

Feature Article

Representing Culture and Identity: African Women Writers and National Cultures

Nana Wilson-Tago

Dominant Narratives of Nation and Culture

The problem with the notion of culture in African literature is that it is often embedded in representational narratives of the nation and shaped by the politics of national emergence. In such narratives, "culture" becomes part of a political process of constructing the distinctive identity of a national collective through the representation of its history and the creation of new knowledge about its place in world history. When culture is so determined by the exigencies of anti-colonial discourse, the linking of nation and culture runs the risk of presenting culture as coherent and homogenous, rather than as continually contested and renewed.

As prominent twentieth-century commentators on African culture, both Frantz Fanon (1967: 166-199) and Amilcar Cabral (1993: 53-65) recognise this risk when they reject tendencies to define culture in terms of concrete behaviour patterns and customs, and focus instead on people's fluid movements throughout the course of their political and economic history. Fanon also anticipates the paradoxes that we confront in representing culture in literature. On the one hand, he sees culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (1967: 188). On the other hand, he recognises that this "body of efforts" can never be stable and fixed, that it is from the "instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities - modern, colonial, postcolonial, native" (Bhabha, 1994: 152). Fanon's warning against the reification of culture stems from his sense of culture's contemporariness and its continually transforming and contested aspects.

In spite of their sense of culture's fluidity and presentness, neither Cabral nor Fanon pursues the ramifications of cultural fluidity in relation to gender. For Fanon, the major power struggle in colonial relations is between coloniser and colonised and between black and white. Women's liberation and agency become part of the radical and revolutionary history of the anti-colonial struggle, and require no separate elaboration. The likelihood that men may seek to subordinate women even within the revolutionary movement is certainly not a consideration in Fanon's major text, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). Even where Fanon broaches the question of gender in his short piece, "Algeria Unveiled" (1965: 32-67), the fluctuating history of the veil as a mechanism of resistance completely overshadows the subtext of the abuse and humiliation of the unveiled Algerian girl by her male compatriots, with the exploration of the local politics of the veil going no further than the fact that "traditions demanded a rigid separation of the sexes" (1965: 65).

For Fanon, then, the possibility of a distinct history of women's agency (in terms of its sources, motivations and dynamics) is never fully theorised, even though he recognises the heterogeneity of national agency and the various temporalities within which national cultures are articulated. Anne McClintock astutely describes the suppression of gender in his theorising when she claims that "gender runs like a multiple fissure through Fanon's work, splitting and displacing the 'Manichean delirium' to which he repeatedly returns" (1997: 96).

For Cabral, an emphasis on culture as both the product and determinant of national liberation inspires a comprehensive and dynamic view of culture in which the positive cultural values of different social groups create a popular and national culture. Though Cabral suggests that the social inferiority of women would limit such a culture, he leaves the resolution of such contradictions to "the balances and solutions which society engenders to

resolve conflicts" (1993: 61). Within his generalised and collective view of culture, therefore, gender disappears as a constitutive factor of social/sexual relations and as a determinant of power. Robert Young (2001) has argued that the dialectical form of identity which culture preserves is, in Cabral's account, very different from the performative kind of identity described by modern commentators. Cabral's notion of identity, Young argues, "results from the place of an individual within a framework of a culture that operates as a constant form of resistance, passive or otherwise" (2001: 291).

Nation, Culture and Gender

It is precisely the conceptual challenge offered by the performative that opens avenues for rethinking culture in terms of gender, especially in a post-colonial era. The work of critics such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, frequently overshadowed by the dominant theories of Fanon and Cabral, challenges the assumption that the history of women's agency should be read in terms of the liberation discourse of the national struggle. Fanon may talk in general terms of how traditions become unstable and "shot through by centrifugal tendencies" in national struggles (1967: 180). But it is the work of theorists like Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) and the imaginative writing of African women that relate these transformative possibilities to the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of women's histories, and illustrate how women may be located differently within nationalist struggles.

Exploring the relationship between culture and identity from the perspective of women's narratives does not only mean undermining totalising definitions of culture; it can also mean disrupting the very foundations of national cultures. Because women's knowledge and art frequently contest conventional divisions between public and domestic spaces, they make even the most intimate details of domestic life political, and reveal that gender ideologies are inextricably woven into the politics of culture, history and nationalism.

It is by focusing on women's perspectives on everyday culture that this paper explores the writing of Ama Ata Aidoo and Yvonne Vera. Aidoo and Vera may be a generation apart, but they both consistently explore history with reference to women's struggle for agency. Their works place these struggles in different historical contexts, and create histories of women's struggles that question both a fixation with the nationalist struggles of the mid-twentieth century, and the masculinist ways in which these struggles have been represented. Aidoo's play, *Anowa* (1970), investigates the possibilities and contradictions of women's ambiguous position in a nineteenth-century Ghanaian world touched by a new capitalist modernity. Vera's *Nehanda* (1993) dramatises the impact of a woman's spiritual leadership on a patriarchal Shona world destabilised by colonial incursions, while in *Butterfly Burning* (1998), she focuses on a colonial urban Zimbabwean world that reshapes women's traditional roles and aspirations.

Aidoo and Vera resist the tendency to subsume and foreclose women's histories within patriarchal views of nationalist struggles. In both *Anowa* and *Butterfly Burning*, the colonial worlds are at once sites of modernity and disruptions of traditionally regulated gender relations, with the authors confronting both sites simultaneously. In situations where political upheavals throw old orders into chaos and bring new ones into being, the terms and organisation of gender and culture may be revised. But they may also not be (see Scott, 1989: 1075). This is the ambiguous process anticipated in *Butterfly Burning*. The old world is transformed by the dreams of white settlers, and survives only precariously in the transformed city. The urban world is thus almost entirely the novel's context. Its chaos and newness present a chance for recreation, with Vera insisting that the process within this flux should involve both gender transformation and the community's collective self-creation. Because it encapsulates both a struggle against oppressive gender codes and the community's larger colonial struggle, the quest of the woman protagonist, Phephelaphi,

becomes a paradigm for the national quest itself.

In the nineteenth-century world of Aidoo's *Anowa*, the context of confrontation with gender and culture is slightly different. The old traditional world seems like an impregnable force whose systems of social and sexual relations rigidly define a woman's place and possibilities. Yet the social power on which this world is based is not as unified and coherent as it appears to be. It is disrupted by the contending perspectives of an old man and an old woman, who are representative voices of culture, and by the values of a new capitalist modernity that has already created an exploitative new class. These fissures are conveyed through the dialogised voices of the play, and suggest important connections between colonialism, the language of male dominance, economic exploitation, and the history of slavery in terms of an expanded view of gender and culture.

In exploring women's relationships to their bodies, to home, to nation and to language, Aidoo and Vera often point to moments of resistance and reinterpretation in terms of "the play of metaphoric invention and imagination" (Scott, 1989: 1067). The emphasis on invention and imagination exemplifies the fact that art, rather than simply "expressing" culture, sometimes works against culture. By redefining and re-imagining the social signs of culture and everyday communication, art can transform cultural and gendered meanings even if such transformations are achieved more through style and mode of narration, than through the actual representations of alternative societies. I show, especially in the last section of this article dealing with the writers' later works, that Aidoo and Vera continually engage in such imaginative transformations.

Aidoo's *Anowa*

Anowa confronts the conflation of imperial and male domination by forcing us to read the normative gender-inflected signs and symbols of culture against contradictory languages within the culture. The play suggests that the ascendant patriarchal norms that construct the place of *Anowa* and other women in the community remain "natural" only because they suppress contradiction, opposition and ambiguity. Rather than simply presenting masculine perspectives as dominant values, therefore, the play creates a battleground of meaning in which the very norms that marginalise and oppress women are undermined within the society. For instance, the masculine perception of women's language as a babble "that no real man can take seriously" (92) [1] is counteracted by *Anowa*'s monumental and transformative vision of history and gender. Similarly, various attempts by Osam, Badua and the old woman to define *Anowa* strictly in terms of the community's myths of continuity and domesticity, are countered by the old man's open view of the instability of such constructions.

Indeed, the very notion of "home" as the location of culture-specific modes of perceiving the world and the locus of identity is called into question when *Anowa* distinguishes between her destiny and "home", and claims her identity as a wayfarer: "A wayfarer is a traveller. Therefore, to call someone a wayfarer is a painless way of saying he does not belong. That he has no home, no family, no village, no stool of his own, has no feast, no holidays, no state, no territory" (97). Here she refuses the connotations of identity through which her father and others envision her destiny and possibilities, and sees her own developing vision as an intervention into the meanings of home and culture. Carole Boyce-Davies helps us to understand *Anowa*'s rebellion when she describes stable notions of home as an "illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (1994: 65).

Anowa's critique of home encodes a transforming vision. The split between self and home is a tension between the normative gender values of the collective and the conceptual

language of gender transformation contained in *Anowa's* vision. I show later that such a concept of language is specifically elaborated in Aidoo's novel, *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), but it is also applicable to the play, and demonstrates Aidoo's desire not only to create histories of women's agency, but also to explore the dynamic social and historical contexts of national transformation. Language in this sense encompasses all the "meaning-constituting systems" through which we organise cultural practices and construct meanings. This language can articulate the future, and is one in which men and women can share fears, fantasies, histories, and anxieties. This is the language that *Anowa* seeks even in the nineteenth-century setting within which the play explores her predicament. It is central to her experiment with an idea of marriage based not on unequal power relations between men and women, but on a shared partnership of work, history, anxiety, and fantasy. The play postulates a kind of neutral ground for the working out of a relationship of equality.

But the play also shows how gender hierarchies are kept alive. Both Kofi Ako's notions of masculinity and the community's gender perspectives are seen to mediate *Anowa's* new experiment in gender relations, and the play demonstrates their power even in the face of *Anowa's* radical vision. Her experiment therefore collapses with the failure of her marriage, although this failure is less significant than the growth, insights and possibilities that her experiment opens up. It is, for instance, through her unravelling sense of displacement, alienation and homelessness that *Anowa* acquires a view that connects the community's gender regulations, Kofi Ako's exploitative business ventures, and the community's willed amnesia about the slave trade.

Anowa's ability to resituate the memory of the slave trade is crucial. By filling the gaps in the community's history narrated in the opening section, it broadly explores political, cultural and gendered processes by making connections between slavery, perverted fertility and sexual impotence. *Anowa's* prophetic dream illustrates this, and it is significant that the play recalls it at a point when Kofi Ako has become the ultimate manifestation of the new colonised class, and when *Anowa's* own identity is on trial, and perceptions about her are split between the view of the old woman (who cannot accept how a woman can know better than her husband) and the perceptive vision of the old man (who believes that the children of a latter day might know what has remained hidden for previous generations). Though the dream presents *Anowa* as the mother whose children are brutalised and enslaved, it does not symbolise the common nationalist vision of the African woman as bearer of the nation's children. *Anowa* relives not the teleological history of the nation, but its sordid and expunged past. We have moved away, it seems, from the unproblematised past of the nation's history into what Fanon would call "the zone of occult instability where the people dwell" (1967: 183), the fluctuating movement of history which the people shape and within which everything can be called into question.

For Fanon and Homi Bhabha, this instability merely marks the various temporalities from which national cultures come to be articulated (see Fanon, 1967; Bhabha, 1994: 152) For Aidoo, however, it is the point of gender mediation. It connects motherhood and slavery, and marginalisation and oppression, and points to a differentiated female history that disrupts the homogeneity of a national culture. Importantly, the dream vision itself is a re-instatement of the visionary significance of *Anowa's* prophetic and priestly role, since only a powerful visionary figure can move beyond the huge and tantalising structures of the new modernity to unravel its aberrations. The two presentations give a dual view of the woman protagonist, and highlight both her ambiguous position and its possibilities.

In an interview with Adeola James in 1990, Aidoo explains the immense significance of a gender perspective in discourses of culture in the following way: "I think part of the resentment which our brothers feel about any discussion on women is because they feel it diverts from the 'main issues'. On the contrary, I feel the revolutionizing of our continent

hinges on the woman question. It might be the catalyst for development, but people feel very nervous about it" (see James, 1990: 26). What Aidoo calls "the woman question" is more complex than the issue of sex roles. It involves larger issues of social, cultural and economic relations, and therefore becomes a paradigm for exploring national culture and agency as a whole.

Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

In Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, national culture and cultural identification become more a matter of creating "the Word" from what is torn, frayed and new, than of cultural consolidation or deconstruction. The city and township worlds of Bulawayo in the 1940s are paradoxical and contradictory worlds, suspended between the first chimurenga of 1896 and white settlers' transformation of the land. In the 1940s, Vera's characters live suspended between submission to settler rule and latent resistance and creation. It is within the limits and possibilities of this transitional moment that Vera explores the meaning of a community's culture and its implications for women. Her evocation of city and township life of the 1940s enacts the paradox of limitation and possibility. In this period of European transformation of Zimbabwe, culture is explored in terms of creation rather than deconstruction. The townships, built specifically to confine and limit Africans, are ironically the very context for the creation of new languages of culture. Africans live within its cracks, dream of flight and create a music of sorrow and transcendence. The city fascinates and beckons, and its trains connect black people to new growing things, new accents and sounds, the beginnings of a language in which English, the language of domination, is appropriated to express different orders of experience.

In many ways, Vera's emphasis on the space, perceptions and sensibilities of a modern colonial world dramatises what Bhabha has theorised about newness and cultural translation:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with "newness" that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as a social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space that, innovates and interrupts the performance of the present (1994: 7).

For Vera, such a process of cultural translation begins as a drastic reorganisation of women's traditional roles. The city's chaos and newness spawn a new breed of women who, uninhibited and forthright, challenge both the established colonial and patriarchal orders. This is the world from which the protagonist, Phephelaphi, emerges as a woman who makes claims on time and space. Though Phephelaphi's personal quest dominates the novel's narrative, it is intertwined with the political and social history of the city and is not very different from the community's own need to create a new identity and to free itself from colonial limitations.

In constructing the narrative of *Butterfly Burning* around the individual and intertwined quests of women protagonists, Vera experiments with the possibilities of different and contrasting languages of culture. *Butterfly Burning* is narrativised on several levels as a communal quest. The community is constantly defined as a people pitched against a contrastingly hostile world. Men cutting grass, building city structures, or dancing, are seen to be connected in their unified desires for space, voice and agency.

Yet this communal quest represents only one layer, and there are layers of women's individual stories that enact Vera's awareness of the difference and specificity of female psychology. Her particular focus on women's narrative within the collective is an attempt to "give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experience of women left mute by culture in the past" (Kristeva, 1999: 202). The narrative self-consciously states this

specificity and focus from the very beginning, literally anticipating both the novel's ending and its moral underpinnings:

[Phephelaphi] would be in flight like a bird, laden with the magnificent grace of her wings. She would be brimming with a lonely ecstasy gathered from all the corners of her mind. She would be whispering something which he could not hear, a message he would recall much later, when all his senses were finally free: he has moved from his own song into her astonishing melody (29). [2]

By implicating every space and character in the story of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha, Vera makes this story both the nucleus and the paradigm for exploring male-female cultural identification and identities. In this sense, Phephelaphi and Fumbatha become iconic figures whose relationship unravels the problematics of cultural representation and subjective identities. As the most masculinist figure in the novel and as the character most linked to the past of resistance, Fumbatha encapsulates both the discourse of patriarchy and liberation. But his friendship with Phephelaphi presents a path of possibility for the communication that Aidoo envisions in *Our Sister Killjoy*.

Phephelaphi's background presents a view of struggle outside Fumbatha's experience: the struggle of women in their attempts to deal with motherhood, to find liberating identities and meanings beyond the false faces and identities that hide their wounds. It is a picture of women's lives that could transform the view of women's sexuality that has always characterised Fumbatha's relationships with the women of Makokoba township. At the same time, Fumbatha's own history of resistance and tragedy (which he never divulges to Phephelaphi) could provide a view of broader struggles to a young woman who has lived her life making individualistic claims on time, space and existence as if these could be claimed at will.

But the possibilities suggested by their first meeting do not survive their claims on each other. Fumbatha sees Phephelaphi in conventionally feminised terms as a shelter, as one who will endorse his abandoning a heritage of resistance and the making of a new dream. For Phephelaphi, Fumbatha is masculinised as an anchor, someone to hold onto in her efforts to attain freedom. While Phephelaphi's pursuit of individuality and agency leads her to abandon a vulnerable dependence, Fumbatha never recognises the oppressiveness of designating another as a shelter in his hopes for freedom and fulfilment. Indeed, their entire relationship is fraught with contradictions, and captures the city's untried realities and its distancing of memory.

In Vera's novel, contradictions are often presented as a contest of authority between the pedagogical and the performative. The yearnings and motivations that drive Phephelaphi's quest appear to lie outside the notions of womanhood and motherhood in her social world. That is why she looks for a new descriptive language that can define and inscribe her yearnings. Her awakening consciousness of her body as her personal possession, and her heightened experience of her sexuality, are part of a new language that questions the proprietary closeness and intolerable intimacy of her relationship with Fumbatha. In spite of her naive assumption that the hardened Deliwa possessed answers to her search for meaning, she is actually able to think through and refine her new perceptions as she reacts to cultural assumptions about the obligations of womanhood:

It was about loving her own eyebrows before he had passed his fingers over them and showed her that she had a smile that was tucked down on the edges She wanted the time before time, before her legs felt empty without him... she wanted the sense of belonging before that sense of beginning, which rested on another's wondrous claim (69). In this sense, her quest involves framing a new way of being in a world that rejects women's subordination and marginality and claims their independent right to self-realisation. Her question, "... how does a woman claim a piece of time and make it glitter?" (97) has no

ready answers because the community's conception of womanhood appears to have no space for such a claim. Zandile expresses the cultural consensus when she upbraids Phephelaphi for dreaming beyond what is achievable in a place like Makokoba: "What can you do in Makokoba without being a man? Do you not know that a woman only has a moment in which to live her whole life? In it she must choose what belongs to her and what does not. No one can verify her claim except time. Makokoba is unkind to women like you who pretend to be butterflies that can land on any blossom they choose" (110). The entire crisis of identity that Phephelaphi faces as she struggles with pregnancy and the possibility of motherhood hinges on whether one can change this discourse and, in Kristeva's words, claim a multiple "women's time". Bhabha has clarified this theoretical challenge as an attempt to redefine the symbolic process through which the social imaginary (nation, culture or community) becomes the subject of discourse and the object of psychic identification (1994: 153).

In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera rethinks this process of cultural identification through a determined and transgressive reframing of the language of culture. In her work, terms that signify the oppressive obligations of womanhood are decentred, displaced or reframed to create new connotations. The obligations of fertility and motherhood are rewritten in the counter-narrative of abortion, narrativised not so much as a transgressive act, but as one that dislodges cultural boundaries. Abortion offers an opportunity for Phephelaphi's emergence as an individual, freed to claim a piece of time: "The heart beating is hers, her arms, and she is she. She has emerged out of a cracked shell" (69). In the same way, her suicide and the manner in which she claims it do not indicate an acceptance of defeat, but a self-conscious act of control. Her claiming of a right to die in her own storm and to rise into her own song is a right she exercises in contradistinction to Fumbatha's view of woman's nurturing and passive place in the national dream.

While Vera narrates Phephelaphi's independent acts sympathetically, she focuses on the tremendous difficulties of individual struggles for agency. The character's abortion is performed in the bare and sparse landscape beyond the bushes of Makokoba, where the environment seems totally unreceptive. An act that is meant to "order" the disorder of pregnancy therefore appears to pull her into an untidy mess, and her quest appears to become a solitary and invalidated act. Yet Phephelaphi's total engagement with her self-inflicted pain is dramatised as a process towards insight and knowledge, and suggests that only a woman's ability to claim agency and assert control over her body will lead to transformations in social and economic circumstances. The narrative suggests that Fumbatha will rise into Phephelaphi's "song" when all his senses are finally freed. In this way, Phephelaphi's search for agency becomes symbolic of an anti-colonial struggle.

Phephelaphi's story is intertwined with the stories of a genealogy of women and their negotiations of culture. While Anowa is represented as a lone and legendary crusader in the nineteenth-century Akan world, Phephelaphi's story is woven into the voices and histories of two other women characters. Zandile, for instance, presents a contrasting mode of negotiation in the world of the 1940s. As the most historically aware of the three women, she is also the figure most susceptible to compromising her creativity for necessity, the most willing to bear the burden of black pain and suffering, the most anxious to find her happiness through a relationship with a man. Deliwa, in spite of her alert eyes and hardened resilience, is as vulnerable as Zandile when it comes to the obligations of womanhood. Because the women are implicated in each other's histories, Phephelaphi's flight, however difficult, fraught and "incomplete", speaks to all of them about the crucial importance of women's agency.

Extending the Possibilities of "Culture"

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera's latest novel, the emphasis is on the meaning of culture and identity at different moments. Rather than narrating the history of past generations as the sum of an autonomous national culture, it presents different "contemporary" periods: colonial Bulawayo, rural Kezi, and post-colonial Bulawayo. The narrative is careful to separate its own fluid conception of history from the deterministic view that skews and destroys the mind of Sibaso, the disillusioned freedom fighter.

Two different perceptions present conflicting views of how histories and cultures construct identities. Sibaso's linear deterministic view sees his community as doomed by centuries of failures and betrayals. He sees his own progress from being an idealist of the struggle to its destroyed victim as one cycle in a continuum of political betrayals that date back centuries. In his mind, the sacrifice of virgins several centuries ago is no different from the betrayals of the nationalist struggle and his own wanton killing and violation of Thenjiwe and Nonceba.

But the novel also suggests that cultures and identities are frequently contested and reorganised, particularly when there are changes in the structure of power. The novel enacts various moments of such contestations and reorganisations. Women war veterans dramatically reorient themselves differently from the community's cultural norms. Their distinctive experiences break the barriers of male and female roles, and immediately create anxieties about possible gender transformations.

Vera presents us with two other situations in which time and context create different kinds of cultural identification and gender relations. The two different relationships that Cephass Dube experiences with the sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, are suggestive in considering new languages in relationships between men and women. In the case of Cephass and Thenjiwe, love, which grows out of the promise of independence, is influenced by the abundant hopes and possibilities this suggests. In contrast, the silent love and regard that grows slowly between Cephass and the mutilated Nonceba evolves out of the collapse of the nation's imagined coherence and its unimaginably brutal self-destruction. It is therefore a different context that colours this relationship. Both Cephass and Nonceba work their way delicately and tentatively towards each other's feelings, allowing themselves space and freedom to exist as individuals. Vera dramatises their relationship as a delicate creation, a translation and renewal of culture, rather than a continuum of past and present steeped in assumptions and established systems of meaning.

In *Butterfly Burning*, the dying Phephelaphi predicts that Fumbatha would one day rise into her astonishing melody when all his senses were finally free. While Fumbatha never gets this chance, in *The Stone Virgins* Cephass gropes towards such a possibility. He learns to appreciate not only the different melodies to the single theme of love, but also the variegated and multiple nuances in women's personalities. The continuity of the deep feelings he has for the dead Thenjiwe and the living Nonceba illustrates both the incestuous desires he is afraid to admit to, and the different needs and aspirations embodied in both sisters. For Vera, the two relationships are ways of thinking beyond fixed notions of culture, gender and identity that define these categories within the totalities of the nation's ideology, rather than in the fluid moments of the nation's becoming. And it is, of course, particularly significant that the male protagonist must make his way through the fluid, gender-conscious spaces of the nation's story.

Vera's work consistently critiques the construction of women within national cultures and the ideologies that stereotype them. As Eva Hunter has recently remarked, however: "... she does not suggest for them the possibility of repositioning themselves or passing into other spaces in the country" (2000: 241). In *The Stone Virgins*, this possibility can be envisioned as part of the new language that creates the relationship between Cephass and Nonceba. In spite of visible and invisible scars, Nonceba can look forward to a new path, meet new

people, build new friendships, discover qualities of her own and find places to inhabit without Cephas. The wider implications of what Vera calls "the politics of geographical, historical and socio-economic positionality" (1995: 155) are also conveyed in the novel's attempt (through Sibaso's thoughts) to connect political betrayals in Zimbabwe to the image of a continent that has succumbed to a violent wind. Sibaso himself is too wrapped up in his self-inflicted ruin to explore the implications of his insights, yet his foreclosure marks the beginning of a wider context of exploration in Vera's work.

For a wider sense of the relationship between culture, gender and the dynamics of the global system, we must turn to the work of Aidoo, and in particular to her pivotal work, *Our Sister Killjoy*. It is in the dispersed contexts of this novel that we perceive the global forces that have shaped our modern African worlds. The cultural dilemmas, contradictions and alienations explored in the local contexts of Aidoo's and Vera's works find their source in the global histories unearthed in the journey of the novel's protagonist, Sissie.

While a heinous slavery supports the nineteenth century modernity of the Akan coast in Anowa, in *Our Sister Killjoy* a cruel past and a bizarre present haunt the modern era that authorises Sissie's visit to Europe. The bizarreness of the present is a result of the cataclysmic faults of the ages and the huge boulders thrown across the continent's pathway. It marks a new epoch of the dispersal of African people, a time when the whole continent stands in danger of becoming lost. What, Aidoo seems to ask, is the African's place within this global configuration? How can African cultures and identities be represented from within this wider location?

Bhabha has theorised this phenomenon of dispersal as the "demography of the new international" where the very concepts of "homogenous national cultures ... the consensual transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities ... are in a profound process of redefinition" (1994: 5). Aidoo's novel writes against the grain of this celebrated migratory trend. It contests the notion of universality at the core of Enlightenment constructions of the autonomous subject, and critiques assumptions about shared histories and destinies within a globalised world of possibility exemplified by Sissie's scholarship. In fact, Sissie makes a rejection of universalism the conceptual framework of her narrative. In rejecting universal truth, art and literature, Sissie's narrative displaces the story of capitalist modernity, and offers an Afrocentric and feminist narrative of the modern.

In the novel, therefore, exile is often a negative process of further slavery and self-diminishment, with Sissie's privileging of an African memory and perspective underlying her strategy of maintaining at all costs the survival of an "African self". It is a position, Kwaku Larbi Korang argues, "that is consistent with Mudimbe's argument elsewhere, for the need for the African to go from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse" (1992: 53).

While such a perspective explains the history of European dominance and post-colonial self-diminishment, it may not be adequate for exploring new post-colonial identities in contemporary times. If we stress the relational nature of identity and difference and the productive tensions between them (see Lionnet, 1995: 5-6), we need more than the absolute discourse that Mudimbe proposes. Something of this possibility may be gleaned in the contradictory pulls of Sissie's account of her relationship with the German woman, Marija. Commentators are often so ready to link Sissie's viewpoint with the author's, that they miss the nuances of Aidoo's characterisation. It is in the conflicts, paradoxes and contradictions of this relationship that we recognise the problematic nature of Sissie's strategy and conceptual frame. Sissie constructs Marija's identity mostly from her reading of German and European history, even though she admits Marija may be different, too warm-natured for Bavaria.

Similarly, Marija's own view of Sissie often filters through the assumptions of her history.

Yet Gay Wilentz is right when she observes that the one person who sees beyond Sissie's blackness is Marija, the unhappy housewife (1989: 163). Sissie self-consciously construes Marija's gift of plums as the seduction and appropriation of the West. On a basic everyday level, however, it is Marija who encourages Sissie's self-awareness and definition as an African, as a woman and as a sexual being. If, as Aidoo has remarked, Sissie responds to Europe through her memories of Africa, it is through her encounter with Marija that her African memories are made performative and given a contemporary relevance. Theoretically, this process of self-construction through other cultures can transform hegemonic systems by producing resistance and counter-discourses. The process may transform the nature of the counter-discourse itself. Sissie may see herself as asserting an uncontested African self, but it is in the gaps and inconsistencies of her narrative that the dichotomies she sets up begin to crumble.

One level of the narrative therefore explores the possibilities of creating imaginative spaces within which power relations can be reorganised. It is here that another meaning of the universal may be explored, not in the Enlightenment sense of the sovereign self, but in the sense that "the West and the rest share histories, modes of representation and of oppositionality, and that a study of such shared elements can only work against both provincialism and imperialism" (Lionnet, 1995: 6).

The various contexts and negotiations of culture and identity that Aidoo and Vera explore provide important interventions into the discourse of culture in African thought and literature. They demonstrate that, contrary to the suggestion that African nationalisms create a unified history of resistance, different and contending movements continually mediate and problematise their discourse. The flux of African women's agency throughout history places them in ambiguous and contradictory relations to nationalist ideology. Both Aidoo and Vera confront these contradictions in narratives that not only combine nationalist and gender discourses, but also write distinctive trajectories of women's agency. It is women's quests that reveal the contradiction between the fluid modern context and the conventional gender scripts that the community clings to even within a new world of other expectations. The narrative of women's quests, as Kristeva has put it in another sense, "demystifies the *community* of language as a universal and unifying tool that totalizes and equalizes" (1999: 216).

Representations of culture are more than simple reflections of culture, and the politics of representation makes it possible to sustain both the archaeological and Utopian functions of art. It is within narrative that Aidoo and Vera probe and extend the meaning of culture itself. The work of Aidoo and Vera demonstrates categorically that it is the gendered time within the redefined national space of women's narratives that yields innovative recreations of culture and identity.

References

Aidoo, A. 1970. *The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa*. London: Longman.

Aidoo, A. 1977. *Our Sister Killjoy: Or Reflections From a Black-Eyed Squint*. London: Longman.

Alexander, J., McGregor, J., and Ranger, T. eds. 2000. *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the Dark Forests of Matebeleland*. Oxford: James Currey; Harare: Weaver Press.

Bhabha, H. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

- Boyce-Davies, C. 1994. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. London: Routledge.
- Cabral, A. 1993. "National Liberation and Culture" in Williams, P. and Chrisman, L. eds. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. London: Pearson Education Limited.
- Fanon, F. (Chevalier, H., trans.). 1965. "Algeria Unveiled" in *A Dying Colonialism*. New York: Grove Press, 35-67.
- Fanon, F. (Farrington, C., trans.). 1967. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hunter, E. 2000. "Zimbabwean Nationalism and Motherhood in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*", *African Studies*, 59, 2: 229-43.
- James, A. 1990. *In their Own Voices*. London: James Currey.
- Korang, K. 1992. "Ama Ata Aidoo's *Voyage Out*: Mapping the Coordinates of Selfhood in *Our Sister Killjoy*", *Kunapipi*, 14, 3: 50-61.
- Kristeva, J. 1999. "Women's Time" in Belsey, C. and Moore, J. eds. *The Feminist Reader*. London: Blackwell, 201-216.
- Lionnet, F. 1995. *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- McClintock, A. 1997. "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race and Nationalism" in Mufti, A. and Shohat, E. eds. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 89-112.
- Muponde, R. and Taruvinga, M. eds. 2002. *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Harare: Weaver Press; London: James Currey.
- Nhongo-Simbanegavi, J. 2000. *For Better or Worse? Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M. 1994. *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- Primorac, R. 2001. "Crossing into the Space-Time of Memory: Borderline Identities in Novels by Yvonne Vera", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 36, 2: 77-93.
- Ranger, T. 1999. *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe*. Oxford: James Currey; Harare: Baobab Books.
- Scott, J. 1989. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91, 5: 1053-75.
- Veit-Wild, F. 1987. "Creating a New Society: Women's Writing in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 12, 1: 171-8.
- Vera, Y. 1993. *Nehanda*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. 1995. *The Prison of Colonial Space, PhD Thesis*. York University, Canada.

Vera, Y. 1998. *Butterfly Burning*. Harare: Baobab Books.

Vera, Y. 2002. *The Stone Virgins*. Harare: Weaver Press.

Wilentz, G. 1989. "The Politics of Exile: Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*", *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 15, 1: 159-173.

Young, R. 2001. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Footnotes

[1] All page references are to Aidoo, A. 1995. *The Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa*. London: Longman.

[2] All page references are to Vera, Y. 1998. *Butterfly Burning*. Harare: Baobab.

Nana Wilson-Tagoe is a senior lecturer in African and Caribbean literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She was born in Ghana and has taught at universities in Africa, the West Indies, the United States and the United Kingdom. Her books include a study of Ama Ata Aidoo and Historical Thought and Literary Representation in West Indian Literature. She is currently completing a book entitled History and Representation in African Literature.