

The Role of *Secure Base* and *Safe Haven*: A Means of Re-constructing the Broken-Self in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*

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ABSTRACT

Yvonne Vera is certainly the most successful and imaginative female novelist to emerge from Zimbabwe and conceivably one of the most significant writers of Africa. Her prose is valued for its characteristic lyricism and its lightness of touch which paradoxically highlight silenced and weighty realities of life. Being a Zimbabwean, she has directly experienced generational trauma of colonial oppression, horrors of guerrilla war and brutal killings of civilians in post-independence era. In 1990s, researchers have worked on trauma studies focusing on the sufferings of Whites like in the Holocaust and war veterans of Vietnam but less attention has been paid to the sufferings of black women. This study endeavours to locate Vera's texts within the theoretical debates of trauma studies. I intend to focus on Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* (1996) which is about a sexual assault of a pre-adolescent girl by her own father, written against the backdrop of severe guerrilla warfare against colonialism. It aims to analyse the recovery of the protagonist in light of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. This research will strive to study the role of *secure base* and *safe haven* which function as a mean of re-constructing the broken-self of the protagonist. In certain cases, nature or religion helps the healing process of the individual but the paper will

establish how affectionate attachment figures have comforting, healing and therapeutic effects on the suffering individual. This will in turn help to reconstruct the broken-self and enable the survivor to face the society with confidence.

Keywords: Secure base, safe haven, trauma, attachment, pain, women, words

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INTRODUCTION TO ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment is a profound and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another regardless of time and space. It is characterised by a particular behaviour in children who search for an attachment figure when troubled or endangered. John Bowlby analysed the effects of hospitalisation on children orphaned during World War II. He concluded that an early disruption in the mother-child dyad is a significant contributor to subsequent psychical disorders in these adults. A child is able to cope with the outside world when he knows that he has a protective and nurturing parent or caregiver. Without an attachment figure, he suffers serious psychological and social impairment. To recognise the importance of intimacy, Bowlby wrote, "Attachment theory regards the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals as a basic component of human nature, already present in germinal form in the neonate and continuing through adult life into old age" (1988, *A Secure Base*, 120–121). He contradicted behavioural theory which suggests that attachment is simply a learned behaviour. This theory proposed that attachment is the result of feeding relationship between child and caregiver. A caregiver feeds a child and provides nourishment, which is why the child becomes attached to her. On the contrary, Bowlby observed that food does not diminish distress and anxiety experienced by children when they are separated from their primary caregivers. Instead, he found

that it is love, care and attention which a child needs. In later life, as an adult, it helps him to make socio-emotional adjustments and build psychological resilience in the face of impersonal and interpersonal trauma.

Bowlby believed that attachment which begins at infancy continues throughout life. An infant first establishes a strong attachment with its primary caregiver which then becomes a *secure base* and *safe haven* for him to explore. Exploration is essential to development for it promotes learning about the environment and the social world. Yet, the world can be both fascinating and alarming. Secure ones are confident in their ability to explore because their experience suggests that in case of danger a sensitive and responsive caregiver will be there to comfort them. So, he walks around with confidence. He enjoys being independent, but when independency becomes too overwhelming he returns to secure base and safe haven. Providing a safe haven includes being available to the victim, giving space and time for open communication, showing interest in the problems, worries, anxieties of the other. Moreover, in giving reassurance and moral support, making him feel worthy and sustaining physical closeness besides warmth in times of need. Bowlby claimed that human beings are born with an innate psychobiological system which motivates them to seek closeness to attachment figures. Interactions with attachment figures that are sensitive and responsive to their calls for help promote a stable sense of attachment security and build positive mental representations of self and others.

But if the attachment figure is not reliable and/or supportive, proximity seeking fails to relieve distress. Attachment security is undermined, thus leading to negative models of self and others. Then there are chances of other emotional problems which may hinder the acquisition of skills. In *Maternal Care and Mental Health* Bowlby asserted that, “essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or mother-substitute), in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment” (1951, 67).

BACKGROUND

Yvonne Vera (1964-2005), the author of five novels and a collection of short stories, was a popular speaker at many European conferences and recipient of several awards. She was born and raised by educated parents against the backdrop of uncertain colonialism and vicious guerrilla warfare in 1970's Rhodesia. She saw men go off to war never to return while women struggle to survive in a society where being a woman is a challenge in itself; for it is a society where she is frequently ignored and mistreated at worst. Vera was only fifteen when the guerrilla armies overthrew the colonizers and Zimbabwe was born. Unlike her predecessors, her focus shifted from grand narratives of national history and heroic struggle of men to private experiences of women. Her third novel, *Under the Tongue* (1996), deals with pain of three generations of women who are betrayed neither by enemy nor by unknown

men but by the men of the house. *Under the Tongue* won first prize in the Zimbabwe Publishers' Literary Awards, was awarded the 1997 Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa region), and two years later won the prestigious Swedish literary award “The Voice of Africa”.

Vera's fiction has no narrative movement, no plot development, and no character portrayal in the conventional sense; social and political upheavals are highlighted which form the context of her fiction. There is endless repetition of words, short sentences and consistent imagery but framed from varied angles. Singular images are built up into extended metaphors. She deliberately resists clear-cut meaning as she has the courage to tackle taboo subjects of “violence, rape, incest, and suicide, and the collective terror of racism, tribalism, and war, all wicked invasions of the land and women's bodies, dismemberment of memory, and betrayal of the future” (Zezeza, 2007, 14).

METHODOLOGY

The study will depend on the method of using the conceptual framework of safe haven and secure base selected from Attachment Trauma Theory to focus on analysing some intrinsic aspects of psychological trauma alongside to reveal how the character struggles to come out of trauma with the help of safe haven and secure base. References from critical articles will be made to elucidate how affectionate attachment figures help the distressed protagonist in the process of recovery.

DISCUSSION

Under the Tongue (1996) is a novel of trauma. It opens with an image of a *tongue* which is not associated with speech but with life and tears. The tongue is dead and dry, buried deep under rock. The softness of the tongue is contrasted with the heaviness of the rock. The stone is not above the tongue but “buried in [her] mouth, carried under [her] tongue” (121). The protagonist painfully continues, “My voice has forgotten me” (121) and “the fact that Zhizha has no voice is a textual paradox since the narrative comes directly from her and is her narrative discourse, though a silent one. At times, her discourse seems to be an interior monologue, displaying many oral traits such as repetition and piling” (Ortega-Guzmán, 2007, 106). Not only her mother but her grandmother also provides her a secure base and becomes a safe haven as she consoles her in every possible way; the grandmother says that a person has many tongues, which lie inside one’s mouth. If one tongue has stopped responding then another can be used. She tries to absorb all the fears of the grandchild within herself. The grandmother, being an attachment figure who has an enduring emotional bond with the granddaughter, motivates the child to touch the sky, to achieve the impossible and hopes that their “voices reach the sky with their crying; rain will fall and cover the earth” (122). She is certain that nature will respond to their cries and will purify the child with rain water. She pushes her to “touch the sky even if it is so far way. We cannot fear our silence, our desire, our release” (122). Like a

true healer she carries “all [Zhizha’s] sorrow of yesterday” (122) and motivates her to “choose words” to bury the grief (131).

She consoles Zhizha and tells her that pain is common to all women. It is a universal dilemma for it is in their fate to withstand “the many wounds women endure” (122). Grandmother encourages Zhizha to speak because she believes that words help “to bury our grief” (131) but unfortunately “her characters often lack the means to articulate their desires” (Brendt, 2009, 129). Zhizha must confide her sorrows for only by doing so, she will find release. Words borne of sorrows are “the wisdom of her heart” (133). Only in this way she can celebrate “the moment of birth” (131) and “defeat death and silence” (131). The living room is empty, the only thing that is there in the room is the *basket* which has no egg in it but has “words [to] be shelled and tossed” (137). The grandmother is trying to make her realize that “the best words are those that are shared and embraced, those that give birth to other words” (137).

Grandmother cites female gender as an example and says that a woman cannot pinpoint the source of pain because it is here and there. A “woman finds her sorrow in her dream and everywhere” (162). Vera’s compelling narrative portrays the acute pain that pervades women’s daily existence. It extends from the workings of the imagination to the daily process of living (Norridge, 2012, 26). The old woman is no more than a shadow but still Zhizha finds her very supportive as she feels that she is “lifting [her] from the ground, raising [her]

high” (162). She is spending her days and nights with Zhizha to soothe her broken psyche. She sings songs to Zhizha, but tears start dropping from her eyes. Her songs are born in old places where now no organic life exists. These are originated in ancient lands “where the sun no longer rises or sets” (162). She tells her grandchild that sorrows of women are ageless and timeless; sorrows are so obvious that a woman does not need to speak of them because a “woman’s cry is naked like birth; there is nothing to hide it” (162). She says that rivers of tears flow where women gather, but she ends on a hopeful note “that morning will arrive even in such a place” (163). Nature is kind to all. Like night is regularly replaced by morning with fresh hope and optimism; similarly sorrows also stay for a certain period of time. While talking about the limitations of women-folk she says, “We have no mouth” (163). They dare not air their grievances which might help them to survive. They have to cover thorny passages and step onto hostile ground in order to survive. She compares living with dead, saying that those who have left this world are better off, for the sorrows of life cannot touch them. The grandmother wants Zhizha to understand that she is young, and has much life ahead of her; so “[g]randmother’s narratives are not just placebos for the suffering girl childhood, but a transmission of positively utopian possibilities that transcend the ennui and enervation induced by an implacable oppression” (Muponde, 2007, 39). She shares her life experiences with Zhizha in order to reassure her that she does not

suffer alone; there are others too who have been abused and violated. In this novel, women of three generations suffer so much mental anguish that they “have become strangers to sleep and [their] day[s] ha[ve] no beginning or end” (153). She adds that just as smoke makes everything hazy and unclear, similarly sorrow also blinds vision. Sorrow becomes so overwhelming that it comes in between everything they see and everything they do. These sorrows are like cries moving not in linear direction but they move in circles. Accepting all these facts, the grandmother soothes herself and reassures the two suffering females by saying, “these are the things for forgetting not remembering” (154). Despite life’s hardships, one has to move on. She reiterates that sorrows cannot be hidden. They are so visible and obvious hence they have to be buried beneath the earth like the dead otherwise they will putrefy. She has gone through much pain but the sorrows of her daughter and granddaughter aggravate her agony.

Her grandmother’s wise counsel and loving embrace make Zhizha feel safe and loved. On finding her disintegrated, she folds arms around her to embrace all her sorrows. The grandmother weeps for Zhizha and her own painful past. She tries to wash away Zhizha’s pain with her tears, which come straight from heart through her eyes. She tells her that a woman loses her identity as soon as she is born into this world and becomes as insignificant as a branch of a tree or a grain of sand. Grains of sand are innumerable, they do not have

any importance if taken individually, and branches of tree bear the heat of the sun but provide shade to others. Through these two metaphors, the grandmother suggests that women as individuals hold no importance in patriarchal society so they have to raise their voice collectively in order to be heard; and it is also within their nature to withstand heat themselves and provide cool shade to others. Visual symbols entwine with the structure of the text. Discussing the aesthetics of Vera's novels Norridge (2013) writes, "This quest for meaning, the search for narrative thread in the face of free-floating words and images, inconsistencies and gaps in chronology, reflects the real person in pain's quest to make sense of their own story's confusions" (2013, 33).

Pain is one of the most complex realities of life. It is deep rooted but invisible. It has no substantial existence but at the same time it is as big as a tree which grows in a mouth. It is watered by tears of humanity but is as dark and unsubstantial as a shadow is. Grandmother feels that the present pain and loss, when her daughter is arrested and taken away by the police, is greater than all the previous pains she has borne in the past. She does not know when her daughter will be released or reunited with her. This breaks her; she has become tired of this worldly life for "she finds her present sorrow large and waiting" (164). Grandmother represents the archetype of woman whose sorrows are as old as hills, rivers and rocks. This pain of losing her daughter uproots and devastates her. She feels as if she has fallen down with a crash. Her hair has grown white not

because of her age but because of the salt of her tears. The grandmother, though old and mature, searches for her secure base and safe haven. She remembers her family and cries for help, "where is my clan and my people?" (165). Nature too seems to respond to her painful state of mind as it starts raining. The raindrops soothe and comfort her. They have liberating and life-giving energy in them. Though she is going through such a painful state of mind which renders her voiceless, and made her as dead and lifeless as a stone is, yet her "eyes are bright with longing" (165). This longing signifies hope for a better tomorrow which will end their vicious cycle of pain and liberate them. Grandmother is appealing to the Higher Reality with "hands cupped, arms raised, head bowed and eyes closed" (165). Raindrops soothe grandmother's pain which she silently bears hidden under the tongue.

Later it is seen that a transformation in grandmother's thought takes place. Earlier she has been comparing woman to a branch of a tree for it bears heat and provides shade to others but later on she says that "women are children" (173) because they are as innocent and vulnerable as children are. She realizes that women cannot be compared to trees because trees have many branches but women are born with limitations. Another difference between trees and women is that trees are firmly rooted to the ground while women have no firm basis. They can be uprooted by people around them, but the advantage which a woman enjoys over a tree is that she has a tongue with which she can relate her dreams of future and memories of

the past. Another difference between a tree and a woman is that a tree is watered while a woman's tears are an outlet to express her various emotions. No matter what the circumstances are, a woman is born with an indomitable will to move on. Though the "path has many thorns ... this path is narrow ..." (173) but she has to carry on. Circumstances and seasons may change, but women have to endure many difficulties in the journey of life. The grandmother questions the silence of women. She says women who are blessed with tongues should use them to fight for their rights. A woman is not a tree whose fruit falls on the ground and rots. A woman can go to the extent of killing her husband if he has victimized her child. She imparts these words of wisdom to the younger generation. She declares "a woman must not swallow her tears. A woman is not a tree" (175). Vera feels that these words could only be conveyed and understood by the silently suffering female gender. Women sometimes try to bury their sorrows in far off places which they promise never to visit but when a fresh sorrow comes into their lives then "a woman will return to a place she thought had become a memory" (175). Words have the propensity to convey pain but if a woman does not speak of her pain, and then it will become as big as a tree, with its roots reaching the depths of soul.

Zhizha senses her grandmother's grief. She finds her broken and shattered so wants to comfort her. When she finds that the shadow of sorrow has swallowed grandmother then she takes a decision: "I do not cry" (181). She tries to withhold

the hidden word within her mouth. She wishes to pick up a "ray of light and spread it across her forehead" (181) but is unable to do so. She is too young, hence has no idea how to do it but her decision to not cry is a positive one as it will help her to heal, and also facilitate the healing of her mother and grandmother. She takes this positive decision because she has been brought up by a mother who has provided her with a *secure attachment* which is why she is trying to regain her lost confidence; though the situation is too overwhelming to accept.

Gunner and Kortenaar opine that, "For Vera protagonists, there are no havens where one does not have to think and feel. There is no escape from the body in pain" (2007, 4), but I strongly refute this idea. Zhizha recovers because of her closeness to her grandmother who is her secure base and safe haven, the one who listens to her "silence and her dreams" (182). Grandmother recounts Zhizha's birth and recalls how she has buried her incapacitated son, a memory of which is an extremely painful and unforgettable reality of her life. She had frantically prayed for the healthy life of son but was devastated when he died and she had to bury the child with her own hands. Her bereavement led to attachment trauma that further intensified when her husband spurned and humiliated her for giving birth to a sick son. Grandmother has not forgotten her son and still feels his presence around her. This painful episode revealed the true face of her husband who taunted and insulted her instead of supporting her. Zhizha listens as grandmother recounts

her painful past and comes to realize how grandmother, who is broken from inside, still lends her emotional and physical support when she “sleeps beside” her (193). She expresses her extreme love for her and professes that Zhizha is closer to her than her own daughter. She then sings a beautiful and touching lullaby for Zhizha and offers her shoulder to rest her head on it. Though Zhizha’s face is wet with tears, but the grandmother ignores her tears and says that her face is bright and beautiful.

Grandmother not only consoles the granddaughter but her daughter too, who seeks support from her secure base and safe haven after murdering her husband. She consoles her daughter through tender facial expressions “saying many unspoken things which the mouth cannot carry” (151). Their closeness to each other negates the need for language for she does not need the support of language to give expression to her feelings. Her silence details her husband’s murder. There is dead silence in the room yet “they speak and speak” (151). The grandmother knows that after going through such a horrific incident, her daughter must be feeling very thirsty, so she gives her some water to drink. Her daughter is trembling due to extreme shock so she drinks water as if she has been thirsty for years. She “speaks and speaks” (151), in language of silence, which grandmother listens with full empathy. The Grandmother wants the daughter to know that she will always be there as her secure base and safe haven, “to hear the unspoken things of her mouth” (151). She feels her daughter’s

trauma. It appears as if the mother of Zhizha has brought eternal and untold sorrow upon the whole family. This crisis only serves to deepen all the sorrows of the past and reopen old wounds which they have tried so hard to forget. The mother of Zhizha regrets her action but later justifies her guilt by saying, “I am silent. Just silence to speak of my silence against the husband who is not a man but a lizard with a rotting stomach” (152).

Generational trauma borne by the female gender is explicitly described by the grandmother in these words “of the many places, the many sorrows, the many wounds women endure” (122-123) and, “our tears are as old as the daughters and mothers and grandmothers of our ancient earth...” (132). Her expressions are like a soothing balm on the wounds of all women irrespective of race or age. Vera has “steadfastly endeavoured to imagine the emotional and psychological lives of Zimbabwean women and to disclose the histories of violation and brutality responsible for their silences” (Kostelac, 2010, 76). I assert that the lap of grandmother has become a secure base and safe haven — an essential requirement for the re-construction of the broken-self of the traumatized person.

Zhizha, in her extreme pain, searches for her *mother*, but cannot find her. Though she is being fully taken care of by the grandmother, she still remembers and misses her mother whom she regards as her moon. Bowlby also thinks that mother-child dyad is significant in reducing the emotional turmoil of the suffering child. Grandmother consoles her by saying that her mother is around so

she need not be afraid of anything. Zhizha's mother supports the daughter by killing the husband who had sexually violated their daughter, the memory of which "bursts from the sky, explodes in sharp piercing rays, burning, like flame" (142). The wise counsel of her safe haven will help Zhizha to heal her psychic and physical wounds. Zhizha is also mired in the memory of her violation as she ceaselessly remembers the darkness of the night, the sharpness of the knife and the harshness of the rock. Driver says, "Vera's language not only transforms the dead past into a living past but also allows the past to call insistently to the present for the continual reinterpretation of both" (2007, 116). The mother of Zhizha does not feel triumphant after killing her husband; on the contrary, nothing made sense to her numbed mind. Zhizha is haunted by the sight of her grief-stricken mother, whose "voice [is] shattered, hidden, swallowed by the ground" (150). Zhizha wants to show her wounds to her mother but the mother discourages the child from doing so because she feels that Zhizha is too young to understand the implications of her abduction. Words alone cannot explain Zhizha's scars and wounds. All she can do is "only sorrow and forgetting" (180). Vera's characters "inhabit a liminal, interstitial space, caught at various points between life and death, speech and silence, identity and its negation" (Kostelac, 2007, 124). Both mother and daughter are connected through the loss of voice after the most shocking incidents of their lives. Mother's *silence* and *shattered* state are testimony to her pain. Murray (2010)

identifies that Vera's continuous return to bodies as the loci of both psychic and physical pain constitutes part of her attempt to overcome the difficulties of writing about pain, trauma and violence. The mother compares the dead man to a lizard with a rotting stomach and to a hen which chases its own shadow mindlessly. He has stolen the cool light of the moon. He has deceived his family like a traitor who throws a handful of dust onto his own clan. He has brought shame to the whole family—the forefathers as well as the future generations.

Zhizha's disturbed mental state causes her to hear her mother's calling even in her sleep. She cries for her secure base and safe haven for she knows that only these two mother figures can restore her psychic balance. She says, "I cry to my mother frantically, saying, I remember my forgotten world. I remember the pain in my growing. I remember my stolen dawn. I cried in the voice of my mother and my grandmother. I remember my hidden world..." (200). Kopf says, "Zhizha's 'I' moves to and fro in endless shiftings and displacements, the boundaries of her 'self' are indistinct and permeable" (2005, 248). Zhizha remembers her mother teaching English vowels in front of a mirror. Zhizha feels blessed with a new life when her mother returns from the prison. She feels rejuvenated by her "endless warmth" "brilliant growing love" "radiance of her eyes" (202). On her return, the mother tells her daughter that she also used to see her in her dreams. They laugh heartily and rejoice in their closeness. The mother again teaches Zhizha to phonate

English vowels for she strongly believes “[we] live with words” (203). The mother, in this novel, plays a dual role. She has come in search of her secure base and safe haven; she also becomes a secure base and safe haven for her daughter. The writer stresses the importance of secure base and safe haven in a mother-child relationship, “We grow together even when we are apart. We belong together” (208). Distance cannot affect the relationship of a mother and a child because their relationship starts before the birth of a child and it grows with time. Zhizha feels guilty for the pain she has caused to her mother, yet she also knows that she cannot survive without her mother when she says, “I long for her never to depart” (218).

The mother becomes her secure base and safe haven as she comforts and consoles the broken Zhizha. She sings a lullaby to soothe Zhizha’s restless soul. She calls her *light* to restore her self-esteem and to bring her back to normal life. The novel begins with the following lines: “A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock. My tongue is a river. I touch my tongue in search of places of my growing” (121). These lines speak of silence which has engulfed Zhizha, but with consolation, love and care from the two attachment figures, a transformation takes place within her as she says, “Under the tongue are hidden voices. Under the tongue is a healing silence” (163). She then tries to train herself to remain silent, a silence which is different from the former one. Earlier, she has lost her voice after the traumatic experience but now she wears this silence as

a sign of maturity which is passed onto her by the experienced members of the family. She wants to stay in this period of silence to experience the “joy” of “forgetfulness” (182). This will make her strong to face the people of the community with confidence.

The mother consoles the injured child by reminding her of their strong bond which precedes her relationship with the rest of the world. The event of her birth is related to her in detail. To emphasize the strength of their bond, the mother says that they both cry in similar manner. Zhizha hears her mother very lovingly saying, “I have seen you, my daughter, I will always be near” (200). Thus, she re-assures her availability and reiterates that she will always stand beside her. The concept of secure base and safe haven comes in as Zhizha says “lapping gently. My mother” (201). The secure base and safe haven in Bowlby’s Attachment Theory signify the lap of a mother or care-giver and here Zhizha uses the word *lapping* to emphasize the warmth and security which she feels on the return of her mother. She not only feels elated but calm too. The mother plays the role of a psychotherapist as she constantly assures and reassures her daughter of her love and support in order to make her feel important and confident. She reassures her that she is not alone and should not feel alienated. She calls her the beauty of the earth. The mother claims to know the secrets of her sleep; she has intensely enjoyed her innocent laughter. She reassures her that she has full life ahead; she has many bright dawns waiting for her, all carrying messages

of hope. But hope is still accompanied by a restlessness which mother, by her therapeutic treatment, will ease away. She reminisces about Zhizha's birth, how she cried for the first time and how both mother and grandmother were there to take care of her. They held her close to give her a sense of belonging. She continues her consolation by saying "You are strong, Zhizha, you are my daughter so strong" (208). These words are spoken by the mother to strengthen the broken child who has been weakened by a physical assault of that very person who was expected to protect her. Zhizha wishes for the presence of the attachment figure to be permanently with her as she "desires no portions and fragments of her living" (218) because she believes that only her consistent presence can protect her against social alienation and loneliness.

The mother's love for her daughter imbues confidence within the silent child, so she resolutely takes a decision to remain firm and bear the sorrow, as she says, "I do not cry" (181). The child's self-affirmation will support her to discover her lost integrity. Eventually, with the help of safe haven and secure base, she comes out of trauma—a state which had rendered her sleepless and voiceless.

CONCLUSION

Under the Tongue is a novel of trauma that embraces three generations of women: the affected child, the severely shocked mother and the consoling grandmother. The

writer's narrative aims to portray how "the two women join forces in the protagonist's rebirth" (Jean-Charles, 2014, 46). Both the mother and the grandmother soothe, console and comfort Zhizha by reassuring her that just as they have been doing so, they will continue to be her secure base and safe haven. Their laps have become secure bases and safe havens, an essential condition for healing Zhizha's trauma and reconstructing her broken-self. The warm and comforting laps of mother and grandmother offer great fortitude to the fragmented soul.

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