



# On Resilient Character: Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name*

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**Abstract** - Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Garmezy's resilience theory have been used in this paper to discuss the influence of a past victimization on Yvonne Vera's protagonist's present motivations and actions. The paper has underscored that despite her willingness to recover from past psychological injuries, socio-economic forces in the protagonist's settings have distorted and impeded her dream to reconstruct herself, due to her lack of resilience skills.

**Key words:** resilience, victimization, rape, self-reconstruction, tragedy, trauma

**Résumé** - La théorie psychanalytique de Freud et la théorie de résilience de Garmezy ont été utilisées dans cet article pour analyser l'influence d'une victimisation passée sur les motivations et les actions actuelles de la protagoniste d'Yvonne Vera. L'article a souligné qu'en dépit de sa volonté de se remettre de blessures psychologiques antérieures, les forces socio-économiques dans les contextes de la protagoniste ont déformé et empêché son rêve de se reconstruire, en raison de son manque d'aptitudes résilientes.

**Mots clés :** résilience, victimisation, viol, auto-reconstruction, tragédie, traumatisme

## INTRODUCTION

People react to life's challenges in many different ways. Some will emotionally explode; others might become angry; and others might become physically violent. Others may implode, go numb, feeling helpless and overwhelmed by what has happened. Some might portray themselves as victims, blaming others for what has happened. They spiral downward and harbour unhappy feelings. Then, there are people who get through this situation. They bounce back; emerge better and stronger than before. These are resilient people who can quickly adapt to the new. (Cloete and Mlanbo, 2014, p.94)

Yvonne Vera, in her third novel, *Without a Name*, has intended to construct a resilient protagonist. However, she has succumbed to socio-economic challenges that she confronts in the fictional world created by the writer. This paper relies on Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Garmezy's resilience theory to discuss the influence of a past victimization on Yvonne Vera's protagonist's present motivations and actions. The paper takes into account the socio-economic forces at play in Yvonne Vera's rural and urban settings that impede her protagonist's recovery from a horrible victimization. The paper underscores that despite her willingness to recover from past psychological injuries, socio-economic forces in the protagonist's settings have distorted and impeded her dream to reconstruct herself, due to her lack of resilience skills.



*Without a Name*, is set in Zimbabwe in an era when the country was struggling for independence. Mazvita the main character has fled from her hometown, Mubaira where she has been abused sexually by a guerrilla soldier. This abuse has caused her a serious psychological trauma. After such a psychological wound, Mubaira can no longer be a home or a secure place for her. Therefore, she hopes to begin a new life elsewhere in order to reconstruct herself. She thinks Harari, the big city would be the ideal place. Meanwhile, she finds two men who have wanted to marry her. The first one, Nyenyedzi wants to return with her to Mubaira but she cannot do that due to her past bitter experience there. In Harari, she started living with Joel because she has no other options in the face of economic realities. Unfortunately, it has been discovered after some months that Mazvita is pregnant as part of the burden she brought with her from Mubaira. When she delivers the child, Joel does not want to do anything with it. Seeing, under these circumstances, no alternative, she has preferred to get rid of her own child. She came to the city with so much hope to reconstruct herself but she gets disillusioned eventually for socio-economic realities in the city are harsher than she could have anticipated.

The first part of this paper introduces Mazvita with a dream to recover from her horrible fall and the second part brings out the causes of her disillusionment as she tries hard to subdue socioeconomic forces opposing her fate.

### 1. Mazvita's Dream of a New Beginning

Dreamers are always driven by some motives. Through the narrative, Mazvita dreams of going to the big city of Harari. Some questions worth asking are "what are the motives backing her dream"? "What is the influence of her past hidden history on her motivation to go to the city?"

As a matter of fact, most people that leave the village for the city are motivated by the desire of having better economic conditions in the city. Surely, a rural area can be repulsive for many reasons. The most poignant is farm works with traditional tools which are tiring and tiresome. As we read: "At the end of the day, Mazvita felt weak, felt faint and frantic from the tobacco smell which spread towards her, like decay (...) She had worked on the farm" (Vera, p.22). Through this short excerpt, it is clear that Mazvita works in an unpleasant environment. The image of "decay" associated with Mazvita's activities in the rural setting is very crucial. Through it, the authoress implicitly contends that the economic forces in Mazvita's rural setting are repulsive. With this portrayal, the reader could sympathize with Mazvita as she plans to leave the place that turns a human into "a decay". As Rita Afsar's asserts: "migration can be considered as a self-help strategy for poverty alleviation and betterment" (Rita Afsar, 1994, 238).



Poverty is therefore a strong force that drives many young people off the rural setting. However, in Mazvita's case, there is more than that.

As the story develops, the authoress skillfully, through series of flash backs, allows the reader to dig into Mazvita's past and see some psychological forces backing her decision to migrate to the city. As a matter of fact, the narrator states that Mazvita was raped in Mubaira, her hometown in a condition that cannot be forgotten. The narration gives the account as follows:

My arms were heavy as I walked in that early morning to carry water from the river. I only had my arms, because my legs were buried in the mist. But I felt the mist moving upward, towards my face. It was strange to walk separated like that. Then I felt something pulling me down into the grass. This something pulled hard at my legs, till I fell down. I saw nothing, because the list was so heavy. I tumbled through that mist, screaming into the grass. I had forgotten about my legs. It was a man that pulled me into that grass. I felt a gun, though I did not see it. (Vera, pp. 23-24).

Mazvita's rape experience is so repugnant that she feels obligated to leave the place where it has happened in order to erase such psychological pain from her memory. Here is where her dream stems from. The dream to change environment is, therefore, motivated by the desire to reconstruct herself after a horrible rape experience. The trauma created by her sexual abuse has to be healed and for her, the only way to make it happen is to leave the place where she has been victimized.

It is my contention that she will always remember this experience any time she fulfills her daily chore of getting water from that river. As an evidence of how this experience keeps hanging over her, the narrator stresses that even when she gets into Harari, the city she has dreamt of, "she remembered the morning, running, (...) She ran from him, from the thing he had whispered between her legs." (Vera, pp. 84-85). Through this passage, the reader is made to see the role memory and remembering play in psychological and emotional pain. As Catherine Clinton argues "In all cases; memory will replay the circumstance allowing the rapist to prey again and again on the psyches of their victims" (Clinton as quoted in Bailey, 2016, p.52). Even long after her rape, Mazvita's memory still replays the circumstances of her rape. She can even hear again in Harari the noise of the violence. The acoustic image of the whispering of the rapist's genital organ is created for that purpose.

Though any shock may be healed as time goes by, the narrator echoes that it is hard for Mazvita to shake off the bad memory that keeps hovering on her. To lay a particular emphasis on this, the writer allows her to point out that "it is hard to be living (...) It is hard to find words for certain things" (Vera, p.23). Through this statement, one can imagine the extent to which Mazvita has been emotionally bruised. If it is hard for her to find appropriate words to describe her psychological state, then her wound must be so big and so deep, making her



recovery a bit difficult. At this point it is worth noting that, Vera shows, in one way or the other, that the immediate environment plays a key role in the healing process of a victim. Therefore, there is need to move to a new place, which is Harari. The city is the ideal place where Mazvita thinks she can forget her past and recover from her trauma. As she says: "You can forget anything in the city" (Vera, p. 24). Michael Ungar (2018) shares this point when he echoes that: "Recovery from trauma is not in an individual capacity alone but a function of the individual's social ecology to facilitate recovery and growth." (p.28). Harari is portrayed as the social ecology that will help Mazvita recover. In this perspective, Vera shows that the settings play a key role in the restoration and recovery of a victim of psychological torture.

However, in her quest for change of environment, Mazvita faces the opposition of her unique best male friend who would love they get married and remain in Mubaira. In fact, Nyenyedzi suggests he and Mazvita stay in the village of Mubaira in order to "live together and cook together" after he meets Mazvita's parents (Vera, p.23). But Mazvita turns down this offer and says to Nyenyedzi: "I cannot live here" (Vera, p.24). Through that declaration, Mazvita associates her recovery with a change of setting not with marital union. By insisting that she can no longer live in Mubaira, she relates trauma recovery to a change of environment. This reveals the writer's secret agenda to show the role environment plays in the healing of trauma. As Ungar (2018) asserts: "the quality of the environment is more important to recovery and growth following trauma" (p.259). However, a change of environment is not the only factor for recovery from trauma or self-reconstruction. There are some resilience skills to develop as well. Failure to incorporate these parameters will lead to disillusionment.

## 2. Mazvita's Disillusionment and Confusing End

Resilience is "the capacity of a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances" (Zolli and Healy, 2012, p.7). It is also a quality that allows an individual to recover from adversity stronger than before. Mazvita has arrived into Harari with so much hope to reconstruct herself but she fails to maintain her core purpose in the face of life challenges she did not anticipate. She eventually gets disillusioned in the city she has longed for because, she has not been equipped with resilience skills to cope with socio-economic realities in the city.

As a matter of fact, Vera's urban setting is permeated with capitalistic values that compel its inhabitants to selfish living. The writer has allowed Mazvita to express her surprise about the city life as she is struck by the drastic change:

A new life began, grew around you, embraced you like a hurricane. Sometimes, it killed you. ... Its undoubted ability for harm. People liked about that absence. They



had tired of being here, choking on every thought. Thinking was dangerous. Absence more so. They chose the greater danger, arriving unprotected, ready to be injured. That is how naïve they are about freedom (Vera, p.45).

The hurricane is metaphorically used in this excerpt to connote the devastating forces at play in Vera's urban setting. The narrator stresses that these forces kill mainly those who are not equipped to face them; the 'unprotected people ready to be injured'. Mazvita has arrived in the city unaware of its realities. She is completely ignorant of its socio-economic forces. City life, as it has been described in this novel, offers a scant amount of chance to the unprepared or ill-prepared to achieve their dream. However, about Mazvita we read: "She knew nothing of the arrivals, only departures. She knew about departures because she had mistaken them for beginnings, they were resolutions, perhaps, they were acts of courage, perhaps" (Vera, p.42). The passage connotes Mazvita's naivety about city life. She knows nothing about what it takes to make it in the city. This confirms the fact that she is not equipped to face the challenges in the new environment.

I would say that Mazvita is one of the "vulnerable youths unprepared for the risks that await them in ill-equipped cities" (Min-Harris, 2008, p.159). As she has come to the city unprepared, she cannot subdue the huge forces opposing her fate. It takes resilience skills to keep one's objective in a hostile environment. To Anthony Giddens (1990): "modernity also has a somber side, which has become very apparent in the present century." (p.7). The somber side of the city life is what Mazvita fails to anticipate as she dreams to migrate there to recover from her psychological pain. As a matter of fact, upon her arrival in the city, having nowhere to accommodate herself, Mazvita was obliged to follow Joel who offered to take her to his home. From then, she has become Joel's housewife because she had to secure a shelter for herself in a place where she came unprepared. Through this episode, the reader is made to see Mazvita in an unavoidable trap, in that, the author has prevented her from having financial autonomy and independence.

Here, the narration seems to subtly point out one crucial thing that turns most African females into victims in their society: their inability to have financial means to support themselves. As Cecilia Tacoli (2012) sustains: "women's disadvantage stems from a wider set of factors that include their (...) their limited ability to secure assets independently from male relatives." (p. 6). Had Mazvita had means, economic power, upon her arrival in the city, she would not have stayed with Joel; she would have been able to pursue her dream and achieve it. As evidence, the narrator says; "She [Mazvita] felt that each day she was without employment drew her closer to Joel and emphasized her dependability" (Vera, p.56). It is true that Mazvita has become a housewife, because she thinks she has



no other choice, if she should secure an accommodation in the city where she came unprepared. However, if she had been equipped with resilient skills, she would have been able to maintain her core purpose.

Furthermore, Mazvita's case is complicated by her pregnancy for which Joel refuses to assume responsibility because he thinks this must be part of the burden she brought with her from Mubaira. Therefore, when she delivers, Joel does not want to do anything with the baby and threatens her to leave his house. Even though Joel might not have been the father of the baby, he should not have asked Mazvita to leave the house if he wanted to protect the lady he claimed to love. Asking her to leave is a proof that he was not actually interested in Mazvita with the intent to protect and care for her. The episode of the 'baby without a father' is a skilful way for Vera to shed light on females' suffering in the city especially mothers without husbands who daily fend for their children to survive: "The city was like that. There was uniformity about suffering, a wisdom about your own kind of suffering, your own version of going forward. (Vera, pp.35-36). Mazvita like these misfortune women holds men responsible for her fate. That is why "she conceived a deep hatred for this man [Joel] who found it impossible to accept her and the child" (Vera, p.79). However, I contend that her suffering is much more due to her inability to behave as resilient people. For, resilient people believe that they, not their circumstances nor others, affect their achievements. They know that they are orchestrators of their own fate.

Another instance where the reader notices Mazvita's lack of resilience skills, is when the narrator is endowed with omniscience to read her thoughts about her child. A child has always been a mother's joy, however, in Vera's urban setting, due to economic constraints, it has become a burden. "The baby was her own, truly own burden" (Vera, p.42). The baby is believed to be a big obstacle to the fulfillment of Mazvita's dream. That is why it has been portrayed as "a mountain growing on her back" (Vera, p.86). And she longs for someone to take that yoke off her back: "Who will help me carry this pain? Who will carry it for me this pain and this suffering heavy on my back?" (Vera, p.86). Mazvita perceiving her child as a mountain, through her inner monologue, shows that she is ready to quit.

Being utterly disillusioned, because of her unsuccessful adventure, Mazvita decides to go back to her village. She would love to get to Mubaira without the baby so, she exerts untold wickedness towards her own baby. A woman in the bus she takes to go back to her hometown would say: "She was a cruel to her child, keeping her on her back all the way on the bus. A child must not be kept on the back for such a long time and in that heat. Did she not know that the heat could kill her child?" (Vera, p.92) Why would a mother be so cruel towards her own baby? The answer is not farfetched. One reason might be that she wants her to die before she gets to her village. Based on the Freudian theory, her problem



is not physical but psychological. That is why the authoress has the narrator say, Mazvita “had a rare chance (...) to undo her past” (Vera, pp.42-43). In the words, of Freud, Mazvita “has stored painful memories in her unconscious” (Bressler, 2011, p.29). And “because the conscious and the unconscious are part of the same psyche, the unconscious with its hidden desires continues to affect the conscious in the form of irrational thoughts and feelings” (ibid). It is therefore clear that Mazvita’s psychological wound, still controls her actions and decisions at this crucial time. She is neglecting her child because she is under psychological dictates.

Eventually, Mazvita, does the unbelievable: “She had broken the neck of her child” (Vera, p.96). Her psychological wounds she has carried from Mubaria and those she has got in Harari combined with socio-economic forces in the urban setting have certainly driven her to that horrible deed of killing her own child. However, Mazvita’s failure to bounce back in the city should be seen as the authoress’ craft to make the reader realize the importance of having resilience skills. These skills include among many others autonomy, adaptability, optimism and social connections. Mazvita’s has been a failure not because men are so cruel to her but because she lacks these resilience skills.

As a matter of fact, resilient people are autonomous. They have an internalized centre of control. Autonomous people understand that they can change not others’ behaviours but only their response to them. However, Mazvita has not proved that she has control over things happening to her. Actually, she does not show that she holds her fate in her own hands. She has killed her baby because she feels she has no other alternative in her hostile environments. She has allowed her past disappointments to determine her present behaviour and turn her into a murderer. Had she been autonomous, she would not have acted under the influence of her past victimizations.

In addition, resilient people are adaptable. They bend rather than break. Mazvita’s behaviour shows that she has not been equipped to adapt herself to life realities in Harari. That is why in the face of huge economic constraints, she fails to keep to her dream and decide to break, to give up. Going back to Mubaira and killing her own child, is a sign that she fails to adapt herself to life circumstances in Harari.

Besides, resilient people are always optimistic. They realistically know that change is inevitable and have a positive outlook on what will happen. They are able to reframe a situation to look for the good. When Joel has changed towards Mazvita, she decides to go back to her village and kill her child because she has no hope for a better future. She quits because the writer has not made her optimistic.



Furthermore, resilient people are socially connected. They build strong and positive relationships with people and will readily ask for help, even when under pressure. They understand the importance of connecting with others, and will happily engage with people who bring them happiness. Unfortunately, Mazvita did not build any relationship of this kind. The writer has not equipped her with the ability to see the importance of having friends she can share her troubles with. As a result she bore her burdens alone and yield to her evil passion.

## CONCLUSION

All in all, this paper has underscored that Yvonne Vera has wanted her protagonist resilient, capable of bouncing back after her past victimization. However, the protagonist has not been able to achieve her goal of self-reconstruction because she has not been endowed with resilience skills that should enable her to subdue forces that confronted her. This is what accounts for her inhuman act of killing her own child under the pressure of economic constraints. Even though, it can be argued that Mazvita's confusing end is an aesthetic to whip perpetrators of sexual abuse on women, it is my contention that Mazvita has ended that way, most importantly, because she lacks resilience skills that help a human turn tragedies into strategies.

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