

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: The Emancipation of Women in Africa

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ABSTRACT

*Submerging the tortured routes to female subjectivity and the path to gender egalitarianism Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga has presented a novel *Nervous Conditions* that is all about the emancipation of women in South Africa and the circumstances of their lives. The present paper revisits and rereads the social conditions and the laws of Africa that affect its women both in those areas concerned with personal, sexual and marriage relations, with children and property, and in the wider field of education and conditions of work. The paper is also about the ways in which women have organized in the past and they are fighting today to overcome the disabilities and difficulties under which they live.*

Keywords: Tsitsi Dangarembga, Nervous Condition, Women, Africa.

All racial and ethnic groups in Africa have long-standing beliefs concerning gender roles, and most are based on the premise that women are less important, or less deserving of power, than men. Most African traditional social organizations are male centered and male dominated. Even in the 1990s, in some rural areas of South Africa, for example, wives walk a few paces behind their husbands in keeping with traditional practices. Afrikan people's religious beliefs, too, include a strong emphasis on the theoretically biblically based notion that women's contributions to society should normally be approved by, or be on behalf of, men. In *Nervous Conditions* the male dominance is an accepted way of life, as it will be demonstrated in the analysis.

The novel *Nervous Conditions*, examines unequal power relations between men and women in the Sigauke clan which was largely steeped in tradition. Women (Nyasha, Maiguru, Lucia, Tambu and MaShingayi) in the novel challenge the practices of male domination in various ways, usually unsuccessfully. Each of these women makes an effort to question some of the decisions that were the prerogative of the patriarch. The woman also attempts to break out of the role of domesticity and servility to the surprise of the man. Here, Dangarembga focuses in particular on a group of women who struggle to

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be heard and to succeed in a world that often aggressively seeks to silence and control them. Though in a way these women are successful in their struggle, their victories are not grand. They do not openly challenge the status quo, topple repressive systems, or alter prevailing behaviors and ways of thinking. Instead, their victories lie in the strength they muster to navigate a world that is unsympathetic to their concerns, and their success is rooted in their unflinching desire to succeed where others have readily failed.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of **Emancipation** serves the freedom of someone, especially from legal, political or social restrictions. And the emancipation of African women in all facets of society is a key to the continent's development, Vice President J.T.R. Mujuru has said while addressing delegates at a conference on women's emancipation in Abuja, Nigeria on 01 July 2010. "Emancipating the African woman politically, socially and economically is a revolution that has to be fought and won. It is an intimate part of the larger context of the gender, democracy and human rights issues which are all core to the development of any nation or region," she said in her speech on "African Women Emancipation: Key to the Future". And the following analysis on Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is also a powerful indictment of women emancipation—a moving insight into the complex and often contradictory choices faced by African women today.

"I was not sorry when my brother died."(Dangarembga 1)

Dangarembga starts her novel *Nervous Conditions* with this arresting first sentence asserted by the protagonist Tambu. The novel appears not only to be the story of Tambu and her ambition to educate and develop herself in the face of a myriad of obstacles but also it is very much about Nyasha, one of the central characters of the novel, who was alienated from her own clan by virtue of her "Englishness". Social injustices conspire against her to the point that she suffers a "nervous condition". The story is also about MaShingayi, a traditionalist who was complacent with the status quo and could not tolerate womenfolk who were rebelling against it. It is also about Lucia who had the audacity to gate-crash into the meeting of the patriarchs. Lastly and not least there was Maiguru who was balanced perfectly between the two conflicting cultures to the dismay of her daughter on one side, and her in-laws on the other side. That is why Dangarembga in the opening lines says her intension of writing this novel:

"my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion- Nyasha, far minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful." (Dangarembga 1)

So, the story is about the entrapment of five women and their efforts at ameliorating their condition – the nervous condition; after all this is a novel of female suppression and gender discrimination in African society.

African cultural practices and traditions perpetuate the illiteracy of women. Women are thus economically dependent on others, especially their husbands. In addition, illiteracy leads to decreased participation in the formal economic sphere, and in leadership positions. In the proper use of education lies the salvation of sex. As long as she is ignorant, so long will she remain dejected, oppressed and incapable of sharing men's pursuits and ideals. This is presented by Dangarembga in her novel. The novel's protagonist, Tambu is denied access to education because she is a girl. Tambu's father's refusal to further her education is influenced by cultural assumptions, which consider education to be a male preserve. Tambu's proper place is presumed to be in the home, serving her family as her father replies questioned by Tambu why she, too, cannot be educated: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables." (Dangarembga 15)

As a man in African society he thinks that the women are born to do all household works, they are not allowed to do the jobs or study going outside though they are asked to go outside for helping the man in the fields.

But staying in this male dominated society the protagonist Tambu is the one who wants to be educated like her brother. She was born a girl and thus faces a fundamental disadvantage, since traditional African social practice dictates that the oldest male child is deemed the future head of the family. All of the family's resources are poured into developing his abilities and preparing him to lead and provide for his clan. When Nhamo dies, the tragedy is all the more profound since no boy exists to take his place. Tambu steps into the role of future provider, yet she is saddled with the prejudices and limitations that shackled most African girls of her generation. Her fight for an education and a better life is compounded by her gender. In the novel, inequality is as infectious as disease, a crippling attitude that kills ambition, crushes women's spirits, and discourages them from supporting and rallying future generations and other female relatives.

Tambu is bound both by the laws of her culture and the social stratification of colonialism. Because of her gender she will never be seen as more than a possession of the men in her family. So when she complains to her mother about her education, as a traditional African woman she answers:

"This business of womanhood is a heavy burden," as she knows about the condition of the woman. Again she says, "How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them." (Dangarembga 16)

Many Zimbabwean women state that it is "cultural" for women to be subordinate to men (Sweetman 1995: 20). In subverting such utterances, Sweetman alludes to Chitsike's inquiry: "what is cultural about a woman earning all the food through her sweat in the fields and preparing food for her husband and the children to sustain them

when the man is drinking the day away?”(1995:20) Women’s conformity to relegation is partly reinforced by men who justify their superiority as “cultural”. The irony is that “culture”, the common conceptual antithesis to “nature”, is here “naturalized”, so that socially fabricated cultural norms and practices are conjured into inevitable even sacred structures beyond human intervention: ideology (patriarchy) becomes culture, becomes nature.

In *Nervous Conditions* Dangarembga has depicted the same picture through the protagonist’s mother MaShingayi and her Aunt Maiguru who sacrifice their lives for their husbands, families and children though they get nothing as their rewards. Here, MaShingayi (Tambu’s mother) is portrayed as a hardworking rural woman who is trying to eke out a living from ploughing the land. She had several pregnancies with only four children surviving at the end of the novel. Her husband Jeremiah took her as a wife at the age of fifteen without formalizing with a wedding, an issue that was to come up fifteen years later. Her submissive self-effacing life represents the very essence of oppressed female passivity. With no sense of her own self-determination, she is unable to conceive of an identity for her daughter outside of marriage. Economic powerlessness and nineteen years of domestic drudgery have taught her to survive what she cannot change. She has been socialized into assuming a passive role in an environment dominated by patriarchy. It is this role of resignation that she expected her girls to emulate.

The entrapment of Maiguru is only superficially different from that of her sister in law, MaShingayi. They both pay the highest price for being female partners in their household. Tambu could not imagine Maiguru suffering because, according to her, she had everything: money, education and decency. Maiguru was Tambu’s role model and she was obedient and loyal to her husband, until her depression drove her to rebel against her husband. She had had enough of being subservient to her husband’s family. In fact she had the audacity to stand up to her husband and say:

“I am sick of it Babawa Chido. Let me tell you I have had enough! And when I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy anymore in this house.” (Dangarembga 174-175))

Maiguru’s education only serves to make her more resentful of her entrapment. She is still subjected to the demands of her husband and the men of her community. She could not spend any money for her that she earned but she gave all those for her family’s benefit. In her conversation with Tambu we hear her saying: “Your uncle wouldn’t be able to do half the things he does if I didn’t work as well.” (Dangarembga 103) Dangarembga here shows how Babamukuru (Maiguru’s husband) himself suffers in the role of patriarchy. He has the entire control of his wife’s income by virtue of being the family head. He is obliged to educate, feed and house his extended family and intervene at every opportunity to ensure that things run his way. In his attitude to his wife and daughter (Nyasha) we find him as a traditional husband and father though he is the

headmaster of the mission. In one situation he even strikes Nyasha. Seeing this quarrel between the father and his daughter Tambu feels that Babamukru while condemning Nyasha to whoredom is making her a victim of her femaleness, just as she felt victimized at home when her brother Nhamo went to school and she grew her maize. So the situation does not differ much from poor to rich or educated to uneducated. Gender inequality and sexual discrimination form the backdrop of all of the female characters' lives.

Gender discrimination is shown in another conversation between Tambu and Maiguru when the latter says about their own conditions by their own males:

"Sometimes I feel I'm trapped by that man, just like she is." She continues: "It's not really him, you know. I mean not really the person. It's everything, it's everywhere. So where do you break out to? You're just one person and it's everywhere." (Dangarembga 176)

Father is the ultimate decision-maker for the family in African societies and women are expected to remain docile. Women's powerlessness is portrayed through the characters MaShingayi, Maiguru, Tambu, Nyasha and Lucia in *Nervous Conditions*. Here, the readers will find though Maiguru manages her family her position as a wife prohibits her to act against her husband. She and her daughter Nyasha belong to an educated family but they have to be docile in front of Babamukuru. On this docile role of 'wifhood' Boyce-Davies, in a discussion of the Nigerian situation, argues that:

"the woman as a daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage. Married, she becomes a possession, voiceless and often right less in her husband's family, except for what accrues to her through her children"(1986:09).

Women's powerlessness is also portrayed in the novel where Maiguru remarks to Tambu about her dissatisfaction with the manner in which Babumukuru (her husband) handles household finances. She resents her husband's lavish support of his brother's family partly from her wages. However her position as a wife prohibits her to act against her husband's will. On this docile role of 'wifhood' Boyce-Davies, in a discussion of the Nigerian situation, argues that "the woman as a daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage. Married, she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family, except for what accrues to her through her children" (1986:09).

When Ngugi wa Thiongo was interviewed in 1982 about his novels *Devil on the Cross* and *Detained*, he described women as the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class: exploited as workers; at home; and also by the backward elements in the culture (Boyce-Davies et al 1986: 11). The women in Dangarembga's novel are also the most suppressed people. They have to be subjugated by their own husbands, brothers and sons even. As the story continues readers find the character Lucia who is portrayed as a woman without any scruples pertaining to securing a partner. Though Takasure has impregnated Lucia people accuse her not him. They say that she has

done it on purpose whereas she knows Takasure as a husband of two wives. And when she wants to stay with MaShingayi people want her to leave. Then she tells her reason to want to stay with her sister:

“...this man, this Jeremiah....he has a roving eye and a lazy hand. So could I go and leave my sister alone with this man who has given her nothing but misery since the age of fifteen?” (Dangarembga 147)

Because she knows that Jeremiah (her brother-in-law) is so lazy that he is much interested in drinking beer rather than helping MaShingayi with her daily chores.

And when she decides to stay with her sister finally she tells Tambu:

“A woman has to live with something,” “Even if it is only a cockroach. And cockroaches are better. They are easy to chase away, isn’t it?” (Dangarembga 155)

From the speech people can know that the condition of African woman is so miserable that they can be compared to the insects and treated with disregard and indifference.

So, it can be concluded now that Tsitsi Dangarembga's portrayal of the woman in her novel *Nervous Conditions* is a striking reminder that African women are under a yoke when it comes to making their voices heard. And changing the unequal balance of decision making power and control between men and women – in the household, in the workplace, in communities, in government and in the international arena - will lead to women’s empowerment and their emancipation. Adeola James writes, in her introduction to *In Their Own Voices* (James 1990), “Our problem,” “is that we have listened so rarely to women's voices, the noises of men having drowned us out in every sphere of life, including the arts.” But, is not there any hope for these women? “My great hope for African women, South African author Sindiwe Magona writes, ‘is that one day they will come into their own.’”

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