

author's decision to adopt a female persona represents the major act of disguise, the most creative element in the fictionalisation. The mask never covers all of the face and is lightly worn: comments on clothes and accounts of relationships with men and women on the writing programme are presented as elements in the characterisation of the feminine voice.

Ike's decision to cross the gender barrier does not surprise. *Anthills of the Savannah* has already shown one established Nigerian writer responding to the comments of women readers and critics. For what its worth, I find the use of a female persona brave and intriguing. Ify is curious, intelligent, anxious to understand what she sees in the United States and keen to organise her responses. Only very occasionally (see below) does she endow her husband with unexpected wisdom that is surprising and worrying.

From what has been said, it will be apparent that this is a travelogue: a Nigerian visits the US, and writes about experiences. The most immediate comparison is with *America, their America* by Ike's near age-mate J.P. Clark, now Bekederemo Clark. But the 'student' involved is far more mature, far more anxious to get down and communicate information and make the most of a 'learning experience.'

The attraction of the book is in the elegance with which it is written. Ike's sentences are easy and graceful that spare us almost completely the hesitations and repetitions we might have expected in a transcript of a recording. Indeed, the pretence that the work is a transcription is quickly forgotten as, in a measured, finely chiselled style, Ify records reactions. One gets the impression of a

conscientious, perhaps somewhat isolated participant on a writing programme, with no creative project in hand, 'she' turns with all the self-discipline of a model student to the task of recording reactions to events around 'her'. Like a compulsive diarist, 'she' is for ever recording dates, addresses, telephone numbers, percentages, names....

As a responsible national representative on a writing programme, Ify interviews fellow participants about their positions as writers, the conditions under which they work and the incomes they command. 'She' also investigates - without positive results - the possibility of using US publishers, and notes with particular care American attitudes to authors. On learning about the appointment of Poet Laureates in US states, 'she' warns her shadowy but presumably knowledgeable husband, 'I'll need your advice when I get home, on what strategy to adopt to persuade our governments and the private sector to do something tangible to nurture creative writing in Nigeria.' (250) Ify is responsive to ideas and prone to make statements of self-dedication - for example, she likes the idea of poetry readings, and after a visit to Tom Sawyer territory (Hannibal, Missouri), 'she' resolves: 'I'll write on any theme in which I feel competent and knowledgeable. I'll give more consideration to the problems of child development, on which little good fiction has so far

been written in Nigeria, drawing heavily on my own experience as a developing child, and on a mother and teacher. So help me God.' (259).

The presentation of the writer picking up ideas and becoming aware of new responsibilities are the most interesting of the book. But even they are pursued in a somewhat dilettante way so that even the undertaking to interview fellow participants is never pursued rigorously. All in all the book remains on the level of a well-written travelogue to be read with pleasure, and with admiration for the careful way in which facts and experiences have been shared. One can enjoy the asides, the notes that are jotted down for the attention of those in Nigerian universities and governments. One can be surprised by figures and learn some history. There is a 'gentlemanly' understanding that these factual elements will never amount to anything as substantial as a programme or as intellectually challenging as a thesis.

While there is, despite the decision to speak through a female persona, nothing earth shattering in Ike's new book, there should be admiration for a job well done, and thanks for insights into life in the United States and on a Writers' Program.

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## Metaphors of Womanhood

Bose Shaba

Yvonne Vera, *UNDER THE TONGUE*, Baobab Books, Harare, 1996, 114pp.

*The River will become a tongue. Under the tongue are hidden voices. Under the tongue is a healing silence. I see the river. I see Grandmother.*

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S O says Zhizha the child narrator of this story in her desperate song of lament and of hope. For her Grandmother represents the ultimate embodiment of the ironical realisation that it is the lot of women to break out of the silence that society, tradition and family imposes on them. In one breadth she advocates silence as the antidote for the 'heavy things' which cannot be remembered without death becoming better than life and in another celebrates that power of the word in the breaking of silence and the place of the tongue in this voicing. This is the conflict that this novel of despair and hope, of death and life, experience and innocence treads and unravels. And Zhizha never really resolves or transcends this experience of oppositional juxtaposition to the very end.

*Under the Tongue* is a narrative that often dissolves into the subjective. The entire story is realised as an extended prose poem, employ-

ing a style where the narrative is constructed around metaphors and images rather than a concentration on events. The dreamlike quality of the story thus derives from this narrative strategy: fragmented, disjointed and jagged. There is no detailing of a coherent story but briefly reconstructed, it is a familiar story of rape. Muroyiwa, a man who carries a calabash where his heart should have been, rapes his daughter Zhizha and Runyararo, the wife, kills her husband and ends up in jail. Grandmother with her own history of pain and despair locked deep in her memory and silence adds this one more sorrow to the pile. Now living with Grandmother,

Zhizha no longer need fear the darkness for 'Grandmother protects [her] with her weeping, tells her of the many places, the many sorrows, the many wounds that women endure.' Rape, incest and social prejudice have always been presented in the literature of black people as the lot of the black female. *Under the Tongue* represents a very private dimension in its attempt by the child victim to recover from memory what happened less than ten years

before. We are not given the social lives of these people as they interact with outsiders. Rather, there is a delineation of the core of the inner family unit. Nevertheless this basic family unit is exposed as a social unit which subjects the girl child to a life of rape and terror. Grandfather never really features in this novel as a man who abhors what his son-in-law has done to his granddaughter rather he remains the patriarchal figure that he is to Grandmother. The patriarchal power he exercises over them can be glimpsed at the point where he proclaims in all severity: 'She killed her husband.' The survival of the girl child and the woman therefore rests squarely in their own hands. Here, this survival is made possible by a community of women: Grandmother, mother and daughter who work together in their struggle against a common lot and the condition of silence. And grandmother's resilience and will to survive (as shown in her song of hope even in the face of despair) is an indication of the resilience of this community of women.

Central to this narrative therefore is the role of Grandmother who looms large. She is a rallying point for Runyararo and Zhizha. She is the glue that holds the women folk of the family together and prevents it from disintegration. The lives of these women may be full of sorrow but they are very supportive of one another. It is here that their strength lies. Grandmother may be ambiguous about the power of her own voice but she remains a powerful figure, loving, caring and understanding to her daughter and granddaughter. She is unequivocal in this love even when Runyararo did what she had to do. And Runyararo? 'I will not bury him but throw him away just like a dead lizard' she declares of her husband. These are strong women in spite of tradition, in spite of silence. And Zhizha will defy both tradition and silence to heal the wounds of all three of them.

*Under the Tongue* is a melange of styles and realisation but its immediate literary precursors are the African-American and Latin American novelists. Specifically, there are echoes of Toni Morrison's novels most especially the very influential *Beloved* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*. Muroyiwa's calabash which he carries where his heart should have been recalls Morrison's Paul D and the tobacco tin which he also carries in the same spot. But while Paul D votes for life in his ultimate rescue of Sethe from the horrors of life, Muroyiwa votes for death. As Zhizha says: 'His voice says death is also life.' While these echoes are of images, those of Vargas Llosa are of style and structure. In that vastly imaginative novel, the story of Varguitas and his love affair with Aunt Julia is told in



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Yvonne Vera

the first person narrative by Varguitas himself in the odd-numbered episodes while the scriptwriter's radio serials are realised in the third person narrative voice in the even-numbered episodes. Vera's narrative is conceptualised in the same manner: Zhizha tells of her pain and hurt and the story of her maternal family in the odd-numbered episodes while the even-numbered ones are devoted to her father and his own family. Towards the end of that novel there is a merging of both stories as father, mother and daughter come together in a fatal union.

This novel is full of promise, the promise of breaking a silence that it never truly fulfils. All we are given are the poetics of pain and yet more pain but no personal histories are delineated to give flesh and humanity to these pains. What went wrong? Why did Muroyiwa's calabash heart finally crack? The war had not come to an end so he wouldn't know whether his brother Tachiveyi who disappeared to join the war and who he was certain was still alive was never going to come back. After all it was this certainty and waiting for his brother that gave meaning to his own existence. Or did Muroyiwa finally discover what happened to the butterflies that

he sought in the mountains during a war? Did he get tired of watching the perfect symmetry of mats that his wife Runyararo wove?

And how well has this novel fulfilled its maxim: 'A word does not rot unless it is carried in the mouth for too long, under the tongue?' In this tale of despair and hope, a tale that aspires to be reconstructed by the power and efficacy of the word alone, the novel never truly meets its own structure as the final realisation of the story shows us. The word has become almost rotten so that in its suspended release what finally comes out is fragmentary. But again this is to be expected if only because of how grandmother sums up the sorrows that women endure: only the departed can speak our sorrow and survive. Only they can walk on a path covered with such thorns, such unwelcoming soil. Even more fundamentally, this is a novel that is realised after all through rememory, and through metaphors and images. One can only walk with Zhizha in piecing these images together. So how does one recover the missing chapter 24? (But are they really chapters or just numbered episodes?) Or is this the publisher's error?

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## Antiphonal Anthologies Aderemi Raji-Oyelade

Henry Louis Gates Jr., Nellie Y. McKay Eds., **THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**, W.W. Norton & Co. New York and London, 1997, xxv 2665 pp.

Patricia Liggins Hill Ed., **CALL AND RESPONSE: THE RIVERSIDE ANTHOLOGY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION**, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1998, xxxviii 2039 pp.

*We have attempted to reconstruct the African American literary heritage, at the turn of the century, without pretending to completeness.*

- Henry Louis Gates Jr and Neille Y. McKay. 1997

SEVERAL anthologies have appeared after the publication of V.F. Calverton's *An Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929) to define and exemplify the canon of African American literature. But none can be said to be as extensively inclusive, patently canonical and compellingly discursive as *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) and *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998). Perhaps these two separate anthologies are au-

thoritatively significant because they are *fin-de-siecle* collections of the most representative of African American literary tradition spanning over two hundred and fifty years. More importantly, they transcend the ordinary generic boundary of the anthology as a calculated story of inclusions, revisions and rehabilitations: *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (here shortened as NA) and *The Riverside Anthology...* (or RA) have generated a new structural sophistication in the navigation and the reception of the expansive history and con-

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