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Not a scintilla of light: Darkness and despondency in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

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The paper makes an attempt at exploring the concept of the absurd as it applies to Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*. The inordinate quest for survival and human dignity is graphically etched on the sordid canvas of angst, grime and abject poverty. The author deftly links this quest with the quest of identity which is manifested in a stream of endless waiting. The world of the novel is patently portrayed as irrational. The absurd is depicted, in the vein of Camus, as the function of the conflict between the irrational world and the human being's passionate desires. The grossly traumatised and colonised humanity in Makokoba, a microcosm of Southern Africa, represents a scathing human condition. The female protagonist Phephelaphi is cast as an emblem of a subjugated and struggling African person seeking an identity as well as self-fulfilment. Phephelaphi, as a matter of course, bears the Sisyphean burden which remains unmitigated for the stone continuously rolls to the foot of the hill. This futile, endless and laborious feat which is symptomatic of the individual's relentless struggles on earth echoes the absurd in an irrational milieu. This is inextricably linked with an indomitable and immortal time against which African men, women and children contend as they are kept waiting in stark futility. **Key words:** absurd, identity, quest, waiting.

In her grim portraiture of African social realities, Zimbabwean female writer Yvonne Vera bares the historical, the fantastical and the cynical immanent in postcolonial African condition. Sidojiwe E2, the longest and darkest street in the irrational world of Makokoba Township constitutes the epicentre of the problem of change, poverty, oppression and disillusionment that has evidently ravaged the entire colonised African nation.¹

History and concrete forms overlap with the spiritual and the abstract to depict the absurdity of African human condition in a mode that evokes Beckett's theatre of the absurd. In the vein of the notable Irish writer, Samuel Beckett, Vera portrays the seedy side of human existence. In this allegory of life replete with auditory and visual imagery, reflections and circles largely constitute the episodic narrative of a degenerate Makokoba society peopled by impoverished and emotionally stressed characters in the 1940s. The novel is a lyric exposé of the struggles and dreams of the female protagonist, Phephelaphi of a nebulous parentage. Her mother Getrude was allegedly murdered by her jealous lover, a white policeman, who caught her talking to

another man in the middle of the night. Upon Getrude's death, Phephelaphi moved from her mother's residence in Jukwa Road to live with her mother's friend Zandile and her partner, Boyidi at 1 Road. Phephelaphi later moved in with her lover Fumbatha at Sidojiwe E2, the longest and darkest street in Makokoba Township in Bula-wayo. On Sidojiwe E2 "every absurdity is examined and delivered to its rightful owner" (36). We are told that though tragedy could be "an exclusive property", absurdity is shared by all in the irrational world of Makokoba. Twentieth century French essayist, playwright and novelist, Albert Camus expounds the philosophy of the absurd. He opines that the absurd is the function of the conflict between the irrational world and man's passionate desires. Mankind is situated in the context of time which constitutes our worst enemy, since it steers and simultaneously reduces all our efforts to nothing. Vacillating between the absurd and revolt, Camus observes that the absurd resides in the inalienable revolt of the human flesh. Camus concedes that the three consequences drawn from the concept of absurd are revolt, liberty and passion.

Clearly, the story of Phephelaphi revolves around revolt, liberty and passion enmeshed in the framework of time. The novel opens with the "pause", "expectation", "silence" and "waiting" of the bleeding, colonized humanity in Makokoba, a microcosm of Southern Africa indicating a scathing human condition. The bowed heads and arched backs of the toiling labourers evoke those of Saadawi's over-worked men in *Two Women in One* (1985). In the case of Vera's labourers: "The work is not their own: it is summoned. The time is not theirs: it is seized. The ordeal is their own. They work again and again and in unguarded moments of hunger and surprise, they mistake their fate for fortune." (2-3)

The exploitation of black men with calloused hands by white settlers culminates in gruesome murder. Black men are reduced to mere shadows or silhouettes at the hands of the white oppressors who brutally hang seventeen natives for resisting Western incursion. Ecology is steeped in grief and darkness emblemised by the beating rain, harsh light, sorrowful and ruthless wind, flicking flame and dark elegy. The "singular tree" of putrescence on which the men had been hanged is redolent of Beckett's solitary tree in *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Beckett's solitary tree on an empty stage represents life's grinding absurdity hinged on the emptiness of nothingness.

Echoes of death and birth ring out in sordid emptiness. The two antithetical concepts of birth and death are implicitly linked in the momentous tragedy of April 1896. Fumbatha, whose father was one of the seventeen hanged men, was incidentally born that same year. Fumbatha relives this incident through his mother, one of the women who raised their voices at dawn to mourn seventeen men and thousands more. Their resistance to the white settlers had been silenced (8). The silence is nevertheless slightly broken the moment Fumbatha's mother takes him to the scene of his father's death revealing the painful truth to him and whispering Fumbatha's own name rather than that of his father for the latter had disappeared with his own name.

The former was, however, traditionally expected to perpetuate the family name. While Fumbatha's unnamed mother had with other women renamed their children, the new names they had given their dead men had been interred in their mouths which had remained shut. Surely they had been silenced and were not even allowed to touch the dead men's bodies.

The author punctuates this historical event with pointillism – a device that elicits images from reality and splashes them into the abstract. The imagery of the drowned hanged men assumes an abstract portraiture in Fumbatha's nightmare. He drowns in the deaths of the seventeen men: "The birds feed on the dead but free them from an eternal silence. The men borrow voices from the birds and speak in fluent sounds. Clouds gather in the story and there is heavy rain. Umguza is in flood full to the brim." (11)

Man loses his voice in the process of emasculation effected by colonialism. The carrion-eating birds ultimately proffer the voice essential to liberty. Camus contends that the absurd does not provide freedom but bondage which is writ large in the milieu of Makokoba described thus:

Beyond the stunted bushes of Makokoba, within it is Sidojiwe E2 Jukwa Street, Bambanani, 1 Road, D Square, and Banda Road and many more. A black location. The houses tiny shelters, like the shrubs. Around them, tall trees introduced one by one after each row of houses, standing on guard against an anticipated accident, some incident of fracture, like breaking bone. In each street dream rubs against dream. (98)

These trees, as we have stated earlier, underscore the absurd underset by vanishing dreams in hovels. This is graphically depicted on the lifestyle of the street urchins on Sidojiwe E2. The children sit on "empty, rusted metal drums" resonant of Beckett's empty stage. As they cling onto trash such as empty bottles, broken old umbrellas and broken cases they clutch at the "every essence of living". The children confront the stark reality of violence and death as well as the ephemeral reflections of intangible rainbows.

Umguza River, however, constitutes a refreshing oasis in the desert of incongruities and absurdities at Makokoba. It is described as "a full river on this dry earth [...] a pure circle" (18). This river contrasts sharply with the stagnant polluted water in the ditch on Sidojiwe E2 over which the sordid tree casts a bleak shadow: "A tree grows and hangs aver the water, reflected unmoving as a thick distorted shadow with no leaves" (16). Umguza River on the other hand "grows among thorns". This river does not belong to dry land (21). Fecund and flowing, the only river – Umguza River – provides the site of mental and spiritual rehabilitation for the low-spirited Fumbatha. It is not fortuitous that he meets Phephelaphi by this river. He is distinctly overawed by her transforming and shimmering presence. Fumbatha has "waited" to possess

this woman whom he views as sunlight, antelope, water, air as well as spirit. The spirituality of the effervescent Phephelaphi resides in her dynamic stature. Judith Antonelli (1982: 400) contends that spirituality is “a world view based on energy, a perception which includes the non-visible and non-material. It deals with the collective psyche (soul) of humanity.”

The energetic, budding butterfly, Phephelaphi, has come to swim in Umguza River. Expending stupendous energy in butterfly strokes, she effuses sparkling spirituality. The active strokes expended in swimming are implicitly contrasted with the passive floating of drowned bodies of men and cats. Drowning, a salient motif in the literature of the absurd, is dexterously used by Vera to underline the fundamental anguish of the human condition. As French writer Eugène Ionesco quoted in Abrams (1993: 3) posits, “People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision.” At this particular moment the female hero comes across as a swimming spirit that is certainly not drowning in meaninglessness. Unlike Fumbatha whose feet were “not on solid ground” (23), she emerged from the water and was anchored on the rock. As she addressed Fumbatha, ample strength “shone beneath each word, each motion of her body” (21). True, the inscrutable features of Phephelaphi cast an aura of a goddess about her. She did not, in the least, hesitate to give Fumbatha her address which was sought before her name. Sakhile renamed Phephelaphi at age six by her struggling and homeless mother followed in her mother’s footsteps moving from one residence to another struggling and seeking refuge. “An antithesis is drawn between Fumbatha’s ancient bracelet and his new lover, Phephelaphi. Merging the spiritual with the mundane, the author gives the spirit-like, sun-like figure the trite role of a live-in lover thus blending the abstract with the concrete” (Opara 2004: 181). The synthesis is literally depicted in the statement that Fumbatha held the name closely on his palm, (22) just like his own mother held “a memory in her hands” (10). Phephelaphi had asked Fumbatha to rename her in order to make the present a bit clearer. Her shaky identity is hinged on the hazy circumstances of her birth. The reader does not exactly get to know whether Getrude or Zandile is her biological mother. Fumbatha is not, in the least, surprised at Phephelaphi’s request to be renamed which is synonymous with female quest for self-identification. He, in fact, is of the view that women have chameleon quality with names. A woman “could wear a name easily like a dress and each moment you looked at her she was checking how well the name fit” (24). There can be no doubt that naming and identification are inextricably linked.

In the wake of Getrude’s death, her name as well as her dress was changed. The policeman who purportedly killed and buried her renamed her Emelda. It is noteworthy that Getrude/Emelda shares the name Phephelaphi with her daughter. According to her, “Phephelaphi was the name she (Getrude) had found for both of us. She had struggled.” (24) Phephelaphi therefore stands for the struggling woman. The

struggle continues after Getrude's death. Phephelaphi moves in with Zandile who offers her a space in her solid brick room which she had built herself. In her struggle for a real identity, Phephelaphi faces Sidojiwe E2 breaking away completely with her past. Not only had she burnt Getrude's dress, she also refused to accept the skirt which Zandile had offered her as a gift. Besides, she rebuffed Zandile's offer to accompany her to Fumbatha's house in Sidojiwe E2. As Phephelaphi struggled with time she appeared to be asking the typical Beckettian question: Who am I?

In the vein of Beckett's character Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* and Camus' Sisyphus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Phephelaphi is saddled with heavy luggage on her head imposed on her by man, Boyidi, as she sets off for Sidojiwe E2. The Sisyphian luggage symbolizes the heavy burden heaved on women by society. Unlike Eaglewoman's balanced load in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols* (2001), Phephelaphi's luggage is obviously unbalanced. Like the Sisyphian burden, Phephelaphi's female burden remains unmitigated for the stone continuously rolls down to the foot of the hill. This futile, endless and laborious feat which represents the individual's relentless struggles on earth echoes the absurd in an irrational world which is linked closely with an indomitable and immortal time against which men, women and children contend as they are kept waiting. We are told that, "Everything can vanish but time" (99). The passive boring and patient waiting of Beckett's characters, Vladimir and Estragon, in *Waiting for Godot* stands out as a dominant motif in Vera's allegory of human identity: "Something was in her, mute, but when he was in the room, she kept all her thoughts at bay. He filled her with hope larger than memory ... When he walked into the room each of her arms waited." (26)

Liberty and passion appear to confront each other as Phephelaphi seeks to mitigate her burden of metaphysical anguish. In the course of this inalienable struggle, one moment is distinguished from endless time.

Vera poignantly narrates the parable of the struggling humanity in the story of the Red Seal Roller Meal handed down paternalistically at the Baloos' store by the racist and exploitative shopkeeper who has threatened the entire continent. He hurls the bag of grains at the hungry masses from the balcony of the two storied shop. As the famished crowd struggle desperately over the disintegrated bag, the grains inevitably get mixed up with sand. Going home dejectedly with their empty bowls, they come to terms with the futility of life's continual struggles which are implicitly bared. Had the crowd waited patiently, the grains could have still eluded them. Much as there was a glimmer of hope, the crowd found none. Consequently "beneath the balcony is a multitude of broken butterfly wings finely crushed" (38). The crushed butterfly wings, resonant of Getrude's fallen arm, symbolize shattered hope and dreams.

This is palpable in the city where frustrations are spawned from endless struggles of black men and women subjugated at this period in the history of Southern Africa by crass racism. Rural-urban drift is facilitated by trains, which at this time could not

even be driven by blacks. These blacks could only afford to travel in fourth-class coaches to the city where they would seek shelter in the waiting room at the train stations. They would wait there before they eventually moved to their hovels described as tiny shelters. Drawing an apt analogy between the city and the train, Vera observes that like the crowded city, the smoking train which brings people to the city emits smoke as it moves fast. As time consumes time and people move in circles, there is expectancy and waiting and of course faith and elusive hope encapsulated in despondency.

In the course of life's circuitous journey in these parts, most women and men drop their African names for Western ones in the city thereby eroding their African identity. Deliwe, the shebeen queen neither changes her name nor rejects her traditional values. She flies in the face of the law enforcement agents who harass her for selling alcohol. In the vein of Peter Abrahams' Leah who sells beer in *Mine Boy* (1946), Deliwe is as resolute as she is assertive and valiant. Her idolater, Phephelaphi looks up to her: "Phephelaphi felt the sun rose and set with Deliwe. She admired every word which fell out of her mouth. She wanted to pick up the word and put it in her own mouth. So dearly was Phephelaphi charmed." (52) In the light of this, Deliwe could be compared to Ezeigbo's wordsmith Okwudiba in *House of Symbols*. Deliwe's creativity with words is implicitly linked with the creativity inherent in the kwela music in her house.² The aesthetics of kwela music is analogous to the functionality of work songs rich in words. We are told that, "A pristine word to a song makes everything poignant. The birth of a word is more significant than the birth of a child". (58)

Subordinating the creativity in childbirth to that in wordsmithery, the author who is apparently not quite enthused over Femalist conceptual nurturance, foregrounds the lyrics of the song that provide solace in anguish and deprivation. "Poverty prevails over innocence. In such times a song in a respite." (4) The invigorating lyrics of kwela music undoubtedly douse life's sorrows and problems. It is noteworthy that the neatness and glistening associated with Deliwe's visitors and Deliwe's shining floor in the course of the performance of kwela music contrast sharply with the grime and filth on Sidojiwe E2. The rainbow of colours in that room is diametrically opposed to the gaudy rainbow of darkness in the squalid streets of Makokoba. In fact the healing effect of the harmonious kwela music evokes the imagery of the soothing river – the matrix of lullaby.

Clearly Phephelaphi's metamorphosis is accelerated by her introduction to kwela music. Her partner, Fumbatha, warns her about visiting Deliwe's house. Much as she knows that he does not like her to associate with Deliwe, she is visibly in high spirits as she walks jauntily towards Deliwe's house. She is wearing a flaring white skirt underneath which is a stiff petticoat, which she has dipped in a bowl of warm water, thickened with sugar and then ironed it hot till it dried. A white butterfly, her waist a tight loop. (54)

The imagery of a butterfly is created in her garb. In retrospect the full cycle of the butterfly is portrayed: larva, pupa, chrysalis, butterfly. She was raised as a larva at both Jukwa Street and 1 Road. Directly she pupated she decided to live with Fumbatha who tried to control her every movement and thought. She, however, strove to shed her chrysalis by subordinating passion to freedom. The whole butterfly emerged when she chose to disobey her partner and decided to visit Deliwe thereafter she realised her inadequacies as well as his flaws. Consequently she reappraised her being:

Finding herself that was it. Phephelaphi wanted to be somebody. Not once but twice, thrice, she visited Deliwe at her home and stood at her door and placed her arm over her stomach where she nursed a wailing hurt, gathering there like a spring because there was a longing there, burning. Fumbatha could never be the beginning or end of all her yearning, her longing for which she could not find a suitable name. Not a male hurt or anything like it. She missed Fumbatha whenever he was away but this hunger she felt was new. [...] She wanted to do something but had no idea what it could be, what shape it offered for her future. (64)

The emerging butterfly was burning with zeal. Her ambition was to become a nurse. In her primed state she was dubbed a flower by Deliwe's visitors – the miners across the Limpopo River. To them she was a "lily blooming in a water lush with sun"; she was like "a sunflower bending its head". Her laughter reminded them of "the wings of a dove" (68). She tried to transcend these and become a "flower blooming in her own green pool" (69). She did not want to be plucked by male hands but to pick the flower, which she was. She sought to bloom with autonomy, rather than drowning in the water of meaninglessness. Her petals would not be burnt out and dried up but like Ngugi wa Thiongo's petals of blood, hers would be a symbol of revolt and freedom.

Her revolt consists in aborting her pregnancy owing to the fact that she is aspiring to train as a nurse at the General Mission Hospital during the June intake. Pregnant women are not enrolled on such courses. By choosing this path Phephelaphi rejects the notion of female fulfilment that resides in maternity. Her foremothers and most African women have moved in circles viewing maternity and nurturance as the sole essence of fulfilment:

The women had other ideas about their own fulfilment, not only did some of them arrive in the city independently of the men, they remained in these single shelters no matter what threat was advertised, they gave birth and raised children on the palm of their hand. The women rode into suburbs where from sunrise to sunset they kept, clothed and fed white children from their own breasts (88)

These women no doubt present the mammy image prevalent in African American literature. As Phephelaphi struggles to rise above the status of these women, she is promptly reminded by Zandile that she cannot achieve much in Makokoba as a wom-

an. In her own words: "Makokoba is unkind to women like you who pretend to be butterflies that can land on any blossom they choose". (110) In spite of these warnings, the butterfly burns with aspirations and moves through the hills and "butterfly valleys" of her life. In the vein of a typical ruminant, an antelope chewing the cud, she ruminates over her life and realises that Fumbatha had "intruded on her dreams". In her sober reflections, "She is lightning burning like it. She is fire and flame. She is light." (100) She wants to be something, an educated fulfilled woman, a nurse. Riding on the crest of a wave of fantasy, She walks down Sidojiwe Street garbed as a student nurse.

Reality, however, dawns with the shattering of her windows. The glass had been broken by a stone hurled by somebody in the street. She held the stone in her hand like memory. While memory seems to be more tangible than incomprehensible time, the stone emblemises life's absurdity. Her dreams have been shattered by her pregnancy. An analogy is drawn between the broken glass and her impregnated state: "A portion of her mind rejected the broken glass as in a way it rejected the child she was expecting" (94). The incident of the broken glass therefore foreshadows the non-attainment of Phephelaphi's goals. In her pain and despair she shuts Fumbatha off with her silences, which close the channel of communication – "the open road between them" (25). Ama Ata Aidoo (1991: 3) has stated in *Changes* that "silence sometimes have a way of screaming strange messages." Phephelaphi's strange messages of revolt were not in the least lost on Fumbatha who was smarting because she had refused to intimate him with the pregnancy and the subsequent abortion. He already knew, for in Makokoba everybody knew every other's secret. The walls were quite thin and privacy was a rare privilege. It was not surprising, then, that Deliwe knew more about Fumbatha than Phephelaphi who was sharing a split bed with him. Like a split personality, the split bed denotes ambivalence in the African man and woman.

Given the shattering of Phephelaphi's dreams to smithereens, she was subsequently reduced to nothing. Phephelaphi who had asked Fumbatha to name her at their first meeting at Umguza River was finally named: "You are nothing." (122) Fumbatha's proclamation is in consonance with the author's concept of the absurd hinged on nothingness or *le neant*. Phephelaphi and, indeed, the entire humankind appear to be drowning in meaninglessness. Phephelaphi has joined the horde of "fallen petals" and "birds with broken wings", as well as "swimmers with no arms". The erstwhile blooming flower has been uprooted and her stem broken like bones. In her diminutive state she becomes a "shallow substance" and is constrained to pose the Beckettian identity conundrum: "She was much less than a thin fabric tearing in the wind. What was she?" (95) The allegory of human life is rounded off with the depiction of illusory ambition and futile hopes. Phephelaphi discovers she is pregnant again after the abortion. The human being appears to be condemned to endless frustrations in an irrational world where "time flips like a tossed coin" (6).

The ensuing angst of unfulfilled desires results in Phephelaphi's spiritual death. Both time and love are lucidly wasted Vera employs pointillism in the end to portray a diminishing Phephelaphi whose voice has turned to ashes, the emblem of human mortality. Like the drowned hanged men, she is now floating rather than swimming. There is no more music for the flutes are broken and her "woman self" is tearing away. Darkness overshadows dreams and hope. The cycle of life limned in the cycle of the butterfly, moves in circles – the slicing circle of sky and hard earth (106). The hills in the sky create an illusion.

The burning yet effulgent butterfly in the vein of Beckett's characters continually waits while the struggle continues. The struggling woman, Phephelaphi, takes a mythic dimension as she ceaselessly rolls the Sisyphean stone to the crest of the hill. Transient moments cede to ravenous and inaudible time which bestrides the human being in his or her vulnerabilities. Therein lies the notion of the absurd embedded in ideas conveyed by means of stream of consciousness device. Aphorisms and symbols abound in this parable of darkness and despondency where time expands, dreams crumble and humankind waits in intangible eternity as darkness overwhelms elusive aspirations and hope.

Notes

1. The first version of this article was presented at the African Literature Association Conference, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana on 17–22 May 2006.
2. The term "kwela" is derived from the Nguni word "get up"; it also refers to South African township slang for a police van, the "kwela-kwela". An alternative explanation is that the South African musician Allen Kwela (1939–) is said to have developed the music style that bears his name from the marabi music style in the 1950s. The primary instrument of kwela is the pennywhistle or a cheap flute usually played by street musicians. Kwela also refers to a sexually suggestive dance-style in which pairs of dancers *phata* (touch) each other. (South African Music, Pata-pata).

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