

THE ZULU GIRL – Roy Campbell

**When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder
Down where the sweating gang its labour plies
A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder
Unslings her child tormented by flies.**

**She takes him to a ring of shadow pooled
By the thorn-tree: purpled with the blood of ticks,
While her sharp nails, in slow caresses ruled
Prowl through his hair with sharp electric clicks.**

**His sleepy mouth, plugged by the heavy nipple,
Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feels;
Through his frail nerves her own deep languor's ripple
Like a broad river sighing through the reeds.**

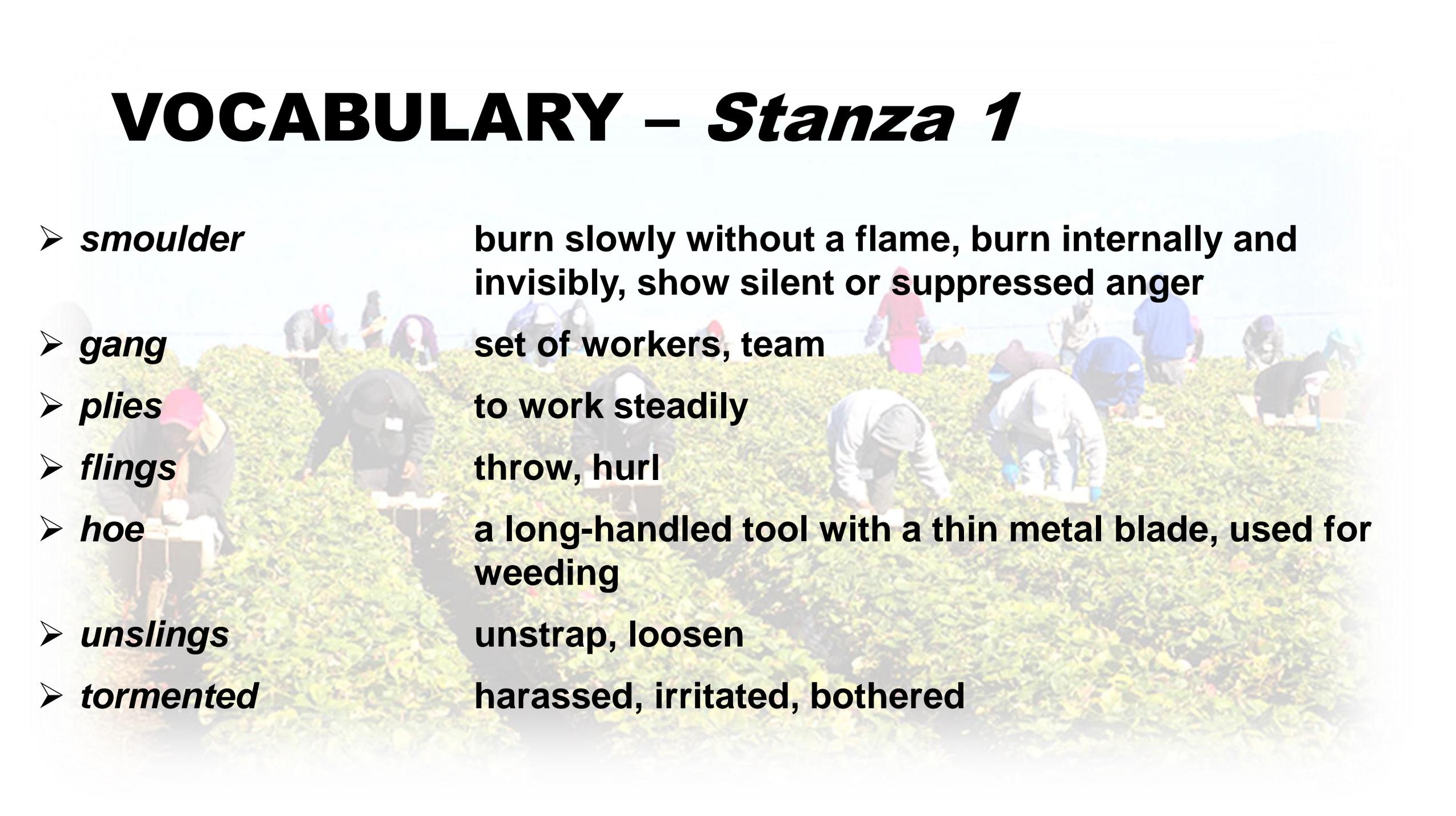


**Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes
And old unquenched, unsmotherable heat –
The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.**

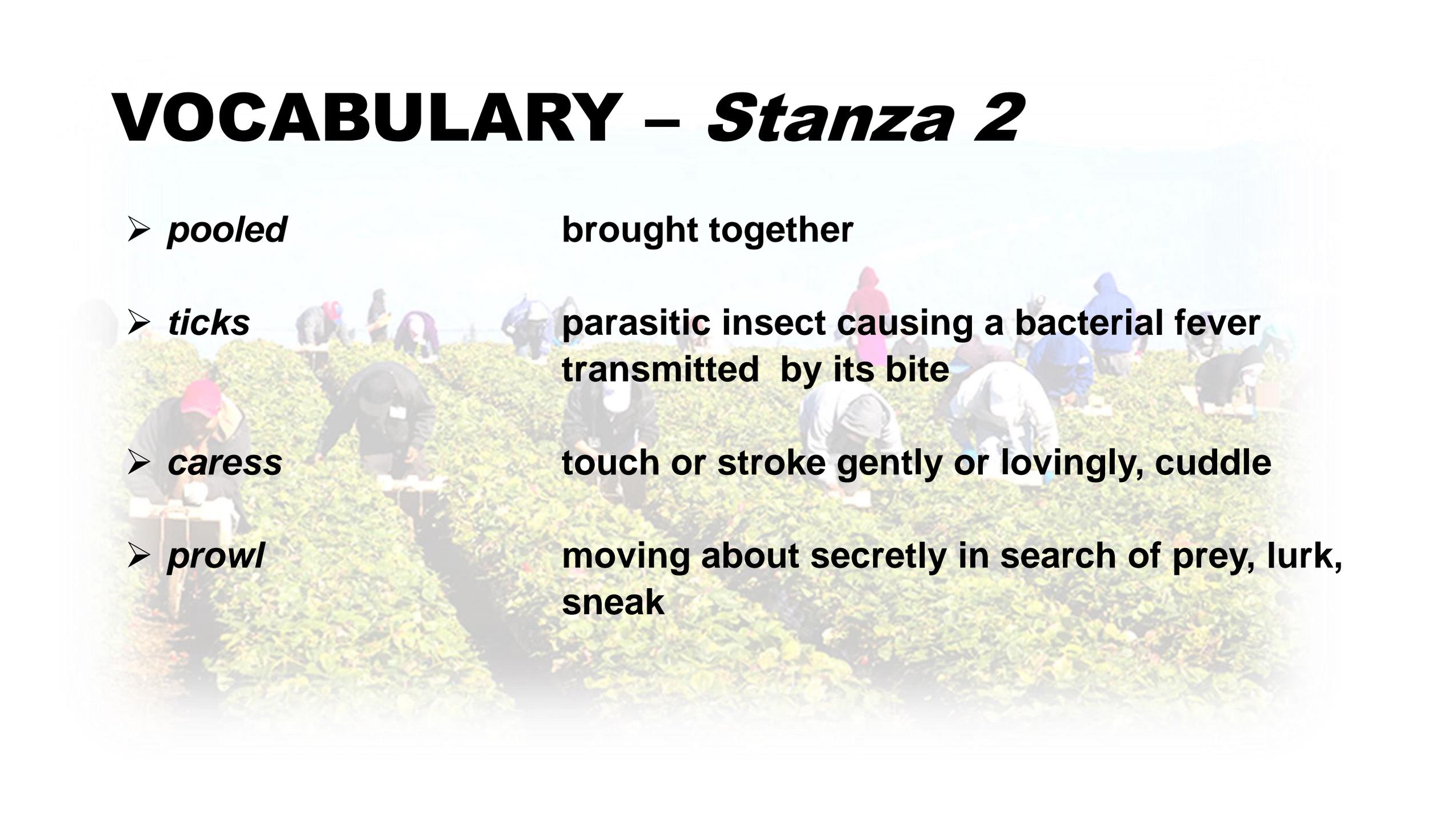
**Her body looms above him like a hill
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
Or the first cloud so terrible and still
That bears the coming harvest in its breast.**



VOCABULARY – *Stanza 1*

- 
- ***smoulder*** burn slowly without a flame, burn internally and invisibly, show silent or suppressed anger
 - ***gang*** set of workers, team
 - ***plies*** to work steadily
 - ***flings*** throw, hurl
 - ***hoe*** a long-handled tool with a thin metal blade, used for weeding
 - ***unslings*** unstrap, loosen
 - ***tormented*** harassed, irritated, bothered

VOCABULARY – *Stanza 2*

- 
- ***pooled*** brought together
 - ***ticks*** parasitic insect causing a bacterial fever transmitted by its bite
 - ***caress*** touch or stroke gently or lovingly, cuddle
 - ***prowl*** moving about secretly in search of prey, lurk, sneak

VOCABULARY – *Stanza 3*

➤ *frail*

fragile, delicate

➤ *languors*

tenderness, lack of energy, fatigue

➤ *ripple*

ruffling of water's surface, a brief wave of emotions or excitement



VOCABULARY – *Stanza 4*

- *drowsy* half asleep, dozing
- *imbibes* absorbs or soaks up, assimilates
- *unquenched* unsatisfied,
- *unsmotherable* inextinguishable, cannot be put out, cannot be suppressed, cannot be held back
- *curbed* held in check, restrained, subdued, restricted
- *ferocity* fierceness, violence
- *sullen* gloomy silence, resentful
- *dignity* composed manner or style, worthy of honour or respect, stateliness

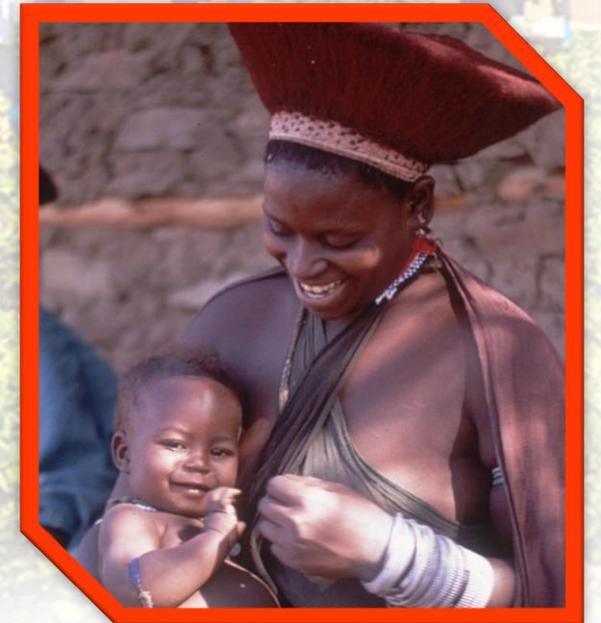
VOCABULARY – *Stanza 5*

➤ *loom*

rises before, arise, come into sight as a magnified or threatening shape

➤ *bears*

carry, transport, convey



DISCUSSION – STANZA 1

- The narrator provides us a detail of the plight of the Zulu girl.
- It is during the daytime that the sun sheds its hot rays on the ground – *“the hot red acres”*.
- The farm seems to be under the powerful heat of the sun.
- It is so parching that the hot red acres – African landscape – seem to be ready to burst into flames – *“smoulder”*.
- In the field is the *“gang”* – the workers. The word *“gang”* as frequently used in this connection, suggests that its members have no individuality and identity, are treated rather like prisoners, or are being made to undertake forced labor: certainly they have no personal pride or pleasure in the work they are doing, and are actually under some kind of compulsion.

DISCUSSION – STANZA 1

- The first strong impression we are given in the poem is of the heat which scorches the landscape where the girl is working:
- the acres, we are told, are red, which we know is the predominant colour of the African earth, but the pair of adjectives ‘*hot red*’, suggest in our mind something similar – ‘red hot’ – the epithet usually applied to heated iron.
- This together with the metaphor of “*smoulder*” gives the impression that the heat is almost too hot to bear and that the landscape could almost burst into flames.
- We are given other details that emphasise the unpleasant nature of the ‘*gang’s*’ work: they are “*sweating*”; the child is “*tormented by the flies*”.

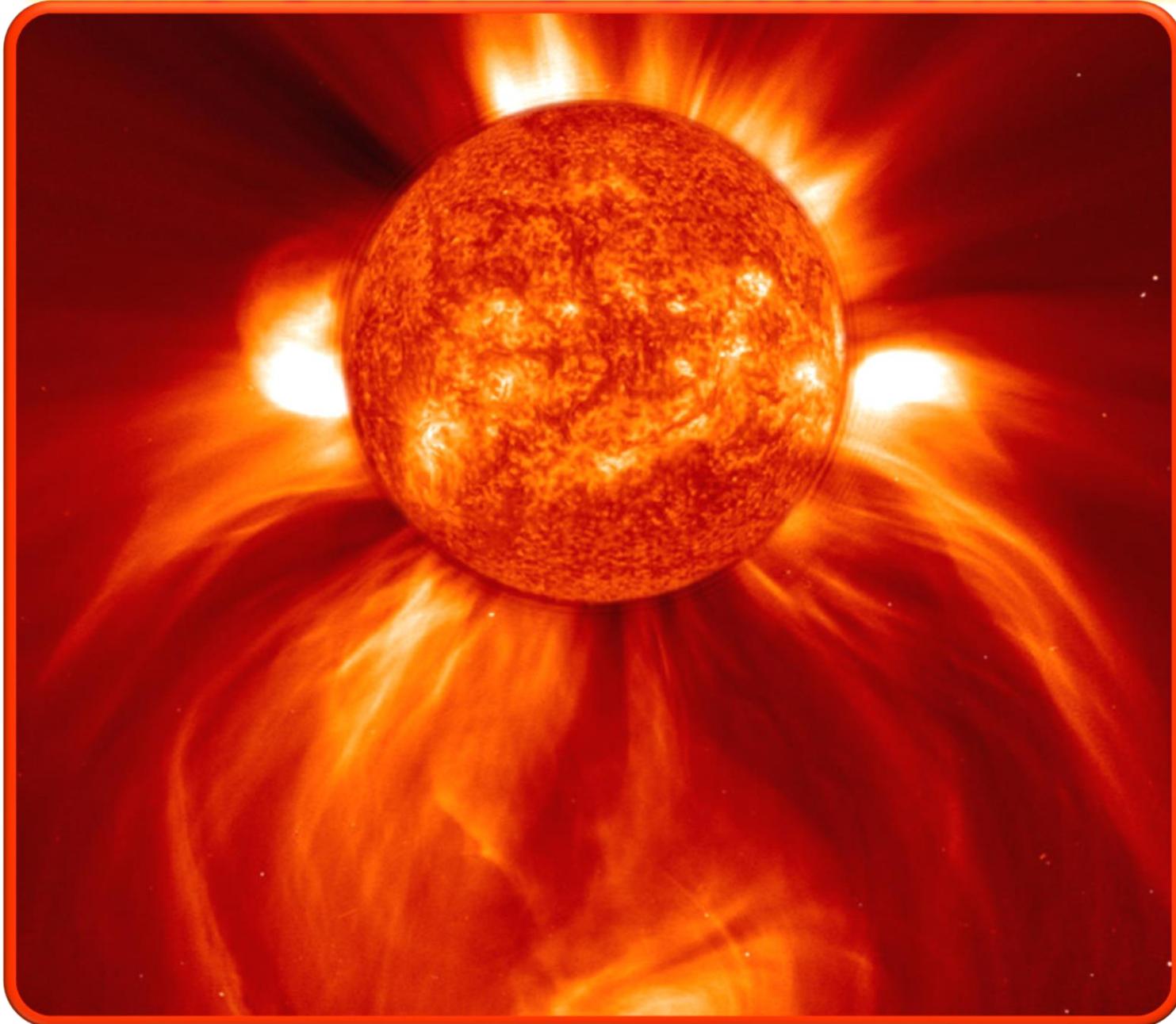
DISCUSSION – *STANZA 1*

- At last the girl flings down her hoe. She does not just ‘drop it’ or throw it down: the word ‘*flings*’ suggests impatience and exasperation.
- An interesting point to notice in the first stanza is the way in which the rhythmic and rhyming pattern emphasise the physical effort made by the girl when she takes the child from her back.
- *“When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder / A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder / Unslings her child, tormented by the flies.”*

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 1*

- The description of the labourers as a ‘gang’ (line 2), and the reference to the Zulu mother as a ‘girl’ (line 3) groups/combines them as a people, rather than individuals.
- Now the observation is focused on the girl who flings down her hoe.
- This act can be seen as an act of defiance of authority, which exacts her subjection, a turning from mass production to the responsibilities of parenthood.
- Then she unslings her child from her shoulder.
- The child, apart from being “*tormented by flies*”, is also in need of nourishment, for the girl takes him to a patch of thin shade nearby to feed him at her breast.
- The woman’s actions imply a disregard for the labour that she is doing and the image of the tormented child is a reminder that he should not be in the hot fields at all.

“When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder”



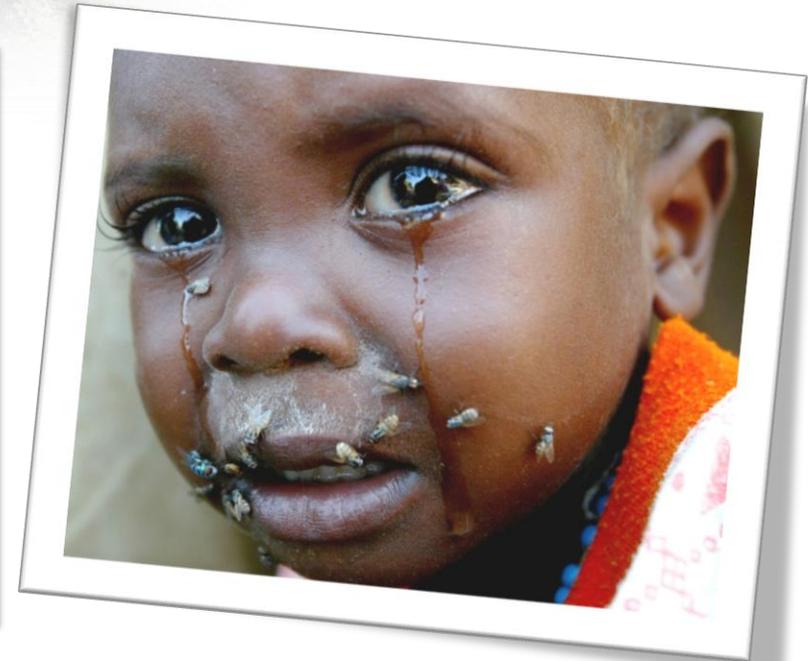
- **It is during the daytime that the sun sheds its hot rays on the ground – *“the hot red acres”*.**
- **The farm seems to be under the powerful heat of the sun.**
- **It is so parching that *“the hot red acres”* – African landscape – seem to be ready to burst into flames – *“smoulder”*.**

***“Down where the sweating gang its
labour plies,”***





***“A girl flings
down her hoe,
and from her
shoulder
Unslings her
child tormented
by flies.”***



DISCUSSION – *STANZA 2*

- In a metaphor, Campbell compares the area of shadow cast by the thorn-trees to a pool of water. '*Pooled*' can also mean 'brought together', which describes how the thorn-trees are clustered together to form a surrounding shade break from the sun. '*Pool*', with its connotations of water, also suggests coolness and refreshment.
- While the child feeds, the girl passes her hand caressingly through his hair.
- It is significant perhaps that the mother is referred to as a '*girl*': this may suggest that she is still a child and should therefore do what children are expected to do – play carefree.

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 2*

- The mother, in the meager shade of the thorn trees, is searching the hair of her child for ticks – again a detail which suggests the poverty and unsanitary conditions under which these labourers live.
- We notice that her sharp nails are “*purpled with the blood*” of the parasites. “*Purpled*” refers to the dried-out blood of the ticks.
- In fact, the phrase “*purpled with the blood of ticks*” is grammatically out of place,
- It is intended presumably to relate to the baby’s head.
- The word “*nails*” is introduced by the conjunction ‘While’
- This slight dislocation of syntax is easily forgiven as our attention is held by the metaphor ‘*prowl*’, which suggests that her fingers are like a fierce animal searching through the forest for its prey.

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 2*

- The sharp electric clicks are produced when she finds a tick and cracks it between her fingernails:
- this produces a sound like that given by an electric spark (as from a car battery).
- Not only does the metaphor give this impression but the sounds of the word sequence *'ticks'*, *"electric clicks"* intensify it.
- This is also an instance of onomatopoeia
- The second stanza illustrates the care that the mother shows for her child: she is looking for ticks and lice on him, which emphasises the poor conditions in which they are forced to live.



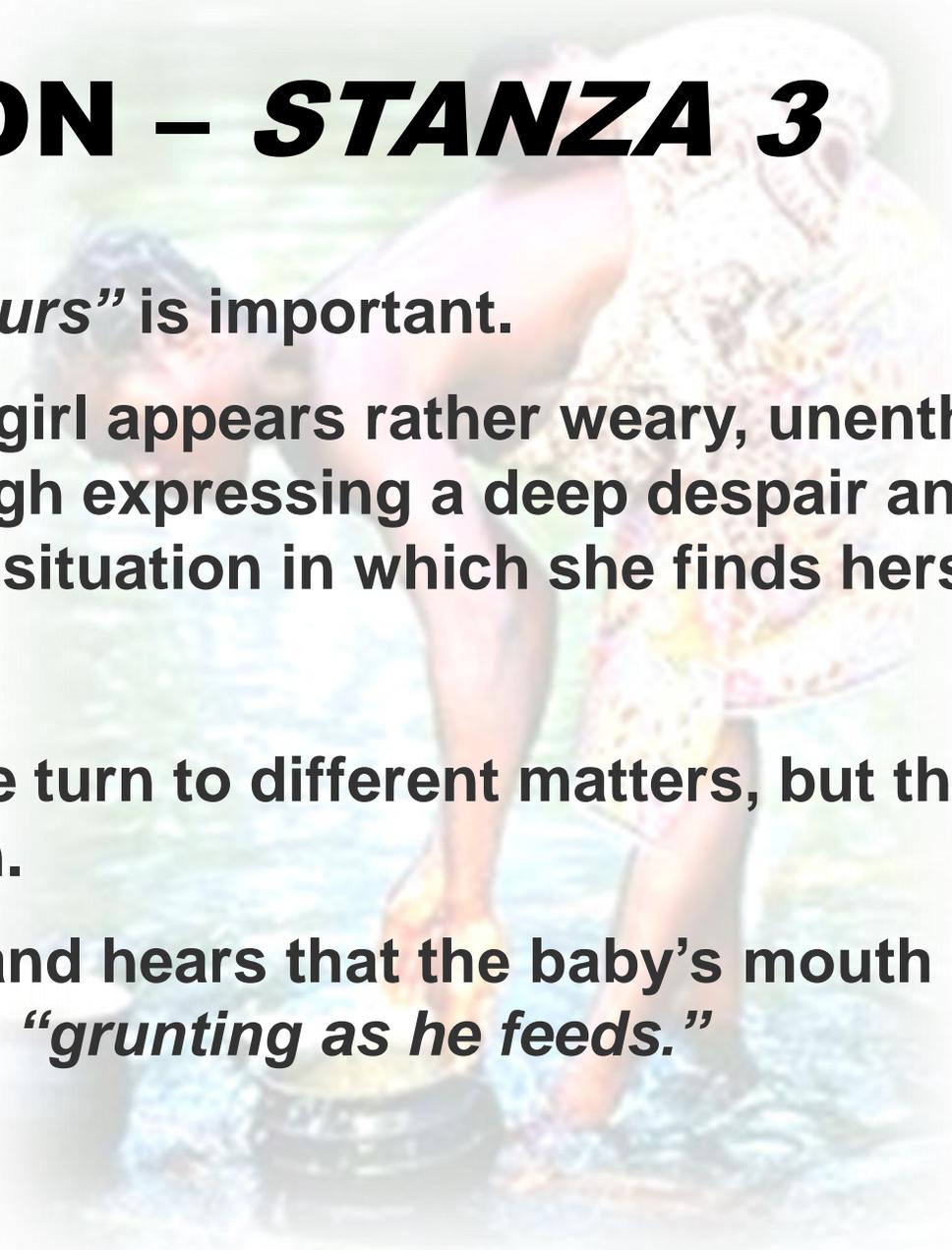
***“purpled with the
blood of ticks,
While her sharp nails,
in slow caresses ruled
Prowl through his hair
with sharp electric
clicks.”***

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 3*

- In stanza three the narrator goes on to give his impression of the relationship and feeling between mother and the child in more than a merely physical sense.
- The child is “*grunting*” as he feeds, that is he is feeding greedily and expressing his simple but deep satisfaction – onomatopoeia.
- Not only does he take in physical nourishment, however, for during this process of feeding, the mother’s own deep feelings “*ripple*” and are conveyed little by little into the baby’s frail, infantile nerves.
- The poem admirably suggests the strong intimate mother-and-child relationship developed by breast-feeding.

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 3*

- The word “*languours*” is important.
- It tells us that the girl appears rather weary, unenthusiastic, and hopeless, as though expressing a deep despair and resentment against the whole situation in which she finds herself.
- In stanza three, we turn to different matters, but the choice of words is apt again.
- The reader sees, and hears that the baby’s mouth is “*plugged*”; he tugs at the nipple; “*grunting as he feeds.*”

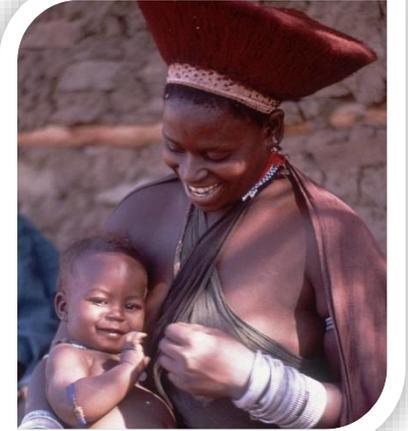


DISCUSSION – STANZA 3

- The sequence of ugly vowel sounds suggest the greediness (and hunger) of the baby as he feeds.
- This is intensified in the animal simile “*like a puppy*”, in which the same vowel sound appears.
- Then the narrator goes on to describe the deep strong feelings which pass in a steady, inevitable flow from the mother to the child.
- Here the simile of the broad river is very suitable; its effect being further strengthened by the predominance of broad syllables and diphthongs in the line: “*Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.*”
- This effectively suggests the flow of a mighty river.

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 3*

- In the third stanza, the woman breast feeds her child.
- He is hungry and tugs at her nipple like a ‘puppy’ (line 10).
- “grunting” is another instance of onomatopoeia.
- This image again points out the way in which the people in the poem are viewed:
 - if the child is viewed as a puppy, his mother is viewed as a dog.
 - The mother, however, does not see her child in this way, and feels an overwhelming tenderness for her child.



A wide, calm river flows through a dense forest. The trees on both banks are in various stages of autumn, with some leaves turned bright yellow and orange, while others remain green or dark brown. The water is still, reflecting the clear blue sky and the surrounding foliage. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

***“Like a broad river sighing through
the reeds.”***

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 4*

- In the fourth stanza, the underlying message becomes clear.
- The young child is a symbol of the might of the Zulu nation:
- in him, there is an *“old unquenched, unsmotherable heat”* (line 14) that refers back to the fierce warriors of the Zulu tribe.
- The river of the mother’s milk is seen as something to put out the fire in the child’s body! And yet it is not able to quench the *“unsmotherable heat”* or thirst because the child belongs to the tribe whose fierceness has been *‘curbed’* for generations. But the tribe is one that has retained its dignity even though it is beaten.
- The strength of the Zulu tribe still exists in the Zulu people in spite of the oppression that they experience.

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 4*

- Even in the girl's mood of hopelessness, her motherhood and the latent satisfaction she has in feeding her child, seem to arouse in her a kind of pride, *'the old unquenched, unsmotherable heat'*:
- a feeling perhaps that her life has some value, that she is taking part in an important life process;
- that she is not alone and abandoned; she belongs to an old enduring tradition of human struggle and survival; her tribe, though *'curbed'* and *'beaten'* for the time being, *'have a dignity'* in their *'defeat'*; and still retain their self-respect, and are ready to *'rise again'*.

DISCUSSION – STANZA 4

- **Stanza four arouses increased attention with an unexpected switch of thought, almost a paradox.**
- **In the physical sense it is obviously the child that is drinking from its mother;**
- **in another sense we are now told that her flesh is, in a deeper sense, imbibing – soaking up – something from the drowsy stream.**
- **To make the sudden change of thought from the reflective to the aggressive, there is a sudden change in the rhythmic and sound qualities of this stanza, and we come to a vigorous climax on the energetic multi-syllabic word ‘*unsmotherable*’.**

DISCUSSION – STANZA 4

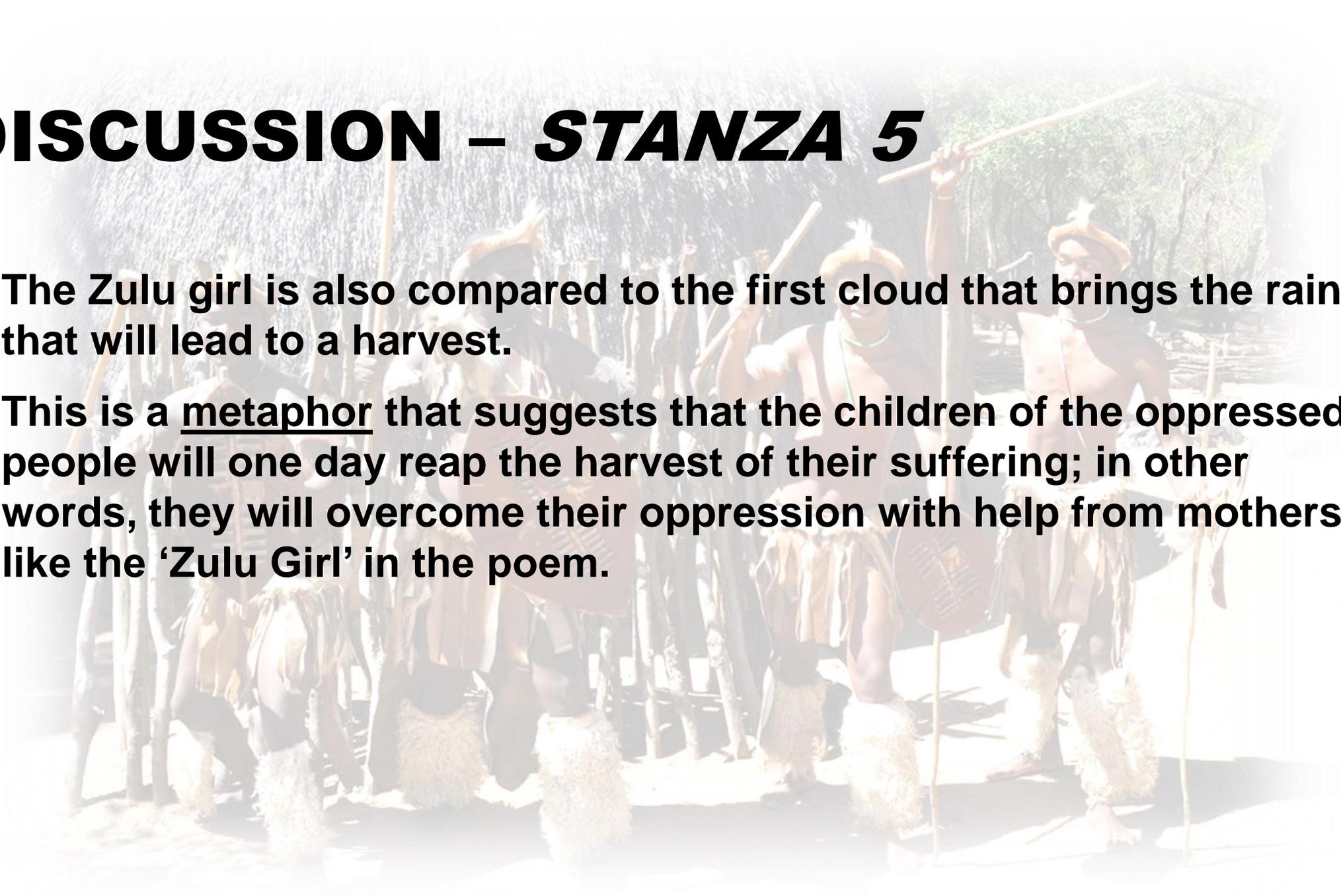
- ***“Yet in that drowsy steam her flesh imbibes/ An old unquenched unsmotherable heat...”***
- **The word ‘unsmotherable’ takes on special force in its context with ‘unquenched’, which seems to prepare the way, and the monosyllable ‘heat’ which gives the line its decisive conclusion.**
- **The line as a whole is an emphatic statement of the unquenchable vigour and spirit of the African people: nothing can blot out or obliterate their primal energy (heat – one of the basic essentials of life).**
- **The feeling of conviction is repeated in a slightly different rhythmic pattern in two following and closely parallel lines:**
- ***“The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes/The sullen dignity of their defeat”*** when an element of alliteration ‘b’ and ‘d’ also adds to the forceful pattern of speech.

DISCUSSION – STANZA 5

- **As the dazed child looks at his mother, he sees her like a mountain, on the base of which there is the village.**
- **She becomes a landscape, geography, the African land.**
But the image is further developed when the poet (from the viewpoint of the almost sleeping child) describes the mother as a *‘cloud’* that is pregnant with the coming spring-rain, which will bring about a revolutionary change in the barren land of the tribes.
- **In this final stanza of the poem, the mother figuratively becomes a hill that overshadows a whole village.**
- **She is no longer just the mother of one child; she represents all the mothers of all the children of oppressed people.**

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 5*

- The Zulu girl is also compared to the first cloud that brings the rain that will lead to a harvest.
- This is a metaphor that suggests that the children of the oppressed people will one day reap the harvest of their suffering; in other words, they will overcome their oppression with help from mothers like the 'Zulu Girl' in the poem.



DISCUSSION – *STANZA 5*

- As the poem develops, we seem to move gradually closer to the mother, until in the final stanza we are looking up at her, almost as though through the eyes of the child himself; and she appears as an impressive, statuesque figure, shielding and protecting her helpless infant.
- In the two last lines, after being compared to a ‘*hill*’, she is likened to a great storm cloud which “*bears the coming harvest in its breast*”.
- Without appealing to our emotions, directly or blatantly, the writer arouses our sympathy for the Zulu Girl in the hardships of the existence; this leads on to an admiration for the endurance and for the strength of life that is seen in her.

DISCUSSION – *STANZA 5*

- This in its turn, through the concluding metaphor, leads to a kind of prophetic hint that the scene we have witnessed is not final, and that a different and better state of affairs is bound to come in the future.
- *“The coming harvest”* extends the agricultural idea of reaping the rewards of labour in the fields, aided by nature’s supply rain. But continuing the metaphor of the child drinking in the mother’s passions. The image suggests that it will be the child’s generation that will *“bear the fruit”* of those passions – they will rebel against their previous defeat and take charge of their lives. Campbell’s image is prophetic here.



***“The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.”***



FORM AND STRUCTURE

- Campbell makes use of a regulated form to structure his message.
- The five stanzas of four lines (**quatrains**) each follow the same rhyme pattern:
- The first stanza uses a-b-a-b, the second c-d-c-d, the third e-f-e-f, the fourth g-h-g-h and the fifth i-j-i-j.
- The different stanzas are thus related to each other because of this noticeable pattern.

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- The poet uses imagery, symbol, metaphor and diction to add meaning to the poem throughout.
- The simile in stanza three, which compares the child to a '*puppy*' (line 10), implies an innocent, harmless and natural activity.
- However, the '*broad river*' (line 12) contains more than nutritional sustenance. The reader is informed that this child is absorbing much more and the dash used at the end of line 14 tells us what this is.
- The power of the final stanza is largely due to the use of simile and metaphors that imply a day of reckoning is inevitable.
- The nation might be '*at rest*' (line 18) now, but their power is not gone.

SOUND DEVICES

- The rhyme of the stanzas provides the poem with regular rhythm.
- Sound is also employed to add richness to the image of the *'grunting'* (line 10) child, the sound of the mother's nails rustling through the child's hair with onomatopoeic *'clicks'* (line 8), and the personified *'sighing'* (line 12) of the river as the mother's milk passes to her child.



STANZA ONE :

The speaker then focuses on a girl who flings down her hoe to unsling her child.

Creates the image of an unbearably hot environment. "Sun", "red hot acres smoulder", "sweating"

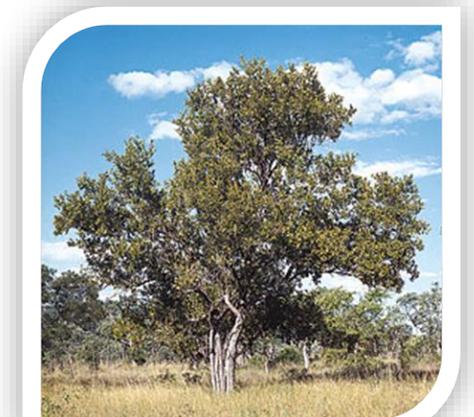
When in the **sun the hot red acres smoulder**
Down where the **sweating gang** its **labour plies**
A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder
Unslings her child **tormented** by flies.

This shows us the terrible conditions under which these people worked.

This can be seen as an act of defiance – she does not care about the authority.

She is hot and tired and "flings" down her hoe. The child is "tormented" – another link to the environment, but the mother has no choice but to bring him to the field.

They seem to be forced to work – treated like prisoners



Again describing the environment: the area is so hot, yet there is no shade for the workers and there are ticks around, but nobody seems interested in protecting the workers from them.

STANZA TWO:

“pooled” = a contrasting image to the heat

Parasites: anything to do with who is living off who’s blood. Tick/ farmer/ colonial powers?

She takes him to a ring of **shadow pooled**
By the **thorn-tree: purpled** with the **blood** of ticks,
While her **sharp nails**, in **slow caresses** ruled
Prowl through his hair with **sharp electric clicks**.

The dried out blood turned purple

A harsh image, not usually associated with coolness and shade



The words/phrases: “sharp nails”, “slow caresses”, “prowl” “sharp electric clicks” all convey an image of a strong, protective mother.

Despite her tough life, she still cares deeply for her child.



L9 – 10: **SIMILE:** the child is compared to a puppy because of how he is feeding. This emphasises the baby's innocence and helplessness "frail nerves".

STANZA THREE:



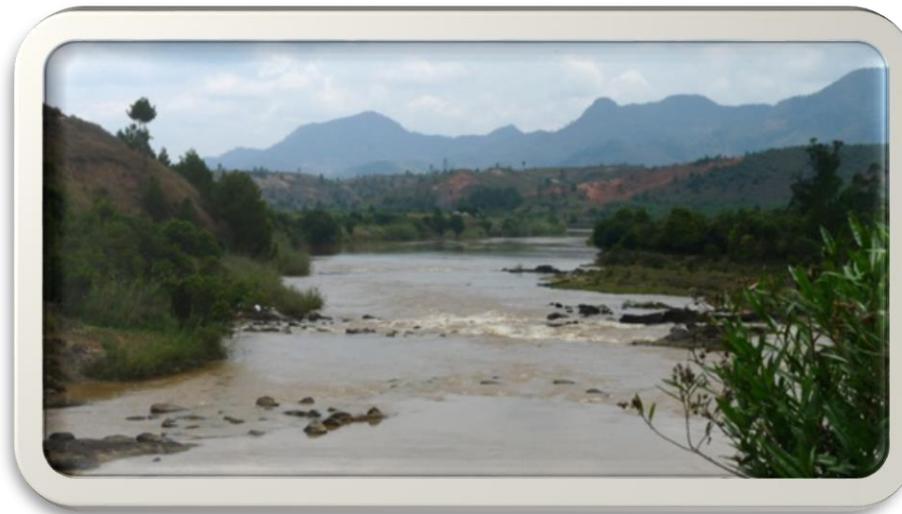
The mother's deep tiredness and low energy "languor's" flows through her into her child.

The baby is anxious and needing food

His sleepy mouth, plugged by the heavy nipple,
Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feels;
Through his **frail nerves** her own deep **languor's**
ripple
Like a broad river sighing through the reeds.

The child feeds at his mother's breast – but there is more than milk that he is taking in...

L11 – 12: **SIMILE:** The milk flowing through mother and child transmits her "languor's" – this is compared to a river that flows slowly "sighing through the reeds"



STANZA FOUR:

YET = this word conveys the idea that it is not only the mother's languor's that the child is taking in...

The milk makes him sleepy and relaxed

The child also **imbibes** (absorbs) "an old, unquenched, unsmotherable heat –"

This is another feeling/form of energy that the child takes from his mother – a strength "heat" that is unable to be extinguished by anything...

Whilst they are "defeated", the workers are still violent, but they are keeping it in check.

Yet in that **drowsy stream** his **flesh imbibes**
And old unquenched, unsmotherable heat-
The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

This refers to the African tribes that were "beaten" into submission by the colonisers.

Despite their current oppressed state, these tribes are still ferocious and they keep their dignity even though they are defeated "sullen dignity".



Begs the question are these people really defeated?



STANZA FIVE:

The mother stands above her child, but she seems more imposing and stronger than she was at the beginning.



SIMILE: *The mother standing over her child is compared to a huge hill that protects a village.*

She stands guard over her child against anyone who would dare hurt him.

Her body looms above him like a hill
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
Or the first cloud so terrible and still
That bears the coming harvest in its breast.

These lines refer to storm clouds, which look harmless, but bring intense weather that eventually benefits the land.

*This **METAPHOR** compares the mother to a cloud. Just as you cannot predict when a storm will arrive, it is the same with this woman and her tribe.*

They are gathering strength and one day will unleash a huge storm on the people and will bring a “harvest” of war just as the rains help bring in a harvest of crops.



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What does the inclusion of the colour 'red' in line 1 tell us about the scene?

The use of the colour 'red' (line 1) may suggest a red-tinted dust that coats the land, or the harsh yellow of the sun's rays making the land seem like it smouldering like the remaining coals after a fire.

2. List all the words in the poem that suggest heat, and provide short definitions for each of them.

'Sun', 'hot' and 'smoulder' (line 1): burning, flameless fire

'sweating' (line 2): perspiring from heat and physical exertion

'unquenched unsmotherable heat' (line 14): unrelenting heat that cannot be eased by liquid or by blocking it out.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

3. What is your understanding of ‘curbed ferocity’, and who are the ‘beaten tribes’ (line 15)?

The words ‘*curbed ferocity*’ (line 15) could refer to the restrained or controlled fierceness or strong passion of the oppressed indigenous inhabitants, the ‘*beaten tribes*’ (line 15), whose anger lies just beneath the surface.

4. Explain what the child ‘imbibes’ (line 13) on both a literal and figurative level.

The child literally drinks or ‘*imbibes*’ (line 13) its mother’s breast milk, but on a figurative level also takes in or absorbs the emotions, beliefs and ideas of its mother. The child is ‘fed’ a diet of values from a young age, and so inherits the mother’s attitudes and dreams.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

5. Explore how the poet uses tone in the poem. Note how and where it changes over the course of the poem, and quote from the poem to give substance to your response.

The opening stanza adopts a sympathetic tone as the poet exposes the harsh conditions where *'the sweating gang'* (line 2) labours. Likewise, the girl's child is *'tormented'* (line 4) by flies. The second stanza portrays the mother as loving and nurturing as she *'caresses'* (line 7) her child's hair while she tends to him. The tone of the third stanza is positive as the scene appears tranquil and serene: The child feeds *'like a puppy'* (line 10), and the mother's tired satisfaction is captured by *'languors'* (line 11) and *'sighing'* (line 12). The interruption of *'Yet'* (line 13) alerts us to the shift in tone as the threatening *'curbed ferocity'* (line 15) of those *'beaten tribes'* (line 15) intrudes on the peaceful scene. The tone of foreboding and danger finds expression in the *'cloud so terrible and still'* (line 19) that warns of a looming confrontation once the ferocity is unleashed.

THE WARRIOR – Margaret Singana

