Catharsis in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*
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Introduction

Yvonne Vera’s novel, *Butterfly Burning* is about search for catharsis, for the triumph of healing and beauty over wounds and chaos. The novel breaks the silence imposed by colonialism on the people in Zimbabwe. It gives voice to the silent pain of the living and it weeps for the dead who gave their life resisting oppression. At the same time, the book gives voice to joy and celebration, through which the people survive and resist their restrictive living conditions.

*Butterfly Burning* is closely connected to colonialism and historical reality. However, it surpasses these boundaries through its protagonist, a young African woman, Phephelaphi. The reader is invited to witness Phephelaphi’s tragic endeavour to achieve integrity and independence, an endeavour that can be regarded as a universal problem that probably many women face irrespective of ethnic or historical background.

The boundaries of ethnicity and history are surpassed also through the representation of pain and joy. What makes this novel great is Vera’s unique way of rendering lived experience through written words. She describes pain in such a way that it hurts; she depicts celebration in such a manner that one wishes to join in. Through her literary presentation, Vera brings to the surface basic human experiences that link people irrespective of race, country or the time they have lived in.

I feel the great power of *Butterfly Burning* emerge from the symbolism of the language. Through recurrent motifs, metaphors and symbols, Vera creates a meta-world or rather an aura to reality consisting of light, sounds and a multitude of various elements of nature. She evokes the sounds of music and songs. Then she represents silence as well, which makes the sounds even more precious. In addition, she creates a constant play of light and colours, which emanate or reflect from water, river, soil and, most of all, from people. The various natural phenomena or elements of nature are a living presence in this world; they surround and represent people. Consequently, every feeling and experience receives universal dimensions. Furthermore, through symbols, the boundary between human and non-human is removed and a certain harmony is created, in which everything is connected and is “natural”. In this togetherness with nature, even death can be seen in a different light, death meaning not the end of life, but merely its metamorphosis. Thus, through its recurrent motifs and symbols, the novel transmits simultaneously a sense of pain or horror and their opposite, the sensation of relief, joy and beauty.
For me as a reader, the moments of joy and beauty are essential as they offer a
necessary counterpoint to the immense pain that the story evokes. Referring to relief, joy and
beauty, I am going to use the term catharsis. In my use of this term, I want to emphasize the
nature of joy and beauty in *Butterfly Burning*, more specifically, their close connection to
trauma and pain. There is no pure, unconditioned joy in this book, but joy despite sorrow,
beauty despite horror. Among other things, this is what the concept catharsis comprises. In the
following section, I will present a more detailed explanation of this meaning and use of
catharsis.

**Catharsis – definition and brief history**

I use the term catharsis to refer to relief and beauty present in a literary text that deals with
trauma or some tragic experience. The word implies that relief and beauty emerge beside or
despite the sorrow and horror that the text represents. I derive this definition from
interpretations of Aristotle’s and Freud’s theories about catharsis, formulated in the articles:
“Talking around Trauma: on the Relationship Between Trauma, Narration, and Catharsis in
Literature” by Sven Kramer and “Trauma Within the Limits of Literature” by Geoffrey
Hartman. In the following paragraphs, I am going to sum up a few of the ideas shared by
these critics.

Catharsis is a literary term introduced by Aristoteles in his *Poetica*, a work
formulating his concept on tragedy as a dramatic genre. Here, Aristotle defines catharsis as “a
cleansing of affect by means of pity (eleos) and fear (phobos)” (Kramer 1) which the tragic
heroes evoke through their fate. Aristotle’s initial theory linked to drama has been interpreted
by various critics and applied to other literary genres dealing with tragedy. To summarize
these interpretations, catharsis has been defined as relief from destructive emotions through
appreciation of an aesthetic experience. The definition emphasizes the role of the artistic
devices in evoking catharsis. It is implied that the sense of relief issues from or is the merit of
the creative literary representation of tragedy.

The concept of catharsis has been defined and used in psychoanalysis as well. In
a work entitled *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud connects catharsis to trauma, a psychic wound
brought about by painful experiences. Located in the unconscious, a region inaccessible to the
will of the patient, this wound causes various disorders and mental pain to the traumatised.
According to Freud, a means of curing the wound is language; more specifically, putting bad
experiences into words has a relieving effect. The process of relieving mental confusion and
pain through linguistic verbalisation was called catharsis by Freud. As a result of his research, Freud also made observations on the difficulties of approaching severe traumatic experiences. Deep wounds tend to bereave people of words, he said, therefore no relief or curing is possible for the severely traumatised.

Trauma study in literature draws a parallel between the curative power of psychoanalytic verbalisation and the cathartic effect of linguistic representation in literature. In this respect, Sven Kramer points out that “many literary works have played an important role in bringing the submerged and on-going effects of social catastrophes to the surface of our consciousness” (Kramer1). Here, Kramer underlines the great role of literature in offering relief from suffering by giving voice to tragic experiences.

Geoffrey Hartman also emphasises the role of literature in creating catharsis and he adds the idea that literature does not resign to the failure of words, but it continuously challenges silence. “If there is a failure of language, so that silence or mutism ensues, then no working-through or catharsis is possible. Literary verbalization, however, is a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible. It is a sophisticated and delimited reenactment.” (Hartman 5). Here, Hartman alludes to the special nature of literature, namely, to the power of artistic representation. It is implied that literature or literary verbalisation is effective in creating catharsis thanks to its inherent artistic devices.

In my paper, I am going to focus on both the psychoanalytic and the aesthetic connotations of the concept catharsis. Firstly, I am going to concentrate on catharsis in the Freudian sense, meaning relief from trauma through verbalisation of tragic experiences. Here, I am going to talk about Vera’s challenging of social taboos like abortion, suicide and violent death. Furthermore, I am going to reflect on catharsis in the Aristotelian sense, namely on the creation of relief, joy and beauty through the creative or artistic representation of tragedy. My main focus is going to be the effect of various symbols in the novel. Catharsis both in the Freudian sense and the Aristotelian meaning are actually inherent in Vera’s text as a whole, including both the content and the form. In other words, catharsis manifests itself in the novel as a result of literary verbalisation or representation. It is the unique way of rendering the content through symbols and recurrent motifs that invites relief, joy and beauty besides or despite sorrow and horror in Butterfly Burning.
Aim and approach

The aim of my paper is to highlight some of the cathartic elements of Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*. The main focus is going to be on the representation of relief and joy. As these experiences are closely connected to trauma and pain, emphasis is going to be laid on the evocation of tragedy as well. Special attention is going to be dedicated to the creation of beauty through artistic representation.

I am going to approach my theme by looking at the use of a variety of recurrent symbols and motifs in the novel. The focus is going to be on music, song, words, dance and rhythm as opposed to silence and stillness in the first part of my paper. Then, in the second part, I am going to discuss the symbolism of some natural phenomena, such as water, light, land, fire and soil.

My research question is: How do symbols and recurrent motifs contribute to evoking catharsis in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*?

Secondary sources:

The voice of Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* has been highly acclaimed by critics in a variety of articles and lectures. In my paper, I am going to refer to some of these works as a basis or a support for my analysis. The article, “Between the Pause and the Waiting: the Struggle Against Time in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*” by Violet Bridget Lunga deals with the characters’ struggle against their oppressive living conditions. The critic emphasizes the role of music in creating a vital breathing space for the oppressed. In “Do You Hear What I Hear?: The Conflicts of Language in *Nehanda*”, Heather Sofield reflects on the symbolism and significance of the word in representing orality, a basic trait of Zimbabwean culture. Similar observations are formulated by Kizito Zhiradzago Muchemwa in the article “Language, Voice and Presence in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*”. Here the critic discusses Vera’s giving voice to the Zimbabwean woman’s silenced words and her recreation of repressed oral traditions of the collective. Carolyn Martin Shaw’s article, “The Habit of Assigning Meaning: Signs of Yvonne Vera’s World” offers interpretations on the meaning and role of a variety of recurrent symbols and motifs in Vera’s creation. Shaw points to the complexity and contradictoriness of Vera’s sign system, which gives rise to polyphonic meanings and understandings. Shaw also observes that through these symbols and signs Vera provokes traditional views on Zimbabwean people, especially on the woman. Lizzy Attree’s
“Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*” focuses on the novel’s offering of enhanced aesthetic experience through the creative representation of music and rhythm. In an unpublished lecture about *Butterfly Burning*, Ashleigh Harris discusses the significance of music and dance in expressing resistance and “life force” in opposition to suppression and death symbolised through silence in the novel. She also makes observations about Vera’s use of “images of beauty” around the representation of death. According to Harris, the role of these images is to capture the readers’ attention, to disarm their possible reluctance to read about distressing topics like sorrow and death.
Chapter One

The symbolism of music, words, dance and silence

The aim of this section is to show how the symbolism of music, song, and dance expresses a sense of relief, joy and freedom against trauma, sorrow and suppression symbolised mainly through silence and stillness. Music is one of the most distinct recurrent motifs in *Butterfly Burning*, besides light and natural phenomena. It is present in the form of kwela, a special type of music created by the indigenous people in Southern Africa. Music is the symbol of people’s creativity and life force. Also, it symbolizes freedom and resistance to oppression. This is going to be the topic of the first section of this chapter. In the second section, I am going to underline the contrast between music and the mechanical rhythm of work. To support my ideas, I am going to invoke literary critic Violet Bridget Lunga’s article, “Between the Pause and the Waiting: the Struggle Against Time in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*”.

The effect of music is intensified with the significance of words, which emerge as powerful elements in the novel. There is special focus on the words that create songs. Then, high emphasis is laid on the words uttered by characters. Articulation itself and the words chosen to be uttered carry a special significance beyond their obvious meaning. They are symbols of the people’s identity and strength. In this section, I am going to focus on the words that create songs. Articulation and the words uttered are going to be dealt with in the second part of the paper. I am going to present a short summary of the article entitled “Do You Hear What I Hear?: The Conflicts of Language in *Nehanda*” by Heather Sofield as an explanation of the social-historical significance of the word. Also, I am going to refer to Kizito Z. Muchemwa’s “Language, Voice and Presence in *Under the Tongue* and *Without a Name*”.

Music and song is completed with dance and then all these are juxtaposed with silence and stillness. The juxtaposition reinforces the symbolism of these elements’ expression of the contrast between oppression and resistance, as well as, between trauma and catharsis. This is going to be the topic of the next section. I am going to present a short summary of an unpublished lecture given by Ashleigh Harris as a support for my arguments.

A further paragraph is going to be dedicated to the musicality of the text. Here, I will talk about the sense of musicality created through literary style or language. I am going to emphasize the connection between musicality and catharsis in the Aristotelian sense, namely, the creation of an aesthetic experience. In order to strengthen my point, I will invoke Lizzy Attree’s article, “Language, Kwela Music and Modernity in *Butterfly Burning*”
Music and living conditions

Throughout the text, kwela music is presented as a counter experience against the hardships and traumas of past and present reality. The novel opens a vivid view on the indigenous people’s life in Bulawayo city, in the 1940’s during colonial times. This is how the text describes reality here: “Sidojiwe E2, the longest street in Makokoba, is fresh with all kinds of desperate wounds. Bulawayo, only fifty years old, has nothing to offer but surprise: being alive is a consolation.” (6) The lines epitomize an existence on the verge of death, the people being burdened by “desperate wounds”, having nothing else than their bare lives. Gradually, the text enlarges the perspective on the African people’s living conditions. The picture of Bulawayo displays, the image of a city filled with signs banning the black from entering institutions and even from walking on the pavement: “The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned. It is difficult, but they manage to crawl to their destination hidden by umbrellas and sun hats which are handed to them for exactly this purpose, or which they discover, abandoned, at bus stations.”(6). Apparently, although it is the indigenous people who build and keep clean the whole city, they are compelled to live in a quarter separated from the rest of the city, Makokoba Township, which consists of dilapidated one-room houses surrounded by debris and dangerous waste. Violence and death is a constant presence in this quarter. Men die trying to resist the whites. However, they also die fighting one another. Women die of the lack of men’s love. Children are aborted or close to become disposed of after they were born. Those children that are granted life are not very far from death either. They grow up playing with dead animals; they are exposed to watch men die in an explosion. Here, one can even die without any apparent reason at all. The survivors carry multiple physical and psychic wounds caused by these living conditions.

The indigenous people evoke the spirit of kwela against the demons of the past and present. The adults create music on hand-made instruments. Even the children make music by capturing the wind in empty throwaway bottles. Once kwela is evoked, it is shown to do “marvellous things” (6). Kwela proves to be a powerful spirit that is able to challenge and open up doors, however hermetically they are sealed. It enters the narrow, constricted cracks in which people are compelled to exist and it opens up the door to new dimensions, and possibilities. When it is time to work, music enters the body and finds the secret springs of muscles. It soothes the recalcitrant muscles into disciplined labour, which then, produce an elaborate piece of work, such as a new building. Then, it is time for joy, and music tricks the same muscles into the complex movements of dance, in which all discipline is abandoned and
the freedom is enjoyed to the full. Music opens up sealed doors in the soul and it rips down the veil from dark shadows of torturing memories hiding there. The memory of the “lover lost” is conjured up and forgiven; then, that of a “stone thrust” and “the policeman’s “baton across the neck and the shoulders” (7) of the black man. Kwela generates joy and from this people can pull together the necessary strength to deal with their sorrows. They manage to face their demons, the bad experiences they have gone through and the losses they have suffered, which they have buried in the very depth of their souls. The old ghosts chased away, new spirits hop forth – hope, desire and will. The people become reborn in their freshly revealed spirits. Kwela music is a marked medium of catharsis offering relief, joy, freedom and recreation. In the following sections, I am going to develop the contrast between living conditions and the effect of music.

Music and the mechanic rhythm of work

Literary critic, Violet Bridget Lunga draws attention to the contrast between the rhythm of work and that of music: “The role of music can be read as a counter movement against forced labour. It is akin to singing a song in a strange land. The painful physical rhythms and confining cycle embodied in ‘cutting and pulling’ are alleviated by song.” (Lunga 195) I agree with the critic and in the following I am going to develop her observation by analysing the text of Butterfly Burning.

In chapter one, the “sound of the sickle cutting grass” (3) is connected with the mechanical rhythm of work carried out by black people. Work is shown to be a heavy load, pinning the workers to the ground. Mind and body are tense under a great burden, which nevertheless, is carried with great discipline:

Each motion of the arms, eyes, of the entire body is patiently guided. The palms are bleeding with the liquid from freshly squeezed grass. The brow is perpetually furrowed, constricted against this action, and against another, remembered; against regret for a possible inaction, and against each memory that dares not be understood. A silence, perhaps, or something near and anticipated but not yet done. There is waiting. (4)

Discipline appears to be a harness both on recalcitrant muscles and on restless minds. The text evokes the great anger provoked by work: “The brow is perpetually furrowed, constricted against this action”. At the same time, the words points to something much larger than the burden of work, namely, to oppression or exploitation: “and against another, remembered”; furthermore, the text directs attention to the wounds or trauma caused by oppression: “against
each memory that dares not be understood”. Then there is the anger arising from the acceptance of the fate thrust on the workers: “against regret for a possible inaction”. In addition, there is allusion to the fear of death: “silence”, and immediately afterwards, the threat of revolt against oppression is evoked: “or something near and anticipated but not yet done”. It is made clear that the disciplined work is a sign of only temporary acceptance of the situation: “There is waiting”.

The burden of work is backbreaking, but discipline and will are set against it. The novel continues picturing the workers who stubbornly proceed with their work: “The men cut and pull. Cut and pull. They bend, cut, and pull.” (5) The sentences recreate the rhythm of the workers’ movements, which are full of tension; there is no joy in them. This is the bare and mechanic rhythm of survival. The workers need some relief from these movements, the text says: “It is necessary to sing.” (5). Then comes the rhythm of kwela and the movements it offers:

As for healing, they have music, its curing harmony as sudden as it is sustained. It is swinging like heavy fruit on a low and loose branch, the fruit touching the ground with every movement of the wind: they call it Kwela. It is a searing musical moment, swinging in and away, loud and small, lively, living. Within this music, they soar higher than clouds; sink deeper than stones in water. When the branch finally breaks and the fruit cracks its shell, the taste of the fruit is divine.(5)

As opposed to the restrictive rhythm of work, kwela is shown to offer the rhythm, sound, taste and experience of total freedom and completion. Kwela with its sound disentangles body and spirit, which then it carries into the heights of the sky and into the very depths of water. At the same time, the essence of kwela gathers in the mouth as the divine taste of a fruit.

Words in a song

The juxtaposition of the liberating rhythm of music and the mechanic rhythm of work is repeated in chapter ten. Here, the power of music is completed with the strength of the word articulated and woven into a song by the workers. Music and song are combined to symbolize the people’s identity, their resistance to oppression, at the same time, togetherness and joy.

Chapter ten depicts a scene in which people work on a building. One of the workers is Fumbatha, a house-builder, whose father was hanged together with other sixteen men, because of rebellion against the settlers. The workers are shown to create a song
simultaneously with a building: “They sing as brick pounds from hand to hand to hand. Thrust or thrown. Carried, lifted, and raised; thrust, carried, and raised.” (68) They put together the song word by word just the way they put together the building brick by brick: “A hand swings forward and throws a heavy load. Another picks the tune and adds a word. A pristine word to a song makes everything poignant. The birth of a word is more significant than the birth of a child.” (68) The last sentence brings into focus the significance of the word. The word given birth and put into a song by the workers evokes the word given birth by a rebel’s woman, Fumbatha’s mother. Chapter two presents Fumbatha’s birth connected to the death of his father:

Fumbatha was born the same year in which his father was hanged. Fumbatha – this is how a child is born, with fingers tight over an invisible truth…A child is born with a unique secret however concealed. Fumbatha, his small hand open and spread on the lap of his mother. She delivers words that are arrows. His palms burn as though covered with wounds which have been rubbed with salt till he wants to close them. He closes them. Trapped in his fingers are the words his mother has given him. (13)

The text points to a word conceived and born together with the son, Fumbatha. To see the significance of the word in this passage more clearly, it is relevant to notice that Fumbatha’s mother and the rest of the rebels’ women were forbidden by the settlers to give loud voice to their sorrow at the loss of their men. This is shown in the text in the lines: “…beyond the Umguza River, the women raise their voices at dawn to mourn seventeen men and thousands more. Their resistance to the settlers has been silenced. They weep but nothing can be heard of their weeping.” (13) Although the woman is bereft of words by the settlers, she shelters part of the identity of her man in her soul and in her womb. She gives birth to the rebel’s son to whom she communicates the memory of his father. This is symbolised by the image of the son born with the word in his clenched fist. The seed and the word secured by the woman spreads further: “A single seed gives birth to seventeen more, to a thousand more.” (13) The workers pick up the word and weave it into a song. The sentence is also an allusion to the dimension of further resistance and rebellion. The significance of the word is reinforced again, in chapter ten:

“Another word enters the air and absolves what is hidden beneath each moving arm, what builds up under the brow. This word draws another and the two make honey. We are here. This is said urgently and with wisdom. We are here. The here and the now of it make the honey…Rocking and touching, each man holds on to the word the other has offered and each word raises the moment.” (72)
The paragraph epitomizes how the words of a song unite people and create a sense of togetherness: “We are here”. The joy of togetherness is evoked, “The here and the now of it make the honey”, in unison with the celebration of articulation, “each word raises the moment”.

The significance and symbolism of the word in Vera’s creation is highlighted by critic, Heather Sofield, who observes that “Vera's prose is redolent with references to the power of words. Language was a most inherent and important part of life and soul for these Zimbabwean people. As humans are the bodies of souls, words are the bodies of thoughts. Their power was not to be teased or abused, but respected as the power, which flows through all creatures and gives them life.” (Sofield) These lines emphasize the significance of the word in marking the identity of the Zimbabwean people. It is revealed that the Zimbabwean culture is basically an oral one. Furthermore, the article reveals that in Zimbabwe the spoken word is not only a form of everyday communication, but it is the main medium of art, history and religion as well. The word is a symbol of orality and consequently, it represents the nation’s special identity or spirit.

Similar ideas about the symbolism of the word marking the identity of the people are formulated by Kizito Z. Muchemwa:

> Memory is used to indicate the history of women, their suffering, their silence and the existence of a rich tradition of orature. The word stands for this other tradition of Zimbabwean orature...A woman is seen as a begetter of words, voice and presence. Because she is a begetter she is the origin of the word. Women characters, women narrators and the writer are all begetters in this sense. (Muchemwa 8)

Again, the special nature of Zimbabwean culture is pointed to, namely that it has its roots in orality. Also, attention is drawn to the fact that it is the woman who plays a major role in keeping alive the nation and preserving its traditions and special identity. Zimbabwean women give birth to children to whom they relate past events. In this way, it is the women who assure the continuity of tradition and nation. Muchemwa adds his observation that Yvonne Vera represents these women, and at the same time, she is one of them preserving and recreating the Zimbabwean spirit through her novels.

**Dance**

The effect of music and song symbolising resistance and freedom is completed with the representation of dance. Ashleigh Harris points to the juxtaposition of music, sound and dance
with silence and stillness in the novel. The word kwela, Harris explains, means “get up, stand up, suggesting stand up for your rights. Furthermore, it encourages people to dance and enjoy themselves despite the conditions.” In the following, I am going to quote and comment on some passages that contrast silence and stillness with music and dance.

Chapter two highlights the picture of the seventeen rebels hanged by the settlers. The rebels are pictured as motionless and mute: “The foot curls like a fist, facing down. The feet of dancers who have left the ground. Caught. Surprised by something in the air which they thought free. The limbs smooth and taut, of dancers in a song with no words spoken. A dance denied. A blossom in a wind. A dark elegy. “(11) However, as an answer to forced silence and stillness, the offspring act out the dance that was denied to the seventeen. Chapter twelve presents the image of two young women’s lively dance to the tune sung by the people gathered spontaneously in the room of one of the houses on Sidojiwe E2 in an evening after work:

…rounded hips twisting, the body rocks with one full spasm and the neck a pillar smoothed with the bright light, their eyes close in a free caress, an evocation, their slim bodies rock back and forth, and waiting lips tremble with the desire for unborn moments, and the music is a dream too true to enter so they enter it, enter with hope, with twirling raised skirts and sizzling armpits, their heels turned outward, spinning, pushing back and front in quick dizzying steps and they leap up and land with the thudding full weight of their bodies, the sound of it louder than the music which bends their knees forward and their chests down in a crawl … (86)

The long, rapidly flowing sentence describing the dance recreates the liveliness of the movements even through its form. It creates a marked contrast to the short, fragmented sentences evoking the image of the dead rebels. Dance combined with song symbolizes the people’s “life force” and vitality that despite oppression gushes forth, bringing freedom, joy and recreation.

The rhythm of the text

Music is present in *Butterfly Burning* as a powerful recurrent motif and symbol. Furthermore, the novel pulses with a rhythm that accumulates from various layers of the text. This is observed also by Lizzy Attree: “It is not just what is contained in the language but the way it is shaped and presented that can fundamentally alter the way we read the novel, not just with our eyes, but with our ears as well.” (Attree 67) She points out that that certain paragraphs in the novel can also be read as a poem with a unique melody or rhythm. To illustrates this aesthetic interpretation, she underlines part of the text: “ A stone thrust./ The knees down and
the baton falls across the neck and shoulders. / Kwela. / Climb on. / Move. / Turn or twist or…move. / No pause is allowed, / and no expectation of grace. / Kwela. / Cut, pull, bend. / It is necessary to sing.” (5)

Rhythm is created also through the repetition of sentences, such as: “A single rough note. A broken string…” (65), which is repeated in “One broken string.” (88) The repeated sentences capture the mind like a refrain of a song or a ballad. In addition, the repetition of clusters of visual symbols can be named, such as, the paragraphs displaying the metamorphosis of water into fire and ash. The cluster of symbols and motifs repeat over and over. They become a refrain to a song, so that they are recognized and their implication is felt to the full before their meaning has been deciphered completely. The musicality of the text heightens the aesthetic experience or beauty in the novel. The cathartic effect of music and musicality is completed with the symbolism of natural phenomena, which is going to be the focus of the next part of this paper.
Chapter Two

The symbolism of natural phenomena

The aim of this chapter is to show how catharsis is created through symbols of natural phenomena. Reference will be made to the symbolism of sound and silence as well. Catharsis is meant to denote a sense of relief and beauty evoked besides or despite the sense of pain and horror represented in the text.

A multitude of visual symbols interweave the fabric of the text like a golden thread. These symbols are various natural elements, such as butterfly, flower, sunlight, water, lightning, fire, soil, etc. Most often, these natural elements are fused with the characters, so that they exchange attributes, the elements of nature becoming part of the characters’ nature. Accordingly, the symbols communicate the characters’ experiences or fate, including their death. The symbols intensify but also transform the perception of the experiences represented, for example, death gets further connotations besides its primary meaning of marking a horrible end. In other words, the symbols contribute to making tragedy susceptible, but at the same time, they have a cathartic function offering relief and a sense of beauty.

The fusion of the protagonist, Phephelaphi’s character with symbols of natural phenomena will be the main focus of this part. Some interpretation of the meaning of these symbols will be suggested. A further aim is to show how the fate of the protagonist is represented through the change of symbols around her. Finally, there will be reflections on the significance of symbols in intensifying and transforming the perception of Phephelaphi’s tragic fate. Supporting this analysis, I am going to refer to “The Habit of Assigning Meaning: Signs of Yvonne Vera’s World” by Carolyn Martin Shaw and to Ashleigh Harris’ and Lizzy Attree’s interpretations of the significance of symbols in the representation of tragic experiences.

Water, light, and dry land

The main symbols through which Phephelaphi’s character and experiences are expressed are water, light and land. Water is her main attribute and element. It points to her vitality, young energy or life force. Light stands for her beauty, but also for her intellectual will. Water and soil are combined to express Fumbatha’s character, the man who is shown to play a crucial role in Phephelaphi’s life. Furthermore, the contrast between water and soil is employed to show Fumbatha’s relationship to Phephelaphi. Finally, the symbolism of water and land is the
author’s challenge of traditional concepts about women and men, and the relationship between them.

On a symbolical level, Phephelaphi is introduced as water and light: “She rose out of the water like the sun and he looked at her in total surprise. The words tumbled out of her as she spoke and gasped for air. She was water and air.” (27) This is Fumbatha’s impression about Phephelaphi when he sees her for the first time rising from the Umguza River. Here, light can be interpreted as a symbol of Phephelaphi’s beauty. Light connects her to sunshine, clarity and the sky, making her something divine, the opposite of earthly. Water points to her vitality or her young energy. This is what is suggested also in the lines: “She was sunlight. Her beauty was more than this, not expressed in her appearance alone but in the strength that shone beneath each word, each motion of her body. It was as though she made a claim with each movement, each word spoken, but none of this was a burden to her, it was just how she was.” (26)

In the following, the symbol of land is introduced and it is immediately separated from water. Fumbatha’s words to Phephelaphi: “This river grows among thorns. This river does not belong to dry land. It is greedy and gives nothing of its water.” (27) Here, dry land stands for Fumbatha. The contrast between water and land is an allusion to the relationship between Phephelaphi and Fumbatha and to the differences in their characters. It is Fumbatha who unconsciously qualifies his future relationship with Phephelaphi: he expresses his distrust in it. Phephelaphi’s connection with water and Fumbatha’s association with land and the possible problems in the couple’s future relationship become more manifest as the story unravels. Fumbatha becomes overwhelmed by sudden and powerful feelings for Phephelaphi. His feelings are formulated in the following lines: “Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land. He wanted her like the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him.” (28) The words confirm Fumbatha’s connection with the land. In addition, these lines reveal the nature of Fhumbatha’s love: he associates Phephelaphi with the land and he wants to possess her accordingly.

Despite Fumbatha perceives Phephelaphi as a young woman full of vitality whose charisma fills him with energy and desire to live, his person does not seem to be the appropriate vessel for all the feelings and energy that Phephelaphi possesses. Although Fumbatha’s love gives her a sense of security, she does not feel complete in this relation. This is made evident in the text describing Phephelaphi’s moving to Fumbatha’s place: “Nineteen forty-six was fast spaced and promised a sultry escape.” (32) Here, the relationship is qualified as “sultry escape”. The word “sultry” collocates with weather or air and it means
very hot and uncomfortable. Also, “sultry” is a synonym of sexy; it usually refers to a woman seeming to have strong sexual feelings or look sexually attractive. The text suggests that part of Phephelaphi’s personality is ignored, namely her intellect and strong will. However, Phephelaphi is born out of a river and she has the attributes of the river. This stream of young energy is in search for new riverbeds. She seeks her own path - self-completion, integrity and independence. Without Fumbatha’s knowledge, Phephelaphi goes to listen to kwela music at a night-pub. Phephelaphi’s first encounter with kwela music is epitomised in the words:

When the music tears into the room she almost falls to the floor with agony. It hits her like a hammer, a felled tree, even though the noise is far and low and way back beneath her eyes where it trickles away like a stream. Stunned, wounded, she holds on to the door while she listens to the stream grow into a river and shift every boulder, every firm rock in her body. It leaves a tunnel, an empty tunnel she fills with a far-flung desire. A yearning. She can swim, but she prefers to sink deep down and touch the bottom of the river with her naked body and her stretching arms. (66)

Here water is fused with music to symbolise a cleansing, liberating and life giving energy. Again, water combined with music is shown to be Phephelaphi’s element, which she trusts and relaxes in completely. The effect of water-music is further developed in the sentences:

He plays and lets off a mournful tune which has no beginning at all, just a presence which makes Phephelaphi feel she has heard this song before, that she has lived and breathed in it. She creeps to a corner in the room and kneels down into the sound which is low like a whimsical wind, almost inaudible at the beginning like dry leaves, but it grows gently up and she is able to cross the distance it asks her to cross and to touch, finally, before it reaches the ground, the hand falling down from the doorway, to keep it there. She sees again the hand falling right down to the floor and the well of misery in her own heart fills her with wonder…She forgives Emelda knowing how difficult it is to be a woman, to fly with a broken limb…Finally, she has found Emelda. (66-67)

It is revealed how music-water enters Phephelaphi’s body and finds her deep wound, the painful memory of the tragic loss of her mother. Once the memory is faced thanks to music, the burden of the pain is somewhat relieved. The space gained is filled with a new life force. Phephelaphi feels strong enough to become independent from Fumbatha, or men in general: “After that she could look at a man without falling or seeking shelter in his eyes, then she could be with him without burning like a dry petal, the way she was burning because a man loved her and she felt caught in a storm and could simply drown, though, indeed, she loved him back.” (81) The lines, besides confirming Phephelaphi’s sense of freedom and integrity, also qualify her relationship to Fumbatha. Apparently, despite their mutual love, Fumbatha
bereaves her from water and turns her into a dry petal or on the contrary, he storms her with a flood of feelings so that she has the impression that she is drowning.

Literary critic, Carolyn Martin Shaw remarks on the role of the symbols of water and land contrasted in the novel. Shaw underlines that Vera consistently connects women with water in her creation. Water is used to symbolise, among others, the women’s aspiration for freedom and self-completion. Men, on the other hand, are associated with the land or the ground. Land has the attribute of inescapable gravitational force, which manifests in men’s possessiveness, their desire to rule both over the woman and the land. In accordance, the land is often depicted as inimical to the women, absorbing their energy or life force. In this way, Vera de-familiarizes the traditional concept about earth as protecting and life-giving medium; similarly, she defies the picture of the woman as mother earth. Shaw says: “Vera’s imagination is not bound by African tradition: women’s identities are not grounded in their generative powers; men do not protect; the community does not shelter the individual…” (Shaw, 36) Vera presents the woman as an individual striving for self-completion and independence. In this way, Vera generates understanding for women and as a result, she possibly creates relief for them.

Fire, ground and light

The various turns in Phephelaphi’s life are shown through the change of symbols around her. Fire, ground and dust are combined to represent Phephelaphi’s pain and eventually her death. Phephelaphi applies to be a nurse. However, the nurse-training course is granted under the strict condition that the trainees should not be pregnant. Moreover, Fumbatha opposes to Phephelaphi’s plan. She wonders if he can prevent her from reaching her goal. He can and does: he makes her pregnant. This breaks Phephelaphi’s balance. Her collapse is symbolically represented through the withdrawal of water from her. In this respect, it is relevant the scene that pictures Phephelaphi asking for help in chapter fourteen. After having found out about her pregnancy, Phephelaphi goes to Deliwe, a woman she admires and trusts to ask for her support. The location is the same as Phephelaphi’s first encounter with music. Here, she is shown to “mutter incoherently” and behave in a confused manner until Deliwe gives her a glass of water. The effect of the glass of water on Phephelaphi is formulated in the following sentences:

It was the glass that rescued her. A long glass with a blue tint to it which looked lovelier than sunlight and which, as Phephelaphi brought it to her lips, made her senses gather
together like needles of incandescent light, as though her butterfly wings were closing on pollen, just touching, closed till a breeze lifted and disturbed the pleat...Deliwe listened till the sky turned from blue to crimson light. Phephelaphi asked if she could fill this same sky, once more, with white clouds. Deliwe shook her head and carefully withdrew the tinted glass from Phephelaphi’s hands. Phephelaphi could barely breathe as she staggered back along Sidojiwe E2. She heard her own door creak to a close behind her. (104)

The paragraph displays the withdrawal of water from Phephelaphi, an act symbolising lack of empathy and understanding towards her. She is let down by the woman she admired and trusted. The lines present also the effect of the withdrawal of water on Phephelaphi, namely her loss of balance and control over her body.

However, Phephelaphi continues her struggle for independence and she decides to abort her child without help. The place for the abortion is outside the town, a patch of land in the vicinity of the Umguza River, Phephelaphi’s symbolical birthplace. The land is dry, there is no vegetation on it except for some bushes of dry thorns scattered around. Here, Phephelaphi initiates the abortion by pushing a thorn into her womb. Her painful experience is shown again through symbols: “There is no relief. Instead the pain sharpens and pulls at her. It burns, bottomless burning, beyond any action she might perform to reverse it. It whirls and stirs through her entire body and she is lightning. A streak of heat.” (116) Pain is represented like lightning or fire, the opposite of water. The symbol of fire exchanges water during the abortion marking the disappearance of Phephelaphi’s feelings and life giving energy. This is shown in the following lines as well:

She has to close her eyes and fold her arms to support this last seeping of desire. Strong wave after wave is released like flood breaking over the bank of a river, discovering a new shore where water has not been. She is at the bottom of the river but it is dry there. She is untouched by the flood tearing the riverbed from shore to shore. The river is a pounding and deafening omniscience. This is not water but a liquid wind – a pool of fire in which she burns without pause. (120)

During the abortion, Phephelaphi’s body sinks into the ground. The verb “bury” is used several times. Her loss of vitality is shown through the symbolism of silence as well. After the abortion, Phephelaphi cannot sing; she cannot articulate words: “A song lights her lips but she has no words for it. She tries again. No words, just their shape, a frantic bell, salt over her tongue. The gathered dust. The lost tune.” (128) Similarly, the new phase of Phephelaphi’s relationship with Fumbatha is also represented through the combination of fire, silence and finally soil: They now lived in a stunning, shattering silence. His simmering silence… her fear
burned into a low harmless flame...her body sank into the bottomless earth.” (134) After having found out about the abortion, Fumbatha cheats on Phephelaphi, then he gets her pregnant again and finally he leaves her. To symbolise Phephelaphi’s lack of life force, absence of water is evoked once more: “All the water has dried. There is no water in the river. A woman who is alone stands on solid ground, on a dry riverbed. My own solid ground to match the voice which is no longer in my arms, whispering my name.” (146) The last line expresses Phephelaphi’s alienation from herself, the disappearance of her voice and the lack of control over her body. Finally, the symbolical fire becomes concrete when Phephelaphi decides to take her own life by setting herself on fire. While burning to death, with her last drop of voice, she whispers to Fumbatha about their baby that is in her womb.

Phephelaphi’s death, though horribly painful, is described also as a relief and more than that, as a sense of self-completion and beauty. The symbols of natural elements and of sound are combined to express Phephelaphi’s anticipation of her death:

Today I turn my arm and listen to all the silence in my bones. I hear something beautiful. I see myself die in a storm. A storm has amazing sounds, beautiful, like eggshells crushed between palms, only louder. More certain. There are loud sounds and there are small sounds which are ephemeral, thin like life, and they make me long to die in a storm, amid its small and alluring sounds, wrapped in those tiniest sounds; a blanket made only of petals...Lightning makes a beautiful sound; to die in lightning is to be gathered in a beautiful light, more beautiful than stars. (147)

According to these lines, Phephelaphi looks forward to death. Her death is surrender, but at the same time, it is a sign of her will, a result of her decision. Through death she chooses to be true to herself. She strived to be comfortable with herself, to feel fine with her mind and body. This is also expressed through her desire to listen to the sounds in her bones, which her foster mother, Gertrude used to do playfully when Phephelaphi was a child. She is shown to have achieved her goal; she accepts and likes herself, finally. Her sense of fulfilment is formulated once more in the lines: “To love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially.” (150) The sensation of relief and triumph is reinforced in the combination of image and sound symbols: “She is a bird with wings spread. She falls into a beautiful sound of something weightless rising, a blue light, a yellow light, the smell of skin burning...a woman’s solid flame...she is dying in her own storm...she will eventually rise into her own song.” (150) The presence of the symbols of natural elements, bird and especially light create a sense of continuity. Phephelaphi is portrayed as light at her
symbolical birth, and she is surrounded by light in her death. Consequently, the natural phenomena connected with Phephelaphi can be interpreted to create some catharsis. The symbols link Phephelaphi to nature, especially to light, which besides water, is shown to be her element at her symbolical birth. Phephelaphi is light when she is born and also when she dies. In other words, she continues to live in the fire, “flame”, “lightning”, “sunlight”, even “rainbow”, symbols that are all evoked around her death. The symbols make manifest Phephelaphi’s returning to nature. It is suggested that Phephelaphi has changed, not disappeared; her burning is a metamorphosis, not death.

It is worthy of note that the symbols used around Phephelaphi’s death are similar or the same as the ones that represent the rebels’ death. Phephelaphi is shown to burn and to drown in a “liquid breeze” just like the rebels: “She is in a flood and buried in the most liquid breeze and will surely drown. “ (150) Furthermore, Phephelaphi dies with whispers on her lips. Similarly, the rebels are shown to “die in whispers.“ (11) Also, light, fire and liquid breeze are evoked around the men’s death: “The air leaves their bodies in a liquid breeze. Everything grows heavy, is buried, decays, or dries then burns into a silver ash of wood. The moon gives them a living light… (11) Again, the symbols admit the human into the great expansion of nature, thus establishing togetherness or belonging which otherwise is scarce in these people’s reality. The result is a sense of harmony, relief and beauty, besides the sensation of loss, pain and horror. Moreover, through these symbols a connection is established between the rebels and Phephelaphi. It is implied that Phephelaphi similarly to the men died for independence. In this way, equal tribute is paid both to the men and the woman.

The use of poetic visual and even auditory symbols around the representation of pain and death is remarked on by literary critics as well. Lizzy Attree talks about Vera’s “defamiliarizing and beautifying the commonplace, death and destruction in particular.” (Attree 68) According to these words, the role of the symbols in the novel is to create a sense of beauty besides or despite the possible confusion or pain called forth by the subject of death and destruction. Ashleigh Harris formulates a further view on the role or effect of these artistic devices. According to her, the symbols of beauty around sorrow and death are meant to capture the readers. She points out that people tend to turn away from subjects like sorrow and death. However, Harris continues, “Vera aestheticizes the trauma; she engages us with images and sounds of beauty so that we cannot turn away. In this way, we become witnesses of the trauma and death.” Here, again it is suggested that the symbols create a counter-experience against sorrow; they offer a sense of beauty, which makes it possible to stand out with the sensation of tragedy.
Conclusion

Catharsis in *Butterfly Burning* can be distinguished on different levels. Catharsis in the sense of relief is constituted through verbalisation itself of traumatic experiences. The novel gives voice to the various traumas that the Zimbabwean people have suffered as a consequence of colonialism. Special focus is laid on the double burden on the woman who is restricted not only by the foreign regime but also by the patriarchal nature of her community. The author discloses forced taboos like the settlers’ bereaving the indigenous people from living space, killing rebels and forbidding their mourning and burial. Similarly Vera brings into light abortion and suicide. According to Freud, verbalisation of painful experiences brings relief to the traumatised. *Butterfly Burning* offers catharsis or relief to all those people who have suffered such traumas, first of all in Zimbabwe, but also at any other place in the world.

The main source of catharsis in the sense of aesthetic experience or beauty emerges from the literary or the artistic representation of the traumas and tragedies in the novel. A main artistic device is the rich network of symbols and recurrent motifs through which the content of *Butterfly Burning* is revealed. A most powerful motif and symbol in the novel is music. The writer evokes kwela, a special type of music created by the people in South Africa. The description of the people’s kwela music, songs and dance makes explicit the creativity, strength or life force of this community. It is shown how they manage to achieve relief, joy, and freedom despite constant oppression. Similarly, music is the expression and repository of the Zimbabweans’ identity. Music, song and dance are consistently juxtaposed with silence and stillness, the contrast symbolising the struggle between life and death. The consistent association of symbols with a specific content is another possible source of beauty for the reader. Furthermore, aesthetic experience is offered through the musicality in the novel, namely through the unique rhythm of the text which brings forth the atmosphere of poetry.

Catharsis in the sense of relief and beauty is offered also through the symbols of natural phenomena in the novel. The most relevant visual symbols are light, water, fire, land and dust. These elements are connected first of all to Phephelaphi but also to other characters, including the hanged rebel men. Water and light expressing vitality, intellectual aspirations, integrity and beauty are associated first of all with the female protagonist of the novel, Phephelaphi. Having in mind that traditional views associate the woman with land representing motherhood, Vera’s interpretation is an innovative one. In other words, she reinterprets the traditional role of the woman in the Zimbabwean society. By associating the woman with water.
and light she makes manifest the woman’s aspiration to achieve freedom, integrity and self-completion both on emotional and intellectual level. In this manner, the author challenges the view that women’s primary aim and role is motherhood. Furthermore, Vera associates the man with dry land that greedily absorbs water. In this way, the author accentuates men’s possessiveness and lack of understanding or even exploitation of women. Through the juxtaposition of water, light and dry land, Vera exposes social injustice towards the woman and at the same time she appeals to and shows understanding towards her. This recognition is a possible relief for women.

Light and air (“liquid breeze”) are associated besides the female protagonist even with men in the novel, namely with the rebels who were hanged by the settlers. The parallel exalts the woman into the position of heroes, who struggle and die for independence and integrity. Moreover, the symbols of natural elements around the characters, including the dead, have the cathartic effect of creating a sense of togetherness and continuity and to a certain extent even beauty. In this respect, the most relevant symbol is light in its rich constellation, that is in the form of moonlight, sunshine, rainbow, fire, liquid breeze, shimmering dust, etc. The characters are merged with these phenomena in the novel; they are shown to be surrounded and to exist in these elements even after their death. In this way, a sense of immortality is created. Literary critics remark on the sense of beauty evoked by the various visual and auditory symbols despite their use around painful or tragic experiences. They accentuate that it is this beauty that makes possible to face up to the tragedy represented.

_Butterfly Burning_ creates catharsis through verbalisation of pain and joy and it enhances the cathartic effect through the literary or artistic character of this linguistic formulation. Major artistic devices are the visual and auditory symbols that offer a sense of relief, joy, harmony and beauty, through which the pain evoked by the tragedy is not surpassed, but at least it is counter-pointed. Yvonne Vera makes the tragic experiences of both men and especially women the subject of art, and in this way, she pays a tribute to these people and to all those who suffer. The beautiful symbols around the people are like a bunch of flowers, a token of respect and love for them.
References


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