

**THEORISING WOMEN EXISTENCE: REFLECTIONS ON  
THE RELEVANCE OF THE AFRICANA WOMANIST THEORY  
IN THE WRITING AND ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE  
BY AND ABOUT ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN**

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the major challenges in the writing and analysis of African women's literature has been lack of an acceptable theoretical focus. So much of the writing and analysis of this literature has been influenced by the Feminist paradigm, and which largely operates within the walls of Western thinking. The need for an African – Centered paradigm and theoretical framework prompted Hudson Clenora Weems to come up with an African – centered Africana Womanist Theory to inform the writing and understanding of African – American and African women literature. The theory responds to the inadequacies of both Feminism and Black Feminism and the subsequent need for proper naming and defining of the woman of African descent. This paper, then, intends to examine two issues – the relevance of the Africana Womanist Theory – to the writing and analysis of Zimbabwean women's literature. The relevance of the theory can be located in its demonstration of women categorization not as a monolithic bloc, and is also quite strong in its Afrocentric approach to the writing and analysis of Zimbabwean women's literature. This paper demonstrates that Zimbabwean women writers seek to rewrite official historiography and contest the exclusion and misrepresentation of women experience, but they largely do so within the context of the feminist theoretical focus. Subsequently Zimbabwean women's literature is also read and understood in the context of feminism and not just Africana Womanism.

**Keywords:** Womanist, Feminist, Africana, Zimbabwean, Literature, Theory

## INTRODUCTION:

One of the major challenges in the writing and analysis of African women's literature has been lack of an acceptable theoretical focus. So much of the writing and analysis of this literature has been influenced by the Feminist paradigm, which largely operates within the walls of Western thinking. The need for an African – Centered paradigm and theoretical framework prompted Hudson - Weems to come up with an African – centered Africana Womanist Theory to inform the writing and understanding of African – American and African women literature. The theory responds to the inadequacies of both Feminism and Black Feminism and the subsequent need for proper naming and defining of the woman of African descent. In essence, Africana Womanism is Africana women's effort to 'create their own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and in action'. This paper, then, intends to examine two issues – the relevance of the Africana Womanist Theory – to the writing and analysis of Zimbabwean literature

## THE NEED FOR AN AFRICAN ORIENTED WOMAN THEORY:

In the debate between Third World Women and Western Feminists, "one perspective lays blame on Western Feminist theorists for silencing the African woman in the very speech intended to liberate her from oppression". (Lyons 2004, 3) This perspective does not end at the level of inactive blame; African American women have taken it to another level and have coined a theory that allows a specific discussion of the woman of African descent's existence in reality and in imagined existence. The effort by Hudson - Weems to set up a paradigm "properly named and officially defined" according to the peoples of African descent's "unique and cultural matrix" (Hudson-Weems 2007, 289) fits well into the postcolonial discourse. The Africana Womanist enters the postcolonial discourse by weakening the orientalist discourse of Western Feminism and exposes its inadequacies by attempting to include what it has tended to leave out.

Hudson - Weems did not create the legacy of Africana Womanism but has "observed Africana Women, documented *their* reality, and refined a paradigm relative to who *they* are, what *they* do, and what *they* believe in as a people". (2007, 289) Africana Womanism rejects mainstream feminism's "caustic beginnings and inapplicability for women of African Descent". (Hudson -Weems 2007, 291) Mainstream Feminism is by White women and is largely tailored to suite their own needs. Race as it affects black women existence is underplayed in mainstream Feminism whose main agenda is female-centered empowerment. In establishing this theory Hudson<sup>1</sup>- Weems was also critical of the position that was taken by Black Feminists "who continued to use the term feminism as a theoretical construct for their analysis" (Hudson - Weems 2007, 293) for obvious benefits that included visibility, employment and publication possibilities.

At the center of Africana Womanism is the need for self- naming/ *Nomno*. *Nomno* highlights the need for proper naming of a discipline by women of African descent and their rejection of the construct feminism. In addition to *nomno*, the Africana Womanist theorists insist on an African oriented agenda that "prioritizes race, class and gender". (Hudson - Weems 2007, 302) The Africana Womanist is lucidly characterized as a "self-namer and self definer who is also family centered with a strong grounding in sisterhood and an unyielding belief in positive male – female relationships as foundations for the survival of African people and humankind" (Aldridge 2004). Major aspects of the theory include self-naming and defining, family centeredness, genuine sisterhood and a belief in positive male- female relationships.

## APPLICABILITY OF THE THEORY TO ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE:

One of the major strengths of the Africana Womanist Theory is the realization that "women are not a monolithic bloc; they are divided by race, class, culture and by life experiences" (Ferris 2006). The differences between these categories are too great and, hence generalizing about them may be difficult though sometimes the connections pop up in the most unexpected like in the "common language of oppression" (Tanya 2004, 3). As a starting point, Africana Womanists isolate African women from the general category that includes non-African women.

The theory does not only isolate Africana women from the rest of the woman category, it also allows women of African descent an opportunity to link with each other and build strength from their shared conditions in exploring the links that bind them, leading into international solidarity. This is the case because the theory refers to the realities of African women in the continent as well as in its diaspora. The term and discipline Africana Womanism "fills a void created by the disassociation of Africana women from movements that

foster inequality and keep them languishing on the fringes of the white world” (Ntiri- Quenum 2007, 315). The Africana Womanist theory has therefore the potential of effecting change and making meaningful “contributions to the Afrocentric discourse on African women and men” (Hudson - Weems 2007, 294 -295). Over and above referring to the oppressive elements that affect Africana women, the theory is strong in its Afrocentric approach. African women are not only afforded an opportunity to talk about their lives in their own terms but here is an opportunity for them to demonstrate all their positive qualities. In as much as they are violated in various ways they are “the very foundation of life whether they know it or not” (Hudson - Weems 2004, 66) and “the female gender is the center of life, the magnet that holds the center of the cosmos in intact” (Sofola cited in Hudson - Weems 2004, 66). Africana womanists go back in history and retrieve Africana women who are testimonies to the centrality of Africana women to human existence. In seeking historical truth Africana women raise issues about the insights that history can provide into their struggles against both racism and sexism (Wheeler 2007, 321).

But the major challenge remains that Africana Woman, just like the term woman is not a monolithic bloc. What is particularly problematic is combining and having one approach that addresses the problems of one category but two separate realities of the African continent and that of its diaspora. In as much as women in the continent and its diaspora belong to the same category their realities are quite different. Whereas Africana women in the diaspora may still be existing in racist societies, those in the continent may not identify race as an immediate problem in their daily encounters because most of the African nations are independent from political imperial rule. Maybe this is why most of the writings by black female writers operate within the ideologically dominant culture of mainstream feminism. The racial aspect is not only minimal in their writings but it is not always part of the everyday challenges for contemporary African women of the African continent. Therefore, it would appear as if these African writers in the continent are not operating within the walls of Africana Womanism; this can be discerned from the various literary works written by Zimbabwean women.

## ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN NARRATIVES<sup>ii</sup>:

Zimbabwean women writings operate at three levels. They seek to rewrite official historiography and contest the exclusion and misrepresentation of woman experience in mostly male-authored works. In this context, these narratives become “new discourses that recover the repressed narratives of women” (Mandivavarira and Muponde 2005, xiii). In this respect, women writers resist social silencing and place women at the center of their textual representation. Placing women at the center of textual representation is a refusal of marginality and represents a restoral of the centrality of women in ‘cultural and self – definition’<sup>iii</sup>. Black Zimbabwean women narratives especially those written in English, also challenge the oppression that black women contend with in both the colonial and the ‘independent nation’. The represented women’s resistance lies in ‘their refusal to live their lives only in response to oppression’<sup>iv</sup>. In the process of writing, women writers also carve out an identity for the various women that they represent.

The first Zimbabwean woman writer to write in English and publish in the colonial period is Chifamba “who started writing by collecting and transcribing traditional stories” (Veit - Wild 1992, 17). The transcribed stories are contained in the *Ngano Dzapasi Chigare* (Stories of Olden Days, 1964) anthology. In it, Chifamba makes her contribution towards the preservation of traditional knowledge systems as well as redefining our understanding of justice by outlining some elements of women oppression. One of the traditional stories she transcribed is “*The Widow and the Baboons*” contained in the anthology by the same title. The story draws our attention to the plight of widows who ‘are deprived of inheritances and victimized on the deaths of their husbands’<sup>v</sup> (Musengezi 2004).

Makhalisa is another of the early Zimbabwean black women who wrote and published. She wrote mainly Ndebele works but in 1984, she published a short story anthology entitled *The Underdog and Other Short Stories*. In this anthology, she mainly depicts the “harsh realities of female victimization in a patriarchy” (Veit - Wild 1992, 248). In “*Baby Snatcher*”, Makhalisa highlights the need for societies to rethink their understanding of infertility in marriages.

In spite of the many “gender specific deterrents” that women in Zimbabwe have to triumph over, the independent nation brought an increased publishing literary activity (Primorac, 2006) and women began to let their voices be heard<sup>vi</sup>. With the publication of *Nervous Conditions* in 1988, Zimbabwean female writers began serious writing. Dangarembga has since made an immense contribution to Zimbabwean literature and

film, as a novelist and a filmmaker. Her major publications include *She No Longer Weeps* (1987), *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006). She has also produced a number of films. She wrote a script for the film *Neria*, a 1993 Zimbabwean film that highlights the disadvantaged positions in which women find themselves in traditional inheritance systems. Dangarembga also directed a 1996 film, *Everyone's Child*. In all her creative works, Dangarembga protests against various forms of oppression as they affect black women's existence. This is also a lived reality for Dangarembga. When she joined politics and became a member of the Mutambara MDC faction in 2010, she confirmed this by saying, "I have always been a vocal critic of injustice, backwardness, intolerance, and brutality ... all the things that are named in the bible as deadly sins"<sup>vii</sup>. In *Nervous Conditions*, the battle for black women in a colonial state has two dimensions. Like men, they suffer the colonial burden but over and above that, they have to deal with patriarchal domination. Some of the beliefs contested in *Nervous Conditions* include the belief that did not prioritise the educating girls. The animosity in the Tambudzai – Nhamo relationship is a result of this belief. Tambudzai was not sorry when her brother Nhamo died because he was an impediment to her education. The novel is generally "a stark critique of both the patriarchal beliefs of the black community and against the racist structures under which this community must live"<sup>viii</sup>.

In *She No Longer Weeps*, Dangarembga interrogates what it means to become a woman in the Zimbabwean post independent context. On the attainment of independence, women were promised emancipation, especially in the passage of the Legal Age of Majority Act. This was meant to give women the right to contract their own marriages, represent themselves in court, and be guardians of their children. Since most of the promises were not seriously honored with the attainment of independence, in *She No Longer Weeps* we witness a daughter's struggle to define her own identity as a woman, independent of her father and the confines of constricted cultural codes. The struggle reflects the broader effort by women in the independent Zimbabwean society to assert their own understanding of adulthood. In *Neria* the battle is against the abuse of inheritance customs by black man. The abuse affects the widow and her children who are eventually dispossessed materially. *Everyone's Child* is slightly different in that it deals with the disadvantaged positions of vulnerable orphaned children in an adult controlled post independent world.

After the publication of *Nervous Conditions*, other women writers complemented Dangarembga's efforts, and the most prominent among these is Vera, who was quite prolific. She published five literary works between 1992 and 2004 when she died. Just like Dangarembga, Vera's works are women narratives. Though not well known, Masitera has written interesting works that belong to the woman tradition. In 1996, she published *Militant Shadow*, a collection of poems that militate against emotional and physical exploitation of black women as mothers, wives and children in a male dominated society. In *Now I Can Play*, Masitera contests the various forms of women oppression. Masitera's *Start With Me* (2011) highlights the daunting experiences of women in old age.

There is a specific pattern to these Zimbabwean counter discursive narratives. Zimbabwean women have peculiar elements of oppression that affect them and that the women writers are forced to protest against in their writings. Primarily, Zimbabwean women writers write against patriarchal dominance and history that glosses over women existence and sensibilities. Unacknowledged women experience is a result of silence imposed upon them by patriarchal domination. The enforced silence is broken when women writers write about issues that affect them and are particularly conceived as taboo. Nevertheless, in addition to this, they protest against the oppressions that affect the generality of Zimbabwean people. This is mainly so with literature of Zimbabwe's post 2000 crisis<sup>ix</sup> written by women. This kind of literature encompasses Gappah's *An Elegy for Easterly*, Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope* and the *Women Writing Zimbabwe*. What is peculiar about this kind of writing is the presentation of the crisis as it affected women's lives.

Like most male writers of the late 90s who revise unqualified glorification of the liberation war, Vera and Nyamubaya, respond to an official recalling of the contribution of black women in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. They challenge the Joyce Mujuru image of a "heroine holding a baby in one arm and an AK47 in the other", as the super image of black women in war situations (Christiansen 2006, 92). It is such a glorified role women played that Vera and Nyamubaya contest, showing that women's contribution in the liberation struggle was rather complex. The contribution that women made sometimes left them with painful dents, as in the case of Marita in *Without a Name* and "That Special Place" (2003). Nyamubaya's "autobiographical return to a 'special place' is a retrospective contestation over narrative so as to redeem the true stories of the revolution" (Muchemwa 2006: 14). Vera's *Nehanda* (1993) exemplifies protest literature

by rewriting the First Chimurenga from a female perspective (Muchemwa 2005, 200). Contesting and demythologizing the war historiography implies protest against the official nationalist narrative.

The writing of an alternative history by Zimbabwean women is not limited to literary writing. It also characterizes the making of both fictional and documentary films. *Women of Resilience* (2000), *Mother of Revolution* (1990) and *Flame* (1996) “were driven by a common political concern arising out of post independence marginalization of certain voices. Taken together they therefore constituted a counter-discursive movement toward the writing of an alternative history which otherwise would have remained invisible and unarticulated” (Bryce 2005, 28).

Nyamubaya's *On the Road Again* (1986) also relates to Marechera's *House of Hunger*; Nyamfukudza's *Non-Believer's Journey* and Chinodya's *A Harvest of Thorns* that predict the failing Zimbabwean independent state. Nyamubaya refers to a “defeated victory” and a “mysterious marriage” between “independence and victory”, where “independence” was celebrated without “victory”. Her understanding of struggle entails that attainment of independence did not mark the end of fighting, rather the struggle continues. Vera also participates in post independence critique of the ugly moment of madness in the Gukurahundi epoch. Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) was the first to break the imposed silence on the massacres of thousands of the Matabeleland residents by government forces. Tagwira and Gappah also participate in the 1991-2009 crises rewriting of the official truth in *An Uncertainty of Hope* (2006) and *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009) respectively.

### MODES OF READING ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES:

Clearly most of the Zimbabwean women writers referred to in the above discussion are not only writing against the limitations of a racist society, yet race “is the basis of Hudson - Weems's theory that is operationalised on the assumption that race is of paramount importance in any deliberation of or about Africana women” (Ntiri-Quenum 2007, 310). Nevertheless, this does not mean that Zimbabwean women writings cannot be easily analyzed in the context of the Africana Womanist theory because the theory also acknowledges the challenges faced by the female gender in patriarchy dominance. However, it would also appear that generally the cited works fit well in feminist narratives. The narratives generally speak for as well as to women, but, in the process, these narratives also reflect on men's behavior. Put in other words, the above cited narratives demand recognition of women and redefine the collective understanding of gender justice and good life by proposing new visions of “institutional transformation” (Lara 1998, 1). So to think that operating within mainstream feminism for African women was “temporary, and [a] short-lived embrace [...] as a consequence of the absence of any structured or organized Black women's socio-intellectual groups” (Ntiri- Quenum 2007, 311) is quite misleading. There are overlaps between the two paradigms; overlaps that cannot be ignored. Insisting on the Africana Womanist as “the” paradigm for Africana women's narratives may then seem to border on the assumptions that “cultural purity *can* be recovered in postcolonial Africa through firmly fixing and separating ‘African’ and ‘non – African’ identities and cultural traits” (Primorac 2006, 7)

There are notable challenges relating to the use of the Africana Womanist paradigm to the writing and analysis of Zimbabwean women's narratives. One of the challenges is the Africana Womanist theory's proposal on a family centered approach that “an acceptance of feminism by Africana women translates into the rejection of Africana men given the theoretical underpinnings”. (Ntiri- Quenum 2007, 311) The family-centered approach works well in societies where race is still an issue, and where women are urged to join hands with their men in fighting the common enemy in racism. In African independent states like Zimbabwe, for women writers and critics alike, in that sense Africana Womanism becomes an insufficient theoretical construct. Insisting on a family centered approach means that women writers have to be blind and silent about issues such as rape and incest, and such blindness entails colluding with patriarchy on women oppression. Family centeredness becomes an unfamiliar theme in cases where women struggle in their families as they witness their children incestuously sexually abused by their own husbands.

The Africana Womanist theory also insists on genuine sisterhood as a “catalyst by which other Africana Womanist qualities are advanced to a higher level” and is defined as “one of the key components for human survival, for the security and harmony of women undergird the strength and structure of society and all its participants” (Hudson-Weems 2004, 66-67). Yet in represented reality, women are not always capable of maintaining genuine sisterhood amongst themselves; not only in the Zimbabwean context but the world over. Hudson - Weems acknowledges the animosity that normally exists among women. She asserts; “although we



would like to see more sisterhood among women this ideal unfortunately is not the norm” (2004, 70). In as much as Zimbabwean women have to deal with other forces that work against them, enmity has always existed amongst themselves. This is particularly visible in the “small house” concept, which is succinctly explored by Masitera in *Now I Can Play*. In one of the stories, a man's wife and his mistress compete for him, and both emerge out of the competition as the man's "captives". In another story, a girl escapes an attempted rape and is told by her mother to keep silent about it or she will "be ruined for life". The raped girl stands accused of inviting the attempted rape. The second story clearly highlights moments of unacknowledged women experiences that are a result irresponsible responses from the other women; particularly in the mother – daughter, wife and mistress relations.

### READING VERA'S NARRATIVES AS AN EXEMPLARY ZIMBABWEAN FEMINIST:

Because of the above noted challenges, both Zimbabwean women writers and their critics operate within the general mainstream feminist construct. Of all the Zimbabwean women writers using English as their medium, reading of Vera's narratives has been largely influenced by the feminist focus. Primorac demonstrates that Yvonne Vera's work “had, from the outset met with widespread critical acclaim [...] a number of Zimbabwean critics [...] accused Vera's writing of not being Shona – that is, ‘African enough, and of being too influenced (both stylistically and ideologically) by western feminist fiction” (2006, 6). Clearly then, Vera's work cannot be sufficiently discussed within the context of the Africana Womanist construct, which is basically an Afrocentric approach to the reading and understanding of Africana women's literature.

Vera has been recognized as an exemplary Feminist Zimbabwean writer, and hence efforts have been directed at how she has influenced other women writers in her society. Christiansen refers to how “contemporary Zimbabwean feminists in their struggles to construct feminist discourses that challenge the male dominated cultural norms of marriage and gendered uses of violence in contemporary society” have been influenced by Vera's feminist deconstruction (2012, 203). Christiansen is particularly interested in how Vera's feminist deconstruction has influenced other women writers like Mutandwa in *Whose Daughter my Child?* and Tagwira in *The Uncertainty of Hope*. Related to the above observation, Muchemwa has noted that Tagwira's *Uncertainty of Hope* and Gappah's *An Elegy of Easterly* “attend to [...] themes [...] from a consciously feminist perspective, revealing the state of Zimbabwean feminist aesthetics after Yvonne Vera” (Muchemwa 2010, 27: 134 – 145, 2: 136).

However, it is crucial to note that Vera's writing has also been interpreted as an oscillation between western and African feminist theoretical frameworks. Pucherova suggests that,

it is important to emphasize that Vera's ideas cannot be attributed to French feminism, or to the influence of French feminism, only. [...]. If Vera's fiction can echo Kristeva and Cixous, this could imply that, on one hand, it might be possible to identify experiences and oppressions that women around the world share; and, on the other, that Vera finds it useful to employ diverse concepts to oppose the specific Zimbabwean patriarchy. Vera's fictionalized theory [...] may thus be seen as destabilizing the boundaries between African and Western ways of writing [...] this kind of transcultural aesthetic [...] foregrounds a feminist movement beyond the constructed oppositions between the west and the third world and moves towards a comparative transnational feminism in which no particular theory is the central point of reference (2012, 198).

### CONCLUSION:

In as much as Africana Womanism is global in its approach to an understanding of Africana women's realities, it is weakened because of the diversity of localized realities, particularly inherent in the African continent. Addressing diverse realities of Zimbabwean women under a single rubric is always problematic. It can be argued that there are no simple ways of representing the diverse struggles and histories that characterize Zimbabwean women. However foregrounding Zimbabwean women as a category allows an exploration of the links among the histories and struggles against various forms of violence inflicted on them. In any case, we “must remember that women in general belong to different socioeconomic groups” and because “the majority of black women are poor and illiterate, the process of reflection in language and naming their struggles is

reserved for the privileged in the academy” (Ntiri – Quenum 2007, 315). Such academic efforts “may have little direct or immediate consequence for the woman trapped in the segregated ghettos of America or the resource less villages in Southern Africa” (Ntiri-Quenum 2007, 315). Other realities are also overshadowed by approaches that insist on women as victims and even as the center and source of humanity. This approach thrives on what Helen Washington has termed “the sacred cow attitude”. This attitude bars women writers and critics alike from exploring the often-ignored side of women lives and qualities. Women are not only victims, they also victimize. Women are not always sources of life, they destroy life and when they do that such actions should not be justified. We have women who are very bad wives and mothers. On the other flip of the coin, a sacred cow attitude would not appreciate the many good men around who also hate all forms of violence against their women. The favorable position therefore is progressive merging of the existing women theories as well as coming up with approaches that are local based.

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<sup>i</sup> *Nommo* is an African term that Asante has defined as “the generative and productive power of the word” (Asante 1987, 17)

<sup>ii</sup> This part of the discussion is a component taken from ongoing PHD research.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.jstor.org/pss>

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>v</sup> The same theme is explored in the film *Neria*, which is based on a script written by Tsitsi Dangarembga. The protagonist of this film struggles after the death of her husband. The late husband’s relatives are prepared to disinherit and victimize the widow

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<sup>vii</sup> [newZimbabweSituation.com](http://newZimbabweSituation.com), 3 June 2010

<sup>viii</sup> Lene Bull, [www.od.dk](http://www.od.dk)

<sup>ix</sup> Also named the ‘lost decade’