

# “Confessional spaces and criminality”: Incest in Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera’s works

Edwin Mhandu  
University of Zimbabwe

## Abstract

The paper explores incest in Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera’s works as site for contestation of larger forces in society. The portrayal of incest comes at a time where certain “truisms” known to be in Black men in the stereotypification lore are overly dramatised and this tend to submerge genuine and well meaning struggles for racial emancipation and self determination to the periphery. That black men are portrayed as people with unrestricted libido is neither fortuitous nor an incidental project in the aforementioned writers’ works, rather, as a matter of priority it is often easy to take the lesser path by further complicating and bashing the generic punch bag of the Caucasian world. Thus, I argue that the said incestuous relationships are meant to vulgarise in a parallel form the ongoing struggles in America and in Colonial Zimbabwe respectively in the manner of Thomas Rice’s staged minstrels in Antebellum America. The emphasis by Walker and Vera is on the defective forms of lifestyles by people who declare alibis from the struggles and many critics have tended to applaud such projections as characterising a quest for inclusivity of the formerly muffled voices. This article contextualises the crime of incest, in its socio-political realm and refutes the overblown criminality of the black men as a political invention. Cases of incest abound in society and may persist in the unforeseeable future but these are not a preserve of black men.

## About the Authors: Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera

Alice Walker, by far one of the most acclaimed African American writers of the turn of the twenty first century was born in 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. Her fame rests on a solid ground of literary achievements and hard work. She is one of the most prolific writers of her generation and her works have become a thematic quarry for scholars who research on “Africana Womanism”, race relations, family relations among a host of other issues. Little wonder, Andrea Beaulieu (2009) calls her “a legendary writer and outspoken liberal political activist” ([www.mswritersandmusicians.com/writers/alice-walker.html](http://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/writers/alice-walker.html)). Among her literary canon are texts such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, *Meridian*, *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*, *The Color Purple*, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, *The Temple of My Familiar*, *Finding the Green Stone*, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, *A Long Walk to Freedom* among other significant works. Alice Walker has won a lot of prizes for her literary output among of which are: Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Color Purple*, [National](#)

---

Edwin Mhandu is a Lecturer in the English and Media Studies department of the University of Zimbabwe. Currently he is a Doctoral candidate at the University of Witwatersrand where he is working on the Zimbabwean Diaspora novel. He has published in international journals on African American literature, the interface of literature and nationalism in Zimbabwe, crime literature, war literature and on the Diasporan novel. E-mail address: emhandu2@yahoo.com

© 2013 University of Namibia, *Journal for Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*  
Volume 2, Number 1, June 2013 - ISSN 2026-7215

Book Award , O. Henry Award for "Kindred Spirits" 1985, an Honorary Degree from the California Institute of the Arts (1995) American Humanist Association which named her as "Humanist of the Year" (1997), the Lillian Smith Award, and the Rosenthal Award ([http://womenshistory.about.com/od/alicewalker/a/alice\\_walker.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/alicewalker/a/alice_walker.htm)). Like her counterpart across the Atlantic, Yvonne Vera (1964 - 2005)'s fame rests on real achievements both as an author and critic. Her text, *Under the Tongue* won the Commonwealth Writer's prize, Africa region and to her name, is the first Macmillan Writer's prize for *The Stone Virgins*. Vera is also lauded for being one of the most prolific writers of her generation in Zimbabwe and Africa having written several texts to the time of her death that include *Butterfly Burning*, *Without a Name*, *Nehanda* and a short story anthology, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*. What ties the two authors, apart from being writers of repute is the fact that they have made an impact in literary circles for advocating for women emancipation, sisterhood and on the therapeutic power of the voice. In the projection of women's concerns, they also write on crime, needless to point that in most of their works, the black man is the main criminal. As such, it the object of this paper to explore the presentation of incest in the African American community as presented in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *In Love and in Trouble*, *The Color Purple* and Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*.

## Introduction

The article explores the portrayal of incest in Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera's works. I argue that the two authors offer confessional spaces for formerly muffled voices and in the process problematise the father daughter relationships among people of colour and black people. Plausible as the idea may seem to be, there is a way in which the two authors' creative terrain pander to the often hyped about stereotypification of the black man as always a source of danger. The two problematise the African and the African American families by bringing in "parent-child" incestuous relationships thereby giving what Hortense Spillers calls "confessional space for and between postures of the absolutes"(Spillers in Wall, 1989, p. 127), something akin to writing on "taboos". Needless to point out that the incestuous relationships have nothing to do with mother-son relationships rather it is always father-daughter relationships where the parents' "unsanctioned" power's jurisdiction extends to the point of limiting a daughter's vast and untried sexual possibilities"(Ibid). With this background in mind, a discussion of Josie's father's implied incestuous rape in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alphonso's incestuous rape and subsequent relationship with Celie in *The Color Purple*, the relationship of the father and daughter in "The Child who Favours Daughter" in *In Love and Trouble* and Muroyiwa's incestuous rape on Zhizha in *Under the Tongue* is pertinent. That the two authors have been lauded by many critics for boldly confronting the crime of incest, especially when writing alongside 'hegemonic discourses' of patriarchy, racial repression and the quest for emancipation on both sides of the Atlantic is teleological and is discussed in the frame of Thomas Rice's staged minstrel where the subversive runs with the show at the expense of the authentic, as a way of vulgarising the authentic. Thus the article clamours for an alternative interpretation of the said incestuous relationships especially given the fact that writers go through a whole process of selectivity before writing.

## Incest: A definition

Incest has been defined by Hayward and Sparkes (1984, p. 893) as "sexual intercourse between persons related within prohibited degree of matrimony". A more embraceive

definition comes from Blume (1990, p. 4) who defines incest as:

... both sexual abuse and abuse of power, is violence that does not require force...It is abuse because it does not take into consideration the needs or wishes of the child, rather meeting the needs of the 'caretaker' at the child's expense... incest can be seen as the imposition of sexually inappropriate acts, or acts with sexual overtones, by - or any use of a minor child to meet the sexual or sexual/emotional needs of one or more persons who derive authority through ongoing emotional bonding with that child.

From the above definition, it is noticeable that, as a crime, incest dabbles with the breach of trust and is often associated with a violent seizure that also emotionally deranges the victim. The explanation is embracive, as McClendon (1991) observes. Thus according to McClendon (1991), the above explanation of incest identifies "as perpetrators: immediate/extended family members, babysitters, school teachers, scout masters, priests/ministers" (<http://www.clinicalsocialwork.com/systems.html>). In the case of Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera, fathers are the sole perpetrators as they rape their daughters and as they also subcontract their daughters to rapists, men of their own ilk.

### **The Stranger Within: A "Monstrous Father" in Alice Walker's Works**

Josie is gang raped in the presence of her father in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* at a tender age of sixteen. As Josie re-lives the experience through dreams which engenders her into a neurotic state, the reader gets convinced that her father raped her. Little wonder, she is always having nightmares. Not much unlike situations documented by Sigmund Freud in his seminal book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Josie's recurrent dream takes her back to the trauma and pain of rape and to make the situation worse, in the dream, the father becomes a permanent feature. We are told:

Josie...did not know why he came to her while she slept, drenching her in perspiration, racing her heart with fear, holding her immobile with his weight, like judgement, across her chest. For her father had been a heavy man, and it was her father who rode Josie, stifled through the night (Walker, 1970, p. 138).

The failure to wholly forget the rape and the traumatic after effects as pointed out earlier can be described and analysed in Freudian terms and in Jungian terms. In studies of hysteria, dreams and paraphraxis, Freud makes the claim that the human mind is composed of the conscious, unconscious and the superconscious where traumatic experiences are stored at the unconscious level. Freud in Lowe (1983, p. 107) argues that "in the unconscious, nothing can be brought to an end, nothing is past or forgotten. The unconscious path to thought ...lead to discharge in a hysterical attack (and in dreams) when sufficient excitation has accumulated." The haunting dream becomes almost a replication of the images of a day Josie gets raped in turns by a group of men in a semi-circle while her father stood attendant participating vicariously urging "Let 'er be.... I hear she can do tricks on her back like that" (Walker, 1970, p141). In *Under the Tongue*, Zhizha vividly re-lives the episode and she states, "I dare not cry or breathe. A shadow grows towards me. Father grows out of the shadow" (Vera, 1996, p. 108).

Given the centrality of the family in the puritan bourgeois ethos, where the father figure is regarded as a guardian whose role, among others, is to protect the women and children, Josie's father is presented as an archetypal opposite of that ethos. His presentation becomes a veiled call to the readership not only to denigrate and deride his criminal behaviour but to shun it as well. Although the father professes "abundant Christianity" and some level

of "sobriety and decency" (Walker, 1970, p. 39) his arrogant attitude towards his daughter determines him as an aberration from the bourgeois father. Presenting the qualities of an ideal father figure in bourgeois conceptual framework Rushin cited in Lowe (1983, p. 75) states: "a (father) encounters perils and trials...guards the women from this; within his house, as ruled by her (the woman)... enter no danger, ... no cause of error or offence". Contrary to such a father, Josie's father plays "pimp" on his daughter and thus becomes a catalyst in his daughter's descent into a life of prostitution. What strikes the reader is that the rape takes place on the father's birthday party, which is ironically fully funded by Josie from the money she gets from "prostitution". As if to salvage Josie from criminal-liability, the omniscient narrator argues that the rape takes place when, like the biblical prodigal child, Josie has resolved to repent of her sinful life. To evoke pathos in the reader and to add on to the eerie atmosphere on the eve of Josie's comeback, we are told that both Josie and her mother are pregnant. Although one may applaud the pregnancies as symbolical of the processes of procreation and continuity of mankind, one can also interpret them as evidence of women's vulnerability and total subjection to the male dominated society

In a way reminiscent of Cholly Breedlove's incestuous rape on Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Celie is raped by her stepfather Alphonso whom Shug Avery later refers to derisively as "that dog of a stepdaddy just a bad odor passing through" (Walker, 2004, p.147). On the day in question and on the days that follow, Celie is made to play the role of a surrogate mother irrespective of the "filial" relationship that had been fostered by the virtue of Alphonso marrying Celie's mother. In the incestuous rape, the reader is made to see the "brute" and "monster" in Alphonso who debases the position of the father figure in the African American family. The otherwise conventionally perceived, as "innocent" father-daughter relationship is overtaken somewhere along the way by the stepfather's criminal behaviour.

Annoying to the reader is the level of obscenity achieved through the earthy folkloric language of an ordinary woman, Celie who is made to endure. Just on the opening pages in *The Color Purple*, Celie says: "First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold of my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it"(Walker, 2004, p. 3 ).

Not much unlike Josie's father in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alphonso goes on to have an incestuous relationship, and sires children with Celie. Not to be content, we are told that he also "casts lascivious eyes" on Nettie and in doing so; he is transformed to the archetypal black father figure (someone prone to some wickedness) so common in the Caucasian American mindset. In line with this notion, Robinson Bailey and others argue that Caucasian American literature abounds with images of subversive and criminal black father figures. They state:

In the majority of cases reported in various studies, the husband/father was present in the home. Thus, the invisible man was present but unaccounted for. He is negatively portrayed in much of the literature (which appears to be basically impressionistic in nature). In effect, he is treated more as a problem, which the black family must endure than a functional component of the family (Robinson, et.al, 1985, p. 136).

Taking a cue from the assertion, one sees Alphonso as fitting well in the canon of the black father stereotype, whom, apart from his presence, one is made to view as the main

problem for various reasons. He is the problem in that he devises the fragmentation of the family by raping Celie, exposing her both to physical and mental torture, killing some babies (infanticide), selling children (Adam and Olivia), and getting rid of Celie to Mr. Albert in a manner reminiscent of a slave transaction in the “Antebellum period” in America. Alphonso is almost a pariah whom the reader is made to detest after having stood between Celie, Nettie and their attainment of middle-class status by clinging onto property (buildings and land) that rightfully belongs to them. Thus, an analysis of the incestuous relationship engenders in the reader a loathing of this black male dominated family. It is my argument that the author sidelines the real cause of the fragmented family among the African Americans in *The Color Purple*, which is only hinted at in passing.

The narrative thrust in *The Color Purple* is in such a way that readers question the morality of Alphonso and Albert while glossing over the lynching of Celie’s real father by white business competitors. After all, the effects of the act of lynching on the orphans are projected through the “brutality” and “savagery” of a system presented to the reader as controlled by people such as Alphonso and Albert, not the white controlled system. It is only when Alphonso dies that Celie is able to charge: “Just to think about having my own house...Plus, this home I’m gitting is bigger than Shug’s, got more land around it. And, it come with a store” (Walker, 2004, p. 221).

Thus, Celie becomes a property owner; itself a feat in a white bourgeois middle class culture mediated world. Having been integrated somehow into the bourgeois middle class, Celie strives not only to maintain Alphonso’s class position which he had achieved by default, she goes on to try and reify her position. She states, “I hired Sofia to clerk in our store. Kept the white man Alphonso got to run it, but put Sofia in there to wait on colored cause they never had nobody in a store to wait on ‘em before and nobody in a store to treat ‘em nice”(Walker, 2004, p. 254).

Celie does not question on why is it that the white man cannot be called on to treat coloured people in a nice way nor does she transcend Alphonso’s idea of having a white man to tend the store. Where feminist critics have been on record arguing that Celie is able to surmount exploitative relationships including the incestuous relationship with Alphonso, it is my argument that as a character, Celie is not able to transcend the bourgeois patronage on black people. Whereas she shacks off the tentacles of a demanding patriarchal system, she is more accomodationist when it comes to the race question. Thus, after the death of Alphonso, the rapist, the narrative slant is such that a reader is prompted to see Celie as an arrivant and the presence of Miz Millie’s children gives a semblance of an ideal multi-racial society. However, given the fact that white man in the shop cannot be brought to treat black people well the self-determination of people such as Celie is incomplete.

In “The Child Who Favoured Daughter” in *In Love and Trouble*, we are given a narrative where an incestuous relationship is strongly implied though the feelings are more conspicuous in the father than in the daughter. The father is galled by the idea that his daughter is having an affair with a white man and has actually received a letter with the words “I love you”. The question that comes to the reader is that if the father does not have an amorous intention on his daughter, how come he becomes so determined to “frighten her into chastity”. His jealousy for his daughter’s relationship with a white man is shown by the writer to be interlinked with his lust for her. Little wonder, when his criminal intentions overpower him, he goes for naked breasts and these being erogenous, we are told “he gathers their fullness in his fingers and begins a slow twisting”(Walker, 1973, p.

45). The father's hatred of the white men is influenced by the "master-slave" relationship that he experienced firsthand. The way he is made to act by claiming outright control of his daughter's sexuality, the subsequent "savagery" of cutting the breasts with a knife and throwing them to the dogs leaving "bleeding craters" on his daughter leaves a reader convinced of his monstrosity.

There is a way in which this can be interpreted as a confirmation of some stereotype which though the writer may not believe in, the white bourgeois class believe. The overall effect of the story is that, rather than having a black father responding to the racial situation in a rational way, he finds a scape-goat to act out a long held incestuous instinct in a most bizarre way. In line with this, Spillers contends that the story should be read:

...as Walker's version of an allegory in which race becomes the most pellucid, loud alibi for the male to act out a fundamental psycho-drama: having had a sister whom he could not love in an open, consummated way, this father never finds love at all. Carnality knocks him down, and his response to it is typically penal, punitive: he frails, he beats; his medium and memory are guns...and, great big butcher knives (Spillers in Wall, 1990, p. 143).

Alice Walker's male character in "The Father who Favoured Daughter" treads the ground that is common lore for bourgeois middle class mindset. In the depiction of the father, one senses a relegation of the racial question to the secondary where the black male "virility" and "monstrosity" are given preponderance. His "unnameable desire" and the fact that he has "eyes, ears and sex only for those closest to him" project his monstrous attributes. What is tragic is that he is always defending his position by shifting the blame on racism. Already, he has beaten his wife into a cripple allegedly "to prevent her from returning imaginary overtures of the white landlord" (Walker, 1976, p. 43), and the wife commits suicide. The father's brutality is far more removed from an act that can be found in any society. As such, the act should be viewed "in the world of imagined revenge" (Spillers in Wall, 1990, p. 143). Commenting on the story "The Child Who favoured Daughter" in an interview, Alice Walker says:

I wanted to explore the relationship between men and women, and why women are always condemned for doing what men do as an expression of masculinity. Why are women so easily "tramps, and "traitors" when men are heroes for engaging in the same activity? Why do women stand for this (Walker, 1984, p. 256)?

Without taking a detour, one finds Alice Walker's remarks more interesting and indicative of her revulsion of a repressive male dominated system. Thus, a black father is presented as the "father, judge, giver of life" and above all he is the penultimate devil who is indirectly responsible for the death of his wife and directly responsible for the death of his daughter. The story strikes as an anthropological essay digging into a black man's crimes and subsequent "savagery" and "monstrosity". The father's untended and untameable "sexual drives" whose main target in the absence of a wife becomes the daughter is a typical opposite of a bourgeois father. If we are to have this father as a typical character in the African American reality, the whole presentation becomes problematic. In this case, Alice Walker provides a stereotype of black "savagery" and "brutality". One is reminded of the discrepancies and the inequities that are commonplace in a racially polarised society where crime and criminal liability become purely a race issue. Exploring the subject, Ralph Ellison in *Invisible man* presents readers with Mr Norton, a "New England gentleman and later day, declined Calvinist"(Klein in Gibson, 1970, p. 156) who takes his time listening to Jim Trueblood's incestuous rape. As Mr Norton listens, he participates vicariously and he is

also reminded of his incestuous relationship with his daughter. As he listens, Mr Norton's subconscious obtrudes and he delivers his state of mind: "Your fate and mine are intimately entwined" (Ellison, 1984, p. 44). He admires Trueblood for accommodating himself in the cruel fate.

### **The "Amorous" father against the vengeful mother in *Under the Tongue***

Like the monstrous fathers projected in Alice Walker's works, Muroyiwa, having been born in a calabash overly dramatises the case of demented ego that finds a safety valve after declaring an alibi from the war front. *Under the Tongue* manipulates parallelism where Muroyiwa's story becomes Tachiveyi's story, a fact which many critics of the text glosses over. Tachiveyi literary translates to "What have we envied?" in Shona. If naming is as important as Meg Samuelson in Muponde and Taruvinga (2002, p. 99-100) would have readers believe, then the case of a guerrilla becomes a case of somebody with misplaced priorities not worth of readers' envy. As Tachiveyi goes to war, his alter-ego remains and in the latter's reminiscences, the author makes sure readers do not forget about the former, that is Tachiveyi. The cumulative effect is that Muroyiwa's misdemeanours become the misdemeanours of the combatant in the thicket of the war. The omniscient narrator in the text states: "He existed as the opposite of his brother, the war was an axis which kept a balance between them. Tachiveyi had courage, Muroyiwa had stayed behind. Tachiveyi was the first born, Muroyiwa was the last...Muroyiwa waited for Tachiveyi" (Vera, 1996, p. 93-94). The anticipation of Tachiveyi's return and the bravado with which Muroyiwa views Tachiveyi's mission, that, juxtaposed to Muroyiwa's view of "his own importance" lays credence to the notion that who he (Muroyiwa) is, is somewhat restive on what is happening to Tachiveyi. As to why and how the war gives equilibrium to the two becomes the complication of the puzzle. This is reminiscent of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Sir Bertilak's hunt goes is parallel to the stalking of Sir Gawain by the latter's wife. Unlike in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Tachiveyi's alter-ego is murdered after raping a daughter, Zhizha, and as Tachiveyi returns from the war front, it is difficult for a perceptive reader to exonerate him of any guilty making and at this point, the ritual (the ritual of vulgarising the liberation struggle) becomes complete. This, however, is not to say that I disagree that the text explores relationships between women as healing relationships, while relationships between women and men are abusive (Cairnie, 1998, p. 35). We tend to see the portrayal of abuse as spanning women generations from VaMirika, Runyararo to Zhizha and the women forge a unitary front through unlocking their voices (Samuelson, Muchemwa, Shaw, Wilson-Tagoe, Shaw in Muponde and Taruvinga, 2003). Thus to many critics, *Under the Tongue* confers voice to women and it is primarily focused on the therapeutic power of speech and women camaraderie. However, as Wilson-Tagoe observes: "That the narrative should centre on the subject of incest in the midst of a war so horrifying as to stop planting and harvesting, is itself significant" (Wilson -Tagoe in Mupode and Taruvinga, 2002, p. 174). In line, Wilson-Tagoe notes that the text looks at the wider ripples of the war away from the battleground (Ibid).

In agreement with Wilson-Tagoe, I argue that the liberation war is explored in depth in the text if not in a visible form it is by means of ellipsis. I differ with Wilson -Tagoe in that I do not see the incestuous rape as a ripple from the war, rather, the way it is presented calls upon readers to interpret it as the actual war presented to us in its inverse form. *Under the Tongue* is a story of Tachiveyi who goes to join the liberation struggle leaving home. His story is sardonic as he comes back only to find the brother murdered, the brother's daughter suffering from delusions of her now diseased rapist father's images and the brother's wife also returning from jail. His return becomes uneventful as the landscape and the economic relations he left remain intact. Tachiveyi's story then becomes an inexistent story what

we then get are the voices of Zhizha and the grandmother with some sections referring to Zhizha's mother. I therefore argue that the text explores the liberation struggle and Muroyiwa's incestuous rape of Zhizha becomes a case of an alibi as a prelude to the birth of Zimbabwe as a nation state. The incestuous rape story encompasses the period between 1970 to when Tachiveyi returns with the birth of a new nation. What comes out instantly is the thought that this nation by way of analogy is a result of an incestuous relationship. Martina Kopf (2005, p. 243) states, "Zhizha, presents herself as landscape, as an open territory. Her body language is translated into metaphors of water and stone. Her body/soul/spirit landscape is mainly shaped by a river, her tongue, which hides beneath the rock her belly has turned into in fear and defense". One way of looking at it is that the land has been raped by the former colonisers as Meg Samuelson in Muponde and Tarvinga (2003) seems to suggest and that the combatant, Tachiveyi, like Gikonyo in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* has to adjust to the new dispensation where "what is done cannot be undone". Gikonyo can neither kill Karanja's baby nor reverse the clock to get Mumbi in her pristine form. If this is the case then, what does a critic say of Muroyiwa? Could it be, Muroyiwa, the rapist father who ravishes and whose unashamed behavior is at the centre of it all, is the settler? If so, then I argue that quite a lot of literary criticism on the text has been skirting the observation preferring to rush on to the therapeutic power of the voice.

Given the fact that an artist selects what to write on, the juxtaposition of the incestuous rape and the liberation struggle in *Under the Tongue* is neither fortuitous nor an incidental project as many critics would want readers to believe. This then calls for an alternative interpretation of the text. Thus another way of looking at the liberation struggle poised against the incestuous rape and the over concentration on the traumatising effects of rape point to a situation where the liberation struggle is relegated to the periphery with a strong similarity to the core. What then happens at the core explains the periphery in minute detail to a point where one notices that the said periphery was the core as the core was the vehicle through which "illicit discourses" of the periphery get maximum attention. A parallel story to the phenomenon I am explaining is the story of Thomas Rice's minstrel shows. Rice observed and absorbed African American traditional songs and dances over many years as these were practiced when African Americans were reminiscing and yearning for a spiritual reconnection with their past in Africa. It was not good for the plantation owners and slave masters who had a venal motive for African Americans to seek spiritual reconnection with their motherland. To curb this, Rice staged minstrel shows where "he popularised the blackface entertainment", in doing so he was vulgarising and poking fun on the way black people were perceived to behave. Rice's minstrel shows were meant to peddle stereotypical images of black people as irrational, uneducated and barbaric. The net effects of the shows were felt by black people who may have felt less confident of their songs and dances as these were now subject to caricature ([en/wikipedia/org/wiki/Thomas\\_Rice\\_](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Rice)). In *Under the Tongue*, the return of Tachiveyi mirrors the return of Runyararo as both came to face the grim reality of a return. Whatsoever they were doing, that is one in jail and the other at the war front become ritualistic and not worth much writing home about. What readers get is a case of a nation that faced a still birth where the highly cherished expectations tumble down and clutter into pieces like the mirrors that are broken only for the omniscient narrator to comment "Breaking mirrors in public places became a necessary ritual of abandon" (Vera, 1996, p. 111). The dominant imagery of mirrors being broken, the "dazzling crash" and of "history being dazed and circular" is indicative of a society that is not keen on reflecting on itself (obliterating the confessional spaces), not even keen to look itself on a mirror for all, that is, the strong and meek to see how the society has fared.



### **Declaring an Alibi as a prelude to Zimbabwe as a Nation State**

It is true to point out that Yvonne Vera confronts societal taboos and brings out what Gappah is to later on capture thus: “There are many such secrets here...secrets that everyone may know but which may not be spoken”(Gappah, 2009, p. 24). In *Under the Tongue*, readers are bound to judge the hidden crime that finds leeway through women’s voices against the conventions of the Shona culture and it is noticeable that behind these conventions, there are supposedly, layers of hypocrisy especially in the way things have been said and done. I insist that Vera criminalises the liberation struggle by bringing in its minstrel as the actual thing as the “be all and be end”. In this regard, her sentiments are artistically echoed by Gappah who gives a confessional space to Sisi Blandina in “The Maid from Lalapanzi” in *An Elegy for the Easterly* who spends the war in guerilla camps, providing domestic services and sex as she states: “That was what we were told to do” (Gappah, 2009, p. 173). The importance of going to war is interrogated since Sisi Blantina eventually becomes a maid after independence. The afore mentioned statement is also true of Tachiveyi whose story is more or less the same with Runyararo’s story and Muroyiwa’s story where readers can weigh up and conclude in a pessimistic way, “Tachiveyi?” (What have we envied?) It becomes a case of an alibi as a prelude to the birth of Zimbabwe as a nation state.

### **Conclusion**

In the portrayal of incest in Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera’s works, one is bound to note that the butt of criticism is the black man. The Blackman is presented as a source of danger with an untameable libido and in the process the two writers pander to the gallery of stereotypes. In Alice Walker, the struggles by black people to realise equity as free and dignified people like their white counterparts is relegated to the secondary as the black family is presented as pathological and desirous of redemption. Taking from Freud’s psycho-analytic delineation and Carl Jung’s theories, we note that the writers (Walker and Vera) do not see a black man as having the sophistication to surmount the level where he demonstrates base instincts. Thus, the girl child is almost always the target of the father’s “virility” and to project this as part to the racial debate is akin to staging a minstrel and insist that “that is what black people are”. In the same groove, Vera also puts at the centre an incestuous relationship of somebody who chickened out on going to war and like the biblical King David, pounces on a vulnerable victim, a daughter for that matter. Thus, one can argue that according to Vera, the liberation struggle was not everyone’s war as some had more personal and intricate battles to fight. Such a text, coming in mid 1990s documenting a war that ushered in independence in 1980 has a tendency of vulgarising the struggle and just as incest is a dirty crime; all historical events, processes and episodes are tainted alongside the crime.

"Confessional Spaces and Criminality": Incest in  
Alice Walker and Yvonne Vera's Works

## References

- Blume, E. S. (1990). *Secret survivors - Uncovering incest and its after effects in women*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Beaulieu, A. (2009). *Alice Walker: A biography*. [www.mswritersandmusicians.com/writers/alice-walker.html](http://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/writers/alice-walker.html) [Accessed 2 February 2012].
- Cairnie, J. (1998). Under the tongue: A new novel from Zimbabwe. *Southern Africa Report Archive*, vol 13 no 4, p. 35.
- Ellison, R. (1952). *Invisible man*. 1984. Print. Harmondsworth. London: Penguin.
- Gappah, P. (2009). *An elegy for easterly*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gibson, D. B. (Ed.). (1970). *Five black writers*. New York: University Press.
- Hayward, A. L and Sparkes, J. J. (1984). *The Concise English Dictionary*. London: Omega Books.
- Hemmings, J. (2002). The Voice of Cloth: Interior Dialogues and Exterior Skins. Muponde, R., Taruvinga. M. [Ed.]. *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Weaver: Harare. pp 57-62
- Kopf, M. (2005). Writing Sexual Violence: Words and Silences in Yvonne Vera's *Under the tongue*. Veit-Wild, F and Naguschewski, D. [Ed.]. *Body, sexuality, and gender: Versions and subversions in African literatures 1*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 243-253
- Lewis, J. (2005). ([http://womenshistory.about.com/od/alicewalker/a/alice\\_walker.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/alicewalker/a/alice_walker.htm)) [accessed 3 May 2012].
- Lowe, D. M. 1983. *History of bourgeois perception*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- McClendon, P. D. (1991). Systems Theory and Incest/sexual abuse of Children: Focus on Families and Communities. <http://www.clinicalsocialwork.com/systems.html> [Accessed on 06 May 2012]
- Rice, T. ([http://en/Wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Rice\\_\(1768\)](http://en/Wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Rice_(1768))) [accessed 8 May 2012]
- Robinson, I.E, Bailey, W.C. and Smith, J. M. (1985). Self Perception of Husband/father in lower class Black family. *Phylon*, Vol XLVI, No 2, June.
- Samuelson, M. (2002). A River in My Mouth: Writing the Voice in *Under the Tongue*. Muponde, R., Taruvinga. M. [Eds] *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Weaver: Harare. pp. 15-24.
- Samuelson, M. (2002). Remembering the body: Rape and Recovery in *Without a Name and Under the Tongue*. Muponde, R., Taruvinga. M. [Eds] *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Weaver. Harare. pp. 93-100
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. *Representative poetry online*. University of Toronto Libraries. 2002-08-01. <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/62.html>. [accessed 5 May 2012]
- Spillers, H. "The permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibity Straight": In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers. Wall, C. A. [Ed.]. 1990. *Changing our own words: Essays on criticism, theory and writing by black women*, Routledge. London. pp127-149
- Vera, Y. (1996). *Under the Tongue*. Baobab books: Harare.
- Walker, A. (1973). *In Love and Trouble*. Harcourt Brace: New York.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2004). *The Color Purple*. Harcourt Brace: 1983 rpt, Phoenix, London.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1970). *The Third life of Grange Copeland*. Harcourt Brace: New York.
- Walker, A. (1984). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Women Press: London.
- Wilson-Tagoe, N. (2002) History, Gender and the Problem of Representation in the Novels of Yvonne Vera. Muponde, R., Taruvinga. M. [Eds] *Sign and taboo: Perspectives on the fiction of Yvonne Vera*. Weaver. Harare. pp. 155-178