

## The Meaning of Absence in Yvonne Vera's Under the Tongue and Calixthe Beyala's, Your Name Shall be Tanga

دراسة معاني الغياب في روايتي

### Yvonne Vera's Under the Tongue and Calixthe Beyala's, Your Name Shall be Tanga

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#### Abstract:

Rape and incest are canonical concepts in the representation of sexual abuse in South African fiction where the female body is transgressed. Calixthe Beyala's Your Name Shall be Tanga and Yvonne Vera's Under The Tongue reveal the unethical perceptions of the female body accentuated through the social, historical and cultural rituals of female oppression and subversion. These women authors problematize silence as they convey their female protagonists' traumatic sense of victimization and pain and represent 'absence' as a reality rooted in their psychological struggle. Silence and absence are very telling images because they mean emptiness and strongly reflect the social and emotional damage these females suffer. Throughout this article, I want to study the different meanings of 'absence' conveyed in these novels as protagonists, Tanga and Zhizha, forced to silence when struggling with the violent forces of rape and incest.

**Keywords:** Absence, Silence, Sexual abuse, the feminine body.

ملخص البحث

يعكس أدب جنوب افريقيا صورة نمطية عن الاعتداء الجنسي ضد المرأة، إذ يعتبر الاغتصاب وسفاح

القربى من المفاهيم التي تعرف جسد المرأة على أنه كيان منتهك يعكس هويتها المغتصبة. Calixthe

و Beyala و Yvonne Vera من خلال روايتيهما Your Name Shall be Tanga و

Under The Tongue تحاولان الكشف عن التصورات غير الأخلاقية لجسد الأنثى والتي تبرز من

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خلال الطقوس الاجتماعية والتاريخية والثقافية لقمع المرأة. تناقش كلا من الكاتبتين إشكالية "الصمت"، حيث ينقلن الإحساس بالعنف والصدمة لبطلات عكسن مفهوم "الغياب" كواقع متجذر في نضالهن النفسي. الصمت و"الغياب" صور جد معبرة لمعني "الفراغ الذاتي" تعكس بقوة التفكك الاجتماعي والحسي الذي تعاني منه المرأة.

من خلال هذا المقال، ارتأيت دراسة المعاني المختلفة "للغياب" التي تناولتها الروايتان، والمهيمنة التي أجبرت البطلتين على مجابهة العنف النفسي و الاعتداء الجنسي في صمت.  
الكلمات المفتاحية: الغياب، الصمت، الاعتداء الجنسي، الجسد



#### Introduction:

Female sexuality is a focal concern to many writers who draw attention to women's unvoiced experiences of sexual abuse in stories based on the body as a metaphor for existence. The body is one of the realms within which social vices are performed and transgression is marked. Misconceptions of the body disfigure the meaning of sexuality and form a culture of transgression that embodies different perceptions of sexual violence and define women's state of being « as "other" and also as marginal, silent, absent from the public sphere, confined in private spaces »<sup>1</sup> (d'Almeida, 1994, p. 22) . Writers and theorists stood against the perception of "women's rape by culture"<sup>2</sup>, (Muponde, 2002, p. 95) which came of prominence in south Africa especially in Zimbabwe and Cameroon, and decided to change the dominant mode of dehumanizing the female body by showing that the rhetoric of pain these women embody in their suffering is best represented through different images of silence and absence. Defeating silence and voicing pain is women's biggest challenge to change one of the rituals of oppression made possible through absence, the cultural hegemony of patriarchy and sexual violence. In theorizing the gendered meaning of sexual violence, South African scholar Naylor Nikki asserts that "The intension of gender-based violence is to perpetuate and promote hierarchical gender relations. No matter how the violence is manifested it ultimately serves the same end: the preservation of male control and power...sexual violence is thus seen and contextualized as a form of social control."<sup>3</sup> (Naylor, 2008, p. 7)

Readings in South African fiction differ in evoking the trauma of black women caught within the dilemma of rape and incest and their

struggle to survive the figurative and literal meaning of their victimization that society adopts. Consequently, the literary study of incestuous abuse is a clear representation of a social phenomenon of violence strongly found an echo among different theorists who raised the tension over the liability of society in women's sexual abuse as sociologist Vikki Bell maintains that "[S]ociologists and anthropologists have traditionally regarded incest as disruptive of the family and therefore disruptive of the social order. By contrast, feminism has suggested that, paradoxical as it may seem, incest is actually produced and maintained by social order: the order of a male dominated society"<sup>4</sup> (Bell, 1993, p. 57). Therefore, the feminist discourse held in *Under the Tongue* and *Your Name Shall be Tanga* reflects the writers' commitment to re-envision the feminine body and urge us to question what does absence embody and how did both authors portray its traumatic influence in defining the body and female sexual being?

### **1. The volatile entity of the body**

The violated female body is a site of conflict in which the destabilizing discourses of oppression ,that deny women their femininity and self-agency, are reflected and hence the struggle to cope with the pain of emptiness and transgression introduces a society full of disturbing meanings of repression and destruction the reason why women « were considered passive participants in rape, which was somehow a natural aspect of their social existence ».<sup>5</sup> (Kowaleski-Wallace, 2009, p. 475)This passivity is best represented by Yvonne Vera and Calixthe Beyala as they introduced two different female protagonists who suffered from incest and struggled differently for healing. Beyala narrates the development of Tanga's sexual life as she was raped many times by her father and forced to prostitution by her grand-mother.

Although Tanga wanted to marry Hassen, her man, and dreams of making a family with him, he refused because Tanga can no longer claim her body as her own. But Vera introduced Zhizha as a weak, traumatized child who couldn't bear the reality of sexual violation and found refuge in silence. In narrating incest, both Yvonne Vera and Calixthe Beyala try to give voice to pain embedded in different experiences of loss, absence and victimization. Therefore, to challenge the dominant culture of sexual violence and passivity, south African writers have inscribed to women the role of militant figures to rebel

against the debilitating forces of life that brought them within the traumatic circle of rape and incest; to revolt against the subversion of their voices by creating « a feminine language that struggles to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic » (Kowaleski, 2009, p. 325) that used to define their social existence. Hence, their repressed voices reflect a vision of absence through which victimization and silence are defined.

## 2. Absence and Female Victimization

One of the shared images deeply evoked in the novels of Yvonne Vera and Calixthe Beyala is absence enacted mainly through the calling of memory to « convey a sense of escape from the entrapment of language, traditional cultural memory and history »<sup>6</sup> (Muponde R. &., 2005, p. 197). Memory in *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* and *Under The Tongue* embodies an aggressive past of violence and holds within a mixture of feelings of loss, distortion and deception that summarize black women's sense of sexual and psychological victimization. The particularity of revealing memory in their novels indicates the damage 'silence' has caused to these women as they suffer a reality of a violated body. Given to this reality, Ann Cahill, a professor on feminist philosophy, through her book *Rethinking Rape* asserts that "to violate the sexed body of a woman in a way that is laden with political and sexual meanings is to attack the integrity of her person"<sup>7</sup> (Cahill, 2001, p. 14) which forms her sense of being and wholeness.

The theorization of female sexual abuse as predominantly cultural defines transgression as a cultural performance in a patriarchal society where male sexual power is seen "as a cultural absolute"<sup>8</sup> (Dworkin, 1981, p. 23). Rape in both novels is not just about revealing female's disfigured meanings of sexuality and identity it also questions how male's ideology of subjugation and the "sexual connotations of rape had made of brutality, its sheer violence and destructiveness, virtually invisible" (Cahill, 2001, p. 20)

Throughout the narrative course of the novels, both authors offer a close reading to a damaged social reality of existence -both of Tanga and zhizha - caused by the loss of self as the first motive towards « nothingness » and strengthened by absence that reflects different images of loss like the loss of identity, faith in oneself and in society stressing on the fact that memory is the only refuge when absence pervades. Absence in both novels evokes family as a source of trauma in which visions of chaos, abundance and restlessness offer meanings of

rupture, question father/mother-daughter relationships and narrate the challenging dilemma of victimization in women's lives and reflects those complicated moments of struggle for « a language of agency » (Kowaleski, 2009, p. 589) that is going to liberate their voices .

Remarkably both protagonists lost their sense of belonging to a normal family in which the absence of their mothers left a huge emotional gap and helped in their rape; an embedded « distrust of sexuality that takes mothers away from their daughters, and young women's dread of the snare of motherhood »<sup>9</sup> (Shaw, 2004, p. 38). Both Vera and Beyala evoke absence differently but they share visions of pain and silence. Narrating memory in these novels emphasizes the protagonists' metaphors of psychological entrapment within « the contours of a violent past »<sup>10</sup> (Flanagan, 2002, p. 338) that kept them from overcoming their suffering and sense of exclusion and marks the absence of a 'present of their own'; a present « that remains essentially colonial and is characterized by its inability to sustain itself except through repeated acts of violation »<sup>11</sup> (Jolly, 1992, p. 44)

### 3. Absence of voice in *Under the Tongue*

Yvonne Vera achieved much recognition as a Zimbabwean woman writer who has devoted her fiction to reconfigure the social misperceptions of women's bodies and the nation's debilitating past of colonialism. Remarkably both the body and the nation are key concepts used metaphorically in her fiction to comment on the social fabric of the African historical and cultural existence within which women struggle for recognition against the forces of sexual abuse as a form of oppression because their "violated bodies can be understood as disturbing scars on the texture of the nation, a trope that captures their ambiguous position of simultaneous belonging and not-belonging to the nation".<sup>12</sup> (Toivanen, 2010, p. 6) Breaking the rules of social taboos and voicing sexual transgression is a challenge that reflects Vera's tendency of thinking and revolt against female victimization and silence that stripped women their femininity and made them feel a sense of brutality. Vera's portrayal of rape, silence, abortion and victimization in her novels is to narrate how silence changes these women's course of life and made them "fail in their pursuit of their desire to understand their own bodies"<sup>13</sup> (Hunter, 1998, p. 80) the reason why Vera asserts that " I am against silence...The books I write try to undo the silent posture African women have endured over so many decades."<sup>14</sup> (Soros, 2002).

As a feminist writer, she fought against women's suppressed voices felt mainly in her novels *Without A Name* (1994) and *Under The Tongue* (1996) where she portrays silence as a paralyzing way in mending the wounds of rape and incest arguing that in « the African context, spoken word still belongs to a masculine sphere that women cannot easily access, and that writing can provide women with a space for intervention » (Toivanen, 2010, p. 3). In *Nehanda*, *Butterfly Burning* and *The Stone Virgins*, Vera's focus on the body is aggressive and metaphorical for it is portrayed as an arena of conflict that reflects the nation's war for cultural and political liberation. Vera's artistry in weaving events and telling about silent pains is reflected in her choice of different female protagonists whose despair and struggle are manifested only in their inner world. A technique brings forth internal monologue as the best way to voice their deception and bring readers closer to their suffering and sense of trauma. In commenting her successful imagery of pain, Vera states "I always need to be anchored in such a way that I am inside a character, seeing this fragmented or fractured world, and how-usually a woman-is trying to bring pieces together in her mind, to choreograph her life" (Muponde, 2002, p. 219). But despite her hope for liberating women's voices, she still believes that women's agency is manipulated by sexuality and motherhood is one of the images of victimization.

Winner of the 1997 Commonwealth's Prize for best novel from Africa, and two years later won the prestigious Swedish literary award "The Voice of Africa", *Under The Tongue* is a novel about Zhizha, a victim of incest who longs « to forget the thunder of departing innocence »<sup>15</sup> (Vera, 2002) . Vera's focus on evoking absence in this novel is to prove that sexual abuse is not just about male's sexual desire but rather it is the product of different discourses focal in shaping Zhizha's social world. The absence of Zhizha's innocence is a feeling that seizes her sense of being and narrates her loss of self because "[i]ncestuous assault prepares the girl child for conventional femininity, a life for accepting subordination to the males around her" (Bell, 2002, p. 67). Zhizha's experience of rape reflects a social paradigm of masculinity embodied in her father's brutal sexual desire that forced his daughter to muteness. Vera's traumatized protagonist manifested her pain and survival through silence as she evokes:

Father whispers an embrace of lightning. I bite hard on my tongue....My voice is crumbling and falling apart and spreading

through his fingers. My voice hides beneath rock...My voice is lost. Astray. Salt spreads through my eyes....My voice blinded. My voice wishing to escape. My voice pulled from its roots, dug from sleep. My voice falling. My voice empty and forgotten. My voice slips in a dying whirl that grows small and faint. My cry is stolen. (UT, 2002. p 123)

Zhizha's absence of voice is the authors focal concern, because in revealing her muteness, the protagonist has chosen strong words like 'falling apart', 'beneath rock', 'blinded', 'empty', 'forgotten' and 'stolen' just to lament the damage within and reflect her sense of trauma and state of chaos in which language is no more a viable weapon for healing. In narrating rape, there is a very telling figurative image when Zhizha said « Father has drunk the forbidden water from the sea, swallowed the deep unknown things of my growing » (p. 125). The forbidden water is her 'body' and drinking that water is 'incest'. The water of the sea is forbidden, it doesn't give life and so is her body normally it doesn't give pleasure to her father's sexual desire. A child still doesn't know the meaning of life that her body represents. Through incest, Muroyiwa, the father, disfigured his daughter's passion of childhood and stole the hidden things that are going to make her a woman because Zhizha. "[t]he female child represents a challenge to his authority and must be subdued"<sup>16</sup> (Cossins, 2000, p. 59). Muroyiwa's figurative meaning of absence is best represented through his inability to preserve his image as a normal loving father who gives more than life to his daughter who, in her turn, defined her trauma when she said « I lost the song of my growing » (UT,125) that her grandmother taught her. Muroyiwa embodied the role of the oppressor as he violated the social norms of family and parenthood and exercised his masculinity on Zhiza's fragile body.

Interestingly, narratives of silence, suffering and absence in Zhizha's life have as meaning a struggle for reconciliation with herself and with the social forces that dominates her family. Zhizha's reaction to the pain inflicted in her body is manifested through the different allegorical use of « earth », « darkness », « light » and « water » that emphasizes Vera's use of nature as a cultural embodiment of being, survival and healing; an image strongly evoked in the character of the grandmother as she "cries

to the stars and the shadows and the mysteries of the earth” (p.131) the pain of victimization and the absence of voice that “vanishes into the darkness” (p.132) inside Zhizha . Vera’s focus on presenting the grandmother, who carries Zhizha’s « pain in her mouth » (p.123), as the only reality in Zhizha’s suffering is just to celebrate the power of the mythical beliefs of healing that nature symbolizes and reflect the memory of a gendered historical pain that the grandmother experienced before Zhizha; a sorrow that made both characters struggle to defeat silence and build feelings of trust and longing :

Grandmother turns into an unforgettable whisper of lament. She throws our voices to the moon. She gives us a song for healing, for a memory without sorrow. The song buries all our desperation and our loss. Her voice rises and the moon grows bright into our dreaming, moving and turning a trembling light, round and smooth with her weariless giving. She throws our voices to the sky and night falls around our faces, featherly over our outstretched arms. The moon grows wide into the sky with Grandmother’s calling , growing wide, the moon covers the sky. (p.132)

Remarkably both Zhizha and her Grandmother react differently to the meaning of victimization and silence. Both seized by despair and pain, both cry the absence of Runyararo, the mother as Zhizha evokes:

An empty wave steals into my thought and i grow dizzy with my emptiness, grow hollow with the memory of my mother’s mothering grace and giving. I long for mother...I look for my mother at the bottom of silent lakes. I watch a shadow creep slowly onto her face. I have wounded her with my forgetting, wounded myself. I long for the moment of birth. (p. 217)

#### **4. Absence as dispossession in Your Name Shall Be Tanga**

Absence in Under the Tongue is one of the forces that form the characters’ reality of being and give meaning to silence and transgression. what Vera wanted to convey in evoking ‘absence’ is fully shared and presented by Beyala in Your Name Shall Be Tanga where she reveals the victimization of the black female body through voicing memory in a confined prison. Writing the feminine body in this novel condemns the patriarchal enterprise that made of the body the incarnation of pain and sexual pleasure which goes beyond the forces of rape and incest to introduce prostitution as a marker of dispossession.



Beyala's preoccupation with evoking the meaning of 'dispossession' is best represented through Tanga's strong words, sometimes pornographic, when she describes her body's coercive obedience to the demands of men repeating the sexual past of her mother as a prostitute. Beyala's focus on dispossession problematizes the body and the feminine discourses of subjugation as professor of francophone literature Rangira Béatrice Gallimore explains:

Le discours patriarcal africain a créé une fissure entre la femme et son corps et a fait de celui-ci un mythe. Les différentes œuvres féminines examinées ont démythifié et démystifié le corps féminin à travers une écriture qui expose et dénonce les abus infligés à la femme, à son corps. C'est une écriture qui échappe à la censure sociale, une menace, dans la mesure où elle provoque la désintégration de l'ordre social préétabli.<sup>17</sup> (Gallimore, 1997, p. 60)

[The African patriarchal discourse created a rupture between the woman and her body and made it a myth. The various female works examined have demystified and demystified the female body through a writing that exposes and denounces the abuses inflicted on the woman, and her body. It is a writing that escapes social censorship, a threat, insofar as it causes the disintegration of the pre-established social order]

Cameroonian writer, Calixthe Beyala has always been interested in portraying how the performance of sexuality of her female characters, which is embodied in prostitution, is seen as a sign of revolt for liberation and self-affirmation. As the advocator of women's voice and agency and a leading figure in francophone literature, Beyala's works and tendency of thinking present her as "the perfect illustration of a new surge of the African woman today: she wants to conquer other voices, breaking away with traditions and stereotypes"<sup>18</sup> (Cazenave, 2000, p. 119). Her choice of different women as prototypes of sexual abuse form her critical thinking about the ritual of sexual and patriarchal oppression that evokes stories. Of pain and suffering embedded in the memory and became a tradition for many generations. Tanga's narrative voice in the prison unveils a disturbing social universe that defines her existence through the coercive liaison between the phallus and the body that became a ritual in her family. The phallogocentric society that Beyala portrays reveals painful feelings of loss and absence which transcend the real meaning of victimization not just of Tanga but of all the women in her life for the "Body, the most

visible difference between men and women, the only one to offer a secure ground for those who seek the permanent, the feminine “nature” and “essence” remains thereby the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies.”<sup>19</sup> (Trinh, 1989, p. 100)

Beyala’s choice of the prison cell is so figurative for it represents another part of the world that Tanga used to grapple with. Despite feelings of confinement, hostility and pain in the prison cell, Beyala evoked true moments of compassion, love and harmony between Tanga and Anna-Claude, a white European woman, for both of them were “pursued by the same barbarous phantoms”<sup>20</sup> (Beyala, 1996, p. 7) that made them prisoners of their bodies before they end up in a prison cell. The liaison between both characters eliminates all the racial and cultural differences of their social world and unfolds shared stories of sexual victimization and oppression that marks their struggle to break silence and rebel against their social dichotomy -marked by rape, incest, sex and prostitution.

Tanga, the African girlchild-woman, lost confidence in herself but she found refuge in Anna-Claude’s inner where she got the courage to recount her story and reveal her trauma. Swaying between the disfigured past and the lost present, using flashbacks to mark moments of pain and challenging her despair is how Tanga narrated the phallocratic transgression over her body and entity. Remarkably, absence of innocence in Tanga’s story is a strong motive to her victimization and suffering, because she lost the dream of childhood when her father had raped and impregnated her at the age of eleven and made her kill their son. After the trauma of incest, Beyala portrayed more dramatically the departed innocence when the mother old one forced Tanga to prostitution to support the family breaking therefore all the social and ethical values that stand against sexual violations and abuse.

Being a prostitute persecutes Tanga and made her a stranger to the world around her and even to herself, she experienced a mode of life beyond her emotional and sexual capacities in which her body became accustomed to the sexual submissiveness of men that eclipsed her existence and made her the “shadow of a life that’s lost its way...the body that’s wilted from too much suffering.” (Tanga, 1996, p.108) Despair in Tanga’s story is one of the elements that Beyala uses to evoke how dreams of a decent life are disfigured by the darkness of the streets where Tanga struggles to challenge the ritual of victimization

that inscribed other children like her as heirs to the oppressive vices of society. Tanga's "mutilated childhood" (p.19) encouraged her to desert the corners of the streets that used to sculpture herself and her existence because she was fascinated by the dream of marriage and motherhood. Her unconditioned love to Hassen triggered in her the desire to live differently and change her pre-figured identity of sexual aggression and exploitation. She speaks of her absent joy with rebel saying:

From now on...I will be the woman dressed in white, a garland of flowers in my hair to weave life tirelessly, so that each day will be life. I will have my house, the garden, the dog, the magpie at the end of a meadow, children. The last word pulls me up short. Children, real ones, not this childhood of Iningué where the child doesn't exist, has no identity...Has parents to provide for and gets beaten so it will obey. (p.46)

Apparently, womanhood in *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* is an illusion because none of the women in Tanga's life struggled to reclaim their usurped femininity and identity, they couldn't properly perform their roles as mothers in a disruptive social universe but they participated in their self-destruction and victimization through prostitution. As for Tanga, the sense of illusion is strongly felt when she presents herself as "the girlchild-woman" because the sexual abuse in her childhood made her a hyphenated character, she is the child prostitute whose body marked her premature womanhood and introduced her into the world of prostitution. She escaped her family just to realize her dream of motherhood with Hassen, to redefine her identity and end up her suffering. But Hassen reflected the patriarchal fabric of oppression when he refused to marry Tanga and give her a new chance in life because her womanhood is a volatile construct embodied in "a thigh, breasts buttocks, a mass of flesh poured out by the gods to announce the coming of woman, a swelling of flesh that will not be named" (p. 16). To defeat the sense of being anonymous, Tanga decided to get beyond the meaning of absence that shaped her life by adopting Mala a "nobody's son" (p.47) who "has closed [her] genitals with his raw tenderness" (p.131) and pulled her out of the world of prostitution. She just wanted to "give him his stolen childhood" (p.51) and reclaim her right for motherhood. In Iningué many children like Mala suffer abundance; they know nothing about existence because their identity was

shaped by absence and abuse. Tanga has never forgotten the strong liaison between her past and the present life of these children, the thing that made her rebel against the social forces of victimization by saving herself through Mala, she decided to fight “for the child—for all these children who are born adult and will never know how to measure the harshness of their destiny; these children who are widowers of their childhood, to whom even time no longer makes any promises” (p. 47)

### Conclusion

Of particular importance is the meaning of mutilation conveyed in the novels of Yvonne Vera and Calixthe Beyala yielded because of the different aggressive social forces and the patriarchal oppression that impose on women an unusual mode of life made possible through their bodies. Remarkably, the feminine body in the incestuous family is seen as a utility of victimization and survival for Zhizha was doomed to silence, battling her trauma of incest through internal monologues and Tanga challenged her family by refusing to remain a prostitute, she created a new world of her own in which her body can refuse to be transgressed. The girl-child as a protagonist who suffers sexual abuse is the writers' new vision through which they portray how women's sense of femininity is gradually usurped in which the ideologies of resistance to the phallocratic violence suffer the loss of those spaces of subjectivity that used to help the female construct her identity and existence. Absence, in both novels is seen as a complicating motive of victimization because it represents the emptiness that the protagonists wanted to kill. It is absence, with all its aspects, that marks their emotional and psychological rupture with their family and social environment which made them hopeless and helpless and drugged them towards self-exile. Their struggle towards self-definition is a challenge towards defeating absence and the cultural taboos that disfigured their childhood and enriched the literary discourse on women's victimization. The troubled childhood of both protagonists reflects the writers' commitment to deeply criticize the fragile social fabric that fosters females' sexual abuse, silence and subversion and tolerates their sexual and psychological mutilation. Their engagement in childhood evocation “is a psychogenic impulse of self-assertion and self-research”<sup>21</sup> (Okolie, 1998, p. 30) because femininity, as a

cultural abstract, became no more the essence of a sexed subjectivity and a liable sense of identity. The female body and its entity in South African fiction remain in question since sexual transgression is firstly rooted in the aggressive enterprise of masculinity embodied in the figure of the father as the first sexual perpetrator in the family. Depicting women's struggle against oppression and sexual abuse remains unfulfilled because their pain and challenge in a culturally mutilated society remains unpredictable as Cixous, maintains "In 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies." <sup>22</sup> (Eagleton, 2010, p. 261)

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