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### **De-silencing the Past: Traumatic War Memories in Zimbabwean Narratives**

**Abstract I:** Le contraddizioni e i traumi della guerra di liberazione in Zimbabwe (1966-1979), le violenze e gli orrori che hanno segnato quel periodo, vengono rappresentati attraverso prospettive diverse da Alexander Kanengoni, originario dello Zimbabwe, in *Echoing Silences* (1997), e da Alexandra Fuller, inglese vissuta in Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, in *Scribbling the Cat. Travels with an African Soldier* (2004). Scritte dopo il raggiungimento dell'indipendenza del paese africano, queste narrazioni raccontano il dolore e la sofferenza provocati dalla lotta di liberazione e la nascita della nuova nazione; la ricerca dell'identità, in un paese fortemente segnato dalla dominazione coloniale, unisce esperienza personale e memoria storica. Per quanto entrambe le narrazioni siano pervase dal senso del fallimento e della perdita, riportare alla luce eventi dolorosi del passato ha un effetto catartico, e apre la strada per la guarigione e la riconciliazione.

**Abstract II:** The contradictions and traumas of the national liberation war in Zimbabwe (1966-1979) as well as the horrors and violence that marked that troubled period are conveyed from different perspectives by the Zimbabwean writer Alexander Kanengoni in *Echoing Silences* (1997) and by the British writer Alexandra Fuller in *Scribbling the Cat. Travels with an African Soldier* (2004). In the post-independence period, Zimbabwean narratives disclose the pain and suffering associated with the liberation struggle and the birth of the new nation; the search for identity in Rhodesia-Zimbabwe, a country deeply fractured by colonial rule, combines personal experience and historical memory. Although a sense of failure and loss pervades both narratives, the painful process of de-silencing the past generates a cathartic effect, paving the path for healing and reconciliation.

Zimbabwe's liberation war is the central event in the history of modern Zimbabwe; the 1966-1979 conflict was a struggle for democracy and human rights. In the so-called Second Chimurenga the minority of European settlers, who had been responsible for the creation of a brutal apartheid regime, fought to preserve their power and privileges, while the

black nationalist movements saw the only route to freedom in the armed struggle. The armed resistance to the colonial regime consisted largely of scattered attacks on white farmers and the destruction of the property of white settlers. In 1980 Southern Rhodesia achieved its independence; Robert Mugabe became Prime Minister, opening up a new era, increasingly marked by ethnic cleansing, political corruption and economic regression (Harold-Barry 2005). During the war of independence, both the white Rhodesian Army and the black liberation forces committed atrocities also against civilians, and immediately after the end of the fighting the public silence falling on the most controversial past events became a way of putting aside the deepest contradictions of the struggle (Chiwome & Mguni 2000: 178-179).

Contemporary Zimbabwean narratives have disclosed the pain and suffering associated with the birth of the new nation, and they strive to understand the wounds of its violent past combining personal experience and historical memory (Zhuwarara 2001; Muponde & Primorac 2005; Primorac & Chan 2007). Writers such as Shimmer Chinodya, Chenjerai Hove, Dambudzo Marechera, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera investigate issues of personal and national identity, also portraying the disillusion with the actuality of independence and exposing uncomfortable truths. The fictional narration of violence de-silences a traumatic past and is often connected to first-person testimonial accounts.

According to Dominick LaCapra, in the written testimonies of traumatic events such as apartheid and genocide the distinction between past and present tends to collapse, and the sense of absence and loss shape a human condition in which the representations of actions are obliterated by pain (LaCapra 2001: 185-186). As a disrupting experience, trauma disarticulates the self and creates holes in one's existence.

Because traumatic events are unbearable in their horror and intensity, they often exist as memories not immediately recognizable as truth. In Kalì Tal's theorization (1996), traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and a coherent narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention. When it is fictionalized by survivors, the traumatic experience is re-inscribed into the text as metaphor. The writings of trauma survivors give birth to a distinct literature of trauma.

According to Gabriele Schwab (2010), writing from within the core of trauma is a constant struggle between the power of words and the attempt at giving a shape to what is being rejected and silenced. Violent histories can be silenced and relegated to a level of secrecy in spite of the circulation of stories and narratives. Hiding in language exists even when stories are explicitly told; the traces of such hiding are to be found in the erasures and ruptures of the literary language.

In Alexander Kanengoni's *Echoing Silences* (1997), the liberation war scenario is gloomy, and guerrilla life is a nightmare where loyalty itself can be proven only by acts of violence; Kanengoni's narrative is one of unfulfilled ideals. Alexander Kanengoni joined the liberation army and, after the independence, became an officer in the Ministry of

Education and Culture, and then worked at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Service. In 2002 he was allocated a farm thanks to the land reform, thus becoming a strong supporter of the Mugabe government. Nonetheless, *Echoing Silences*, with its visionary approach to the ghosts of war, stands apart from his author's subsequent political choices.

The novel opens up with the war veteran Munashe's disturbed perception of reality: "As always, it began with the cry of a baby somewhere – perhaps in his mind – and he instinctively reached for the bottle of sedatives in his pocket – but he knew it was hopeless" (Kanengoni 1997: 1). The central event of the novel sees Munashe murdering a woman and her child in a guerrilla base in Mozambique, in order to obey the orders of his commanders. Munashe is forced to beat her to death with a hoe, after she has dug out her grave, and to kill her baby. This is the most traumatising episode in *Echoing Silences*. The murder is illustrated through the painful and ever changing recollections of the main character; however, the narrative focus is on the fact that "there was nothing else to understand" (Kanengoni 1997: 2), because the events of the war are inexplicable: "The woman fell down with the first vicious blow and the sound of Munashe's jarred and violent cry mingled with that of the dying baby as the hoe fell again and again until Munashe was splattered all over with dark brown blood" (Kanengoni 1997: 21). Then Munashe throws away the blood-smeared hoe and walks near a huge baobab, moving towards nowhere: "All he could hear were the last cries of the baby as it died. Strangely, there was no trace of any smell of blood at all. He could not understand it, nor why it took the baby so long to die" (Kanengoni 1997: 21). Kanengoni's fragmented third-person narration conveys Munashe Mungate's experiences before, during and after the civil war: in particular, after fighting in the guerrilla army, the protagonist's life becomes a sequence of nightmares. His memories haunt him, he is pursued by horrible, confused, disjointed hallucinations and cannot make peace with the past. Traumatic memories come in flashbacks or nightmares. The end of the war is, for Munashe, "an inexplicable non-event" (Kanengoni 1997: 43).

Obsessed by the spirit of the woman with her baby on her back he had been forced to kill, he seeks redemption and tries to heal his painful memories through magical ceremonies. In this sense, for Munashe a new beginning can occur only after purification and expiation of the past (Chan 2005: 373). During the rite of the *bira*, ancestral spirits from the other world visit the community, and the ghosts of the dead speak to the living; the final tragedy, however, takes place in the forest, where Munashe dies. The villagers find his body in a gully at the foot of a mountain; nobody knows what happened, the women wail and look at the mountain as if it has something to do with Munashe's death. "At least, the war has ended for Munashe" (Kanengoni 1997: 89), says his wife, watching Munashe's body. Just few moments before, his eyes had met those of the young woman with the baby on her back. "It wasn't your fault" (Kanengoni 1997: 88), she had said, finally forgiving him.

The Rhodesian attack on the Chimoio camp in Mozambique, in which civilians and guerrillas die together, is another crucial episode, an example of utter brutality in a cruel war. Munashe's lover, Kudzai, a guerrilla woman, is killed in the fight. Speaking of the battle of Chimoio, Munashe observes that "life and death had become interchangeable" (Kanengoni 1997: 55); the thought of all the deaths he had caused in the war increases his sense of hopelessness and confusion: those experiences fill him with a sense of futility and loss. War for Munashe becomes an ontological category, a pervasive mode of existence (Primorac 2006: 136).

*Echoing Silences* includes flashbacks from Munashe's past life, and partly follows a linear structure, interrupted by visions, memories and the appearance of ghosts: he is constantly plagued by the *ngozi* (that is the avenging spirit of a wronged person) and the weight of grievous memories destroys his daily life, so he travels home in search of healing, then decides to visit the village of the woman he killed. The world of the spirits is also portrayed by Kanengoni, whose narration mixes the supernatural with the common experience (Vambe 2004: 6).

Kanengoni's novel makes clear that war has terrible effects on individuals: both men and women have their lives irreparably disrupted. Despite its political value, the struggle of national liberation is a source of evil, and the evil deeds committed during the fight do not disappear after independence. Munashe is portrayed as a victim, but also as a perpetrator. In the first ritual, a lioness, the spirit of the family, speaks through Munashe's aunt; during the second ceremony, he is possessed by the spirit of the woman with the baby on her back. Through "ceremonial cleansing", Munashe is able to join Kudzai, Comrade Bazooka, Comrade Sly. In his dream, he sees Herbert Chitepo and other dead heroes. The murder of the heroic Herbert Chitepo marked the beginning of the betrayal of the revolution: "It all began with silence. We deliberately kept silent about some truths, no matter how small, because none of us felt that we would compromise our power. [...] Then the silence spilled into the everyday lives of our people and translated itself into fear" (Kanengoni 1997: 87). In the insanity which engulfs the nation, the only hope is the refusal of silence. If nobody has the courage to speak aloud, healing and reconciliation are out of question. Kanengoni, the writer, has broken the silence, although his character Munashe declares that "telling the stories is an ordeal. It's as if the war has begun all over again" (Kanengoni 1997: 60). Each individual has a story to tell, or re-tell, or, rather, everybody "is" a story, because his or her story envelops the stories of the dead, who cannot speak any longer. To Kudzai's mother questioning him, Munashe answers "I am a long story" (Kanengoni 1997: 74). In this sense, literature has the function of de-silencing, it helps people remove the fears that make them un-free (Kaarsholm 2005: 14) and, in a wider context, maybe, allows the new nation to find a new identity.

Alexandra Fuller's *Scribbling the Cat. Travels with an African Soldier* is dedicated to Kanengoni. Fuller's novel, striving to establish the identity of its author as an 'African

writer', is framed with quotations from the guerrilla fighter and author of *Echoing Silences*. Fuller's parents moved from Derbyshire to Rhodesia in 1972; in *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* (2001), her first book, she tells the story of her childhood in various farms in Rhodesia and later in Malawi and Zambia (Harris 2005). Fuller fictionalizes her white Zimbabwean identity employing the discourses of belonging (Lewis 2003, Whitlock 2000, Simoes da Silva 2005).

The "white African writer" highlights the racial barrier dividing the different sides of the liberation war, because "on the whole, it was a war of race, but it was also a war of clashing nations and conflicting ideals" (Fuller 2004: 36). In *Scribbling the Cat*, she tries to engage a dialogue with Kanengoni's narration. This attitude seems to imply a desire of reconciliation with the past through the sharing of a common narrative. Reflecting on the war wounds, Fuller writes:

Those of us who grow in war know no boundaries. After all, that most sacred and basic boundary of all (Thou shalt not kill) is not only ignored in war, but outright flaunted and scoffed at. We (guilty and secret and surviving, and more cunning than the dead) will seep into unseen cracks to find solace (Fuller 2004: 250).

The idea of a shared consciousness suggests that silence can bring reconciliation better than words; yet, for Fuller words are crucial to shape the sense of uncertainty and anguish experienced by the survivors. Fuller's *Scribbling the Cat*, the first-person account of a woman writer now living in the USA, begins with Fuller's visit to the Sole Valley in Zambia, where her parents run a farm and where she meets K., a veteran of an all-white unity fighting against the rebel forces across the border in Mozambique. Fuller and the veteran begin a trip together through land-mine studded Mozambique towards the battlefields of more than twenty years before, in search of the origins of K's "spooks" and demons.

K. gradually unfolds the story of his personal failures, and most of all he remembers when he was a "hunter", who had to sniff out the "gooks" (a slang and disparaging word meaning black guerrilla fighters). He admits committing terrible crimes during the war, in the span of five years that were, nonetheless, in some ways, the best of his life (Fuller 2004: 58). K. has a deep knowledge of the land: "I know this place like the back of my hand. I've walked all over this land. Shit, I've crawled over half of it on my belly" (Fuller 2004: 172); this makes him very similar to the natives he had fought against. His strong affinity with the land across the border of Mozambique is emphasized by the author. During the war K. "sniffed" the enemies; now, travelling in the areas of the worst battles and ambushes, he becomes increasingly able to "smell" memories (Fuller 2004: 144), highlighting the relevance of his physical sensations in the environment, and thus linking and testing past and present.

By the end of the war, K.'s comrades were just "automatons" (Fuller 2004: 30), "killing machines" (Fuller 2004: 26). Collecting K.'s confessions, Fuller explores the shattered lives of the soldiers who struggled on the losing side of that bloody war, and, at the same time, she examines the psychological cracks she finds in herself, as her perception of her own life changes and she is both attracted and repelled by the harsh personality of the white soldier. War projects its dark shadows on the present: returning to the scenes of his war crimes does not provide K. with any kind of peace and reconciliation. "War is not the fault of soldiers, but it becomes their life's burden" (Fuller 2004: 38): both sides were brutalized by the experience of the war.

The complete dehumanization of the killers is revealed through the figures of other war veterans, whom Alexandra and K. meet during their trip; the former soldiers, just as K. does, still adopt their war names: they are tough guys, tattooed, with shaggy beards, shouting their ghosts away all night. "We were all mad in that war" (Fuller 2004: 197) one of them, Mapenga, admits. He adds: "I tormented people, but the person I tormented the most was myself" (Fuller 2004: 197). War created a world of insanity, of "spooks": the days of the former white warriors are marked by prayers and plenty of booze, the nights by soul-stirring nightmares.

As a sort of mutual understanding develops between the veteran and the young woman, K. recounts his darkest secret to Alexandra, the torture of a teenage girl: he remembers how he forced her to tell where the rebels fighters were hiding by pouring hot "sadza" (porridge) into her vagina; it was the worst savagery he ever committed, "I was an animal. An absolute fucking savage..." (Fuller 2004: 152), he says. And Alexandra exclaims: "This was my war too. I had been a small smug white girl shouting, We are all Rhodesians and we'll fight through *thickanthin*. I was every bit that woman's murderer" (Fuller 2004: 152).

Fuller unveils a postcolonial dilemma: which is the role played by former oppressors in postcolonial nations? Where will they go? Where will they live if their homes and properties in Africa are no longer theirs? Fuller's and K.'s whiteness in Africa, the colonial heritage inscribed in their very skin, is an unavoidable stigma (Rawerda 2009: 57). Fuller occupies the ambiguous position of the 'settler-invader' woman, she is both killer and victim. She confesses her complicity in Rhodesian atrocities and her childhood naturalization of the settler ideology. On the other hand, she becomes a victim in a gendered discourse which sees women as the object of male desire and exclude them from active roles in the war (Dodgson-Katiyo 2009: 71). By admitting she took part in the war, by suggesting she is "that woman's murderer", Fuller raises the issue of collective responsibility, and the question whether all the white settlers were accomplices to the brutal crimes performed by their soldiers. In a sense, Fuller identifies both with the black girl tortured and with the veteran, who tortured the black girl. K. reveals that after the

rape the girl told the name of the 'gooks' hiding nearby, so that K. was able to kill them; she died two weeks later from her injuries.

However, the discourse of guilt encompasses all the characters: both the white and black survivors owe their lives to the death of the others, and they have blood on their hands. The geographical dispossession enforced by colonialism and the subsequent liberation war generate a sense of displacement of the black as well as of the white people. As a double outcast (a white 'African' reclaiming an African identity, who has left her parents in Zambia and now lives in the US), Fuller acknowledges the trauma of a doomed war, in which her party was defeated, by proclaiming a sort of truce, a reconciliation based on the awareness that war is a tragic experience destroying the bodies and the souls of everyone involved in it also after the end of the conflict. This is nevertheless more a theoretical than a practical issue, because in countries occupied by settler communities such as Zimbabwe, reconciliation would need to be pursued as a multi-dimensional process aimed at rebuilding and healing society, and redefining political relationships.

An 'ontology of suffering' is disclosed in both Kanengoni's and Fuller's texts (Chan 2005): the complete dehumanization springing from the civil war creates a world of disorientation and insanity, and generates a sense of endless guilt in the survivors. In a sense, nobody gains an ultimate victory; every side of the civil war is made up of losers. In *Scribbling the Cat* the former Rhodesian soldiers with their devastated lives convince Fuller that no one ever recovers from the experience of war. The scars of the war are in the mind of the survivors and also in the bruised landscape. The bush appears as an enormous grave, and K. remembers when he was busy carrying away the body-bags full of corpses. Moreover, mines have been disseminated everywhere, in arable lands, bridges, railroads, schools and factories; the removal of mines has left holes in the surface of uneven roads, creating hellish craters. The damaged landscape of the present recalls the horrors of the past.

Kanengoni's territory of displacement and horror is equally disturbing. After the Nyadzonia massacre of civilians, the scenery is totally reshaped:

Whole bodies of little boys and girls, young men and women, old men and old women lay scattered amongst those with decapitated heads, crushed skulls, shattered faces, missing limbs and shredded stomachs. Flies, swarms of heavy, green flies hovered over the bodies moving from corpse to corpse like helicopters during an attack: the worms had not yet appeared, they would come later (Kanengoni 1997: 55).

In Kanengoni's novel, the soldier's visions enlighten a topography of war memories inhabiting a dreary post-colonial landscape; depicting the space altered by the war, the

writer unfolds the troubles of the new independent nation, through images that become tropes and metaphors of violence.

Kanengoni's and Fuller's texts mirror each other in several points and are connected not only by their traumatic recollections of personal experiences but also by their narrative techniques. Both their main characters explore the borders between Mozambique and Rhodesia, in a journey back to the source of their troubles: "There is no way that I can reconcile myself with the ghosts of the war without beginning in Mozambique" (Kanengoni 1997: 66), says Munashe, who nevertheless is unable to make the journey. In fact, when the war in Rhodesia was raging, Mozambique became a harbour and training ground for African soldiers fighting the whites. Fuller remarks that "of all the places we came to follow K.'s war, this was the most frozen in time. It was as if the war had stepped away from its desk for a moment, but would be right back" (Fuller 2004: 242).

Travelling through space and time facilitates the expression of memory. K.'s and Munashe's traumatic recollections focus on a crucial accident, the act of violence against a woman; however, K. tortures and rapes the black girl on his own account, whereas Munashe follows the orders of a superior, totally aware of the inhumanity of the action he is performing. This difference implies that K., the white soldier, is in a position of authority, while Munashe, the black fighter, is powerless, because he understands that his ideals of liberation must be measured against involuntary violence. Fuller seems to emphasize the issue of colonial guilt, Kanengoni the disillusionment of the liberation struggle.

The fragmentation of the recollections shaping the past and influencing the present establishes the major link between the two works (Norridge 2008); K.'s thoughts are mediated by Fuller's narrative voice, while Munashe's mind is represented through a third-person narration. The conjuring up of war memories, generating deep anguish, trauma and even hallucinations, is pursued in different ways by the two writers, who share the same purpose of healing the troubled mind of the main characters. This is true of most contemporary Zimbabwean literature, to which also Fuller belongs with a personal voice and perspective.

However, those fighting to maintain Rhodesia a white racist country and those struggling for freedom and black majority rule do have very different stories to tell. Can we detect a shared identity created through suffering? In the case of Kanengoni, only the figure of a Christ-like, mysterious rifleman (Kanengoni 1997: 31) suggests that there is a universal idea of justice and redemption. Instead, K. is a character rooted in the mould of the cynical and amoral white mercenaries, more similar to the South African commando ruthlessly ambushed and destroyed by Munashe and his comrades (Kanengoni 1997: 31).

In such a political and moral predicament, Fuller places herself as a hybrid subject, both an insider and an outsider in Africa: "I had shaken loose the ghosts of K.'s past and he had allowed me to enter into the deepest corners of his closet. Instead of giving each



other some kind of peace and understanding, we had inflamed existing wounds" (Fuller 2004: 238). A sense of loss pervades also Kanengoni's quest, while the possibility of a new beginning is envisaged; after crossing the river, a natural place polluted by the violence of the conflict but still rich of spiritual meanings, in his final dream Munashe "felt a strange sensation: as if he were born again. And once on the other side, he felt a new man and he could feel the light in his eyes and the spring in his stride" (Kanengoni 1997: 86). As a novel that comes out of a nation whose history has become embedded in violence, *Echoing Silences* implies a quest for redemption and the restoration of sanity. One can read the novel as an articulation of a past that the nation has shied away from confronting; in this way, the novel becomes a conduit through which tradition finds its voice to deliver a potent indictment of violence as a political tool.

In conclusion, a sense of uncertainty and instability shapes Zimbabwean narrations dealing with changing identities and responsibilities in relation to the past, as they strive to encompass the personal and the collective memories of the racially divided former settler colony and now independent country. Zimbabwe's postcolonial national history and cultural identity include differences and conflicts, as well as fluctuating interpretations of the past. Remembering the trauma of the civil war from opposite perspectives implies the construction of different narrative versions of it, but it also requires the act of unburying collective memories, belonging both to the former colonizers and to the black citizens of the new nation. In this way, maybe, literature provides a means for overcoming traumatic erasures and excisions. According to Wole Soyinka, reconciliation involves "a process of baring the truth of one's history in order to exorcise the past and secure a collective peace of mind, the healing of a bruised psyche" (Soyinka 1999: 23).

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