

Injustice and Female Voices of Resistance in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*.

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Abstract

In many African societies, the clash between masculinity and feminism often leads to the silencing and marginalization of women. This paper is a feminist study of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The novel focuses on women who struggle against oppressive cultural and social systems that deny them freedom and equality. The protagonist Tambu represents different voices of resistance. Through her life story, she shows how women face pain, betrayal, and discrimination, yet find ways to regain their self-worth and dignity. The research also studies how the writer used storytelling to give women a voice in a society where they are mostly unheard, their image battered and their roles not appreciated. The women's cries against exploitation, intimidation, domestic violence, oppression and all other attendant evils committed against them are also exposed in the analysis. Themes of gender inequality, violence, polygamy, betrayal, empowerment, and the struggle between holding on to tradition and embracing modern values are equally highlighted. Using a postcolonial feminist approach, the paper finally explored how cultural practices and patriarchal beliefs continue to oppress women, while showing how literature can serve as a tool for awareness and reform. The novel reminded us that true progress in society is not possible without justice, equality, and respect for women's voices.

Keywords: Discrimination, Injustice, Gender Inequality, Humiliation, Resistance.

Introduction

Literature serves as a mirror, a channel through which the social, political, cultural and economic issues that ravage a given society are explored. As such, there is a correlation between art and life; hence literature deals with people and their experiences in a given milieu. It also shows the responsibilities and limitations of being a female in a male dominated society. A woman is often overwhelmed by the responsibilities in her life. These responsibilities include those she created by herself, and those imposed on her by the society. The conflict between masculinity and feminism is not new. It is deeply rooted in historical, cultural and social narratives that continue to shape human relations. The Biblical account of the creation of man and woman in Genesis which emphasizes both shared dignity and complementary roles have

several interpretations that justify unequal gender relations. Thus, what was originally meant to establish partnership has, in many societies, been distorted into hierarchical systems that privilege the men and make the women subordinates.

However, in some societies, within their socio-cultural levels, women still exert strong influence. Across African societies, gender roles have often been rigidly defined, with women positioned as caregivers, nurturers, or supporters, while men dominate public, political and economic spaces. This imbalance has fueled feminist thoughts which challenge the marginalization of women and emphasizes equality, autonomy and self-assertion. Feminism therefore, emerges as both an ideology and a movement against systemic oppression particularly in the contexts of marriage, education, politics, religion and economic participation. In

African literature, feminist voices have become particularly significant. Writers use fiction not only to depict women's struggles, but also to critique entrenched patriarchal structures and envision possibilities for transformation. In this study, the novelist presents women as central figures who refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice.

Review of Related Scholarship

According to Cornel Ujowundu in *A Guide to Studies in the Novel*, a woman is expected to perform her traditional roles, efficiently run her home and be a good wife, a super-mother and a supportive member of the extended family. She is expected to contribute to the family's income, and she must perform creditably at her job or business in order to make progress or be recognized. And all these tasks she has to accomplish in a culture where she is taught that she is inferior to her male counterpart (206). It should be noted that most pioneer writers of African literature dwelt more in the area of cultural nationalism.

Their efforts were directed towards enhancing the status of the Blackman and to correct the poor opinion of black people held in most European and American countries. These writers showed that Africa had dynamic social, economic, and political institutions before the advent of the white man. European norms and values were superimposed on the people of Africa and the writers of the period joined the movement of cultural revivalism to bring Africans back to their rich cultural heritage. This resulted in such socio-cultural novels like *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *The African Child*. In the same vein, there is another critical aspect of the society that the writers thought wise to delve deep into as well. This is the issue of womanhood; the female gender, her welfare and wellbeing. African culture does not provide adequate security and equal opportunity for the girl child in particular. In the society, women were consistently bruised and brutalised. This was mostly meted out to

them by their male counterparts. Women were regarded as the weaker vessels and also as sex objects and political pawns in the games played by men. The girl child is seen as a cross-bearer. She is trained and brainwashed to believe that she is meant to take care of the husband and the children, and that her duty begins and ends with family chores and nothing more, against the will, ambition, dream, fate and hope that she harbors. This trend raised great concerns among another group of early writers who showcased the following arts; *Efuru*, *Second Class Citizen*, *Anowa*, *Idu*, *The Concubine* and rest of them. Their main point was to create awareness on the dangers that relegating a girl child to the background

posed to the society at large. They also used their arts to portray the resilience and unwavering strength of the girl child in her determination to succeed as seen in the main character of the novel under study Tumba. A girl child should be seen and heard against the notion of should not be seen or heard. According to Ebere Ezenweke's in her book, *Hindrance in Women Potentials*, "women have suffered tremendous marginalisation and show of superiority complex in the past" (2). Many cultures of the world testify to this assertion. As regards this, she maintains that women's problems vary according to the impact of negative cultural practices. In the same manner, Nwogu Patrick commenting on Ebere Ezenweke's claim emphasizes that;

Educationally, women are discriminated against. Parents prefer to send male children to school to the exclusion of the girls... In the traditional society, women are not allowed to control their hard-earned income. It is considered normal for wives to handover their hard earned money to their husbands for proper control, disbursement or safekeeping. If the woman dares raise an objection to such unholy

practice, she is maligned, cajoled and criticised as a social misfit. Such woman may even stand the risk of being sent packing (74).

To Nwogu, women are helpless in the society because they are "rightless" and voiceless due to the cultural practices of the past which still constitute serious conflicts in our contemporary society. Equal opportunity should be given to both male and female for justice, equity and fairness which welcome sustainable development. These female writers do not clamour for superiority or something, rather they advocate for peaceful coexistence of both the male and female child in the society. They project for a society in which a girl child would be free to choose a career for herself without being forced into child labour or early marriage. Adimora-Ezeigbo exposed this in *Trafficked* where the trafficked girls returned and were very firm and focused towards their success at the centre for development. They were trafficked for one reason, and that is for a better living condition. They were tricked into believing

there were jobs abroad which turned to be a gamble. Ezeigbo's emphasis is on the fact that when a woman is keenly determined, no wave sweeps her off feet. Sutherland similarly, echoes that a woman's joy lies in what she can offer and not what she should be offered through Anowa whose marriage to Kofi was based on love. Anowa thought of how to create a job and join in hiring labourers. She dedicated her time to hard work and labored round the clock for the success of her family. Anowa did not wish to be seen as boss since she remained humble despite her position. No wonder the saying that when you train a woman, you train the nation. What these writers advocate is education of the girl child. A girl child is a hidden treasure that awaits discovery. This girl child education is more than her being in the classroom. It is a voice, vision as well as the future. It provides her the opportunity to

strive, the courage to dream, and the power to achieve. When a girl is educated, she understands her self-worth and this propels her to stand for her right and build-up herself and her family for national development.

Unfortunately however, social norms, poverty, ignorance and cultural pressures still deprive most girls this opportunity. Women's potentials have remained limited and have not fully been tapped because of socio-cultural prejudices and practices. Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* exposed the dehumanisation, exploitation, oppression, poverty, corruption, and betrayal that have eaten up the conscience of several individuals. From the novel, it was the death of Nhamo her brother that paved way for Tambu's educational career.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is an umbrella concept designated the point of view that women's rights and opportunities have been limited by social systems designed mainly to benefit men to the detriment of women. This mindset works on the belief that the negative impact of patriarchal values and practices on the lives of women is the reason why women suffer social injustices. Feminism as a movement originated in the late eighteenth century and gained momentum during the renaissance period. It is a system of ideas and theories that pay attention to women's rights and freedom. The movement aims at addressing the systemic inequalities faced by women in different spheres of life such as legal rights, education and employment, to mention but a few. Ultimately, African feminist writers use literature to illuminate gender oppressions while affirming women's dignity, agency and resilience. It raises critical questions about the nature of freedom, identity and power in

African societies, and it underscores literature's role as a tool for social critique and transformation.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga describes how societal concepts shape women's identities. She asserts that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. This notion resonates deeply in the movie under study where the protagonist navigates her identity in response to the oppressive structure imposed upon her. The concept of feminism in this work strengthens the idea that the fight for gender equality is diverse and requires an understanding of the challenges women face in different contexts.

Injustice and Female Voices of Resistance in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Nervous Conditions was the first book published in English by a black Zimbabwean

woman. Set in the 1960s, it narrates the story of Tambudzai, Tambu for short, a young girl in rural Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, desperate for education. Her uncle is the headmaster of the mission school in the nearest town where he takes Tambu's brother for schooling. As a girl, Tambu's education is not a priority for the family, but her brother's was. "Nhamo began school in the year that he turned 7" (12). This was the age at which the government had declared that African children were sufficiently developed cognitively to be able to understand the abstractions of numbers and letters. Nhamo was one of the youngest pupils in his class" (13). Tambu was a girl born in a society where a girl's education is not considered necessary. Infact, the novel started at the point where Tambu stated that she was not remorseful over the demise of Nhamo,her brother;

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, or my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died and there are reasons for this more than the mere consequence of age. Therefore, I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account (1).

What an arresting first sentence! As readers, whether or not we come from Zimbabwe, we respond to these words in the light of the knowledge that the speaker, like the novel's author, is a woman. Is there not something especially shocking, something inhuman unnatural, in a sister's coldness in the face of her brother's death? Reason being that her uncle had taken her brother for education. There, her brother learnt to despise the village, just as he had learnt in the village to despise his sisters. Understanding that her brother's education is a way out, and knowing that her uncle's wife Maiguru has completed an education abroad, Tambu begins to ask her father why she, too, cannot be educated. The

response was very simple as the father asked if she could cook books and feed them to her husband. Tambu's father says she does not need education. Tambu on her own wondered how to make it possible and easier since they were so poor. "Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other" (12). Tambu preferred to ask for seed to grow maize to sell at the market, so that she can pay the fees that her father will not pay. Despite the family's poverty however, the parents were able to raise the fees to send Nhamo to school. There was not enough cash to send Tambu as well to school and she decided to grow and sell

vegetables and raise the cash herself. When she discovered that her brother Nhamo was stealing food from her garden patch, she attempted to beat him up while the two were attending Sunday school. It was at this point that her case was heard. She was bitterly angry at her brother's act. Their Sunday school teacher Mr Matimba listened carefully to Tambu's story, "What are these?" asked Mr Matimba, patient though puzzled. I told him the whole story, how I was going to come back to school the following year, how I was going to earn the money by selling my crop.

Mr Matimba listened attentively" (24). At this point, Tambu talked to her Sunday school teacher as though he was just another person and not an adult and a teacher and she felt herself relax. Mr Matimba listened hard, inclining his whole person towards Tambu as they walked round the field. He encouraged her and promised to help her to the city where better sales are guaranteed. With great joy, Tambu informed her father of Mr Matimba's promise to help her to the city for more profit from her crops and the father rather than encourage her, twists the whole idea;

Mr Matimba was behaving irresponsibly and interfering in matters that did not concern him. Does he think he is your father? He thinks that because he has chewed more letters than I have, he can take over my children. And you, you think he is better than me. He wants somebody to work in his garden - that is what he wants. I forbid you to go (24).

Though her father's words sounded like 'always' and 'never', she kept her appointment with Mr Matimba and climbed into the school truck with her basket of maize on her lap neatly covered. She felt happy as other

children watch in amazement, envy written so clearly on their faces. She proclaimed, "I have scored a significant victory even if I did not sell any maize"(25). Despite all powers and forces to destroy her future, she climbs

higher in hope and faith. She does not wish to jettison the naive ideology of her poor mother battle over her mother's idea that being black reflected thus in the novel; is a burden. She is clearly determined to

My mother said being black was a burden because it made you poor, but Baba was not poor. My mother said being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband. But I did not think this was true. Maiguru was well looked after by Babamukuru, in a big house on the mission which I had not seen but of which I had heard rumours concerning its vastness and elegance. Maiguru was driven about in a car, looked well-kept, fresh, and clean all the time. She was altogether a different kind of woman from my mother. I decided it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and has not been crushed by the weight of womanhood (16).

This indicates the future Tambu wants for herself despite the numerous social and political factors around her. She has full knowledge of what she wants and admires. She is quite sad because of the level of stress she encounters right in her house because of her gender. If only she is male like Nhamo who commands and speaks authoritatively, "knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had power, the authority to make us

do things for him, I hated fetching my brother's luggage" (10). Tambu had seen enough to know that blame does not come in neatly packaged parcels. She felt the injustice of the situation every time. She thought about it. "Feeling the injustice of it, this is how I came to dislike my brother and not only my brother, my father, my mother in fact, everybody" (12). When her brother died, as the first girl in the family, she took the place of her brother and there begins Tambu's

journey of emancipation from village life. She informs the reader that she was not sorry when her brother Nhamo died. This she says is as a result of the stories of her aunt Lucia, her mother, Mainini, her aunt Maiguru and her cousin, Nyasha. Tambu hated Nhamo long before his death. She is relieved at his absence as she would be free from such duties such as killing and preparing chicken to celebrate his return. Tambu's dehumanisation continues at the gathering of the extended family to celebrate the return of Babamukuru and his family. She was ordered to bring a bowl of water to each member of the family to wash their hands. Babamukuru's three siblings praised his success. He proposed educating a member of each family, focusing especially on the neediest branch, Tambu's clan. They chose Nhamo to go to the mission school but after his sudden demise, Tambu is selected to replace him.

Tambu, returning her focus to the present, is excited and awed by her new life in her aunt

and uncle's house on the mission school grounds. Tambu becomes absorbed in her studies. She soon learns the rhythms of the household, witnessing Nyasha and Babamukuru's frequent fights. To mark the end of the term, Nyasha, Tambu and the children of white missionaries attend a dance. Tambu reluctantly joins the festivities. At the end of the evening, Nyasha resists coming inside, still trying to master a new dance one of the boys is teaching her. When the young people finally enter the house, a violent argument erupts between Babamukuru and Nyasha in which Babamukuru accuses Nyasha of lewd behaviour. Nyasha strikes her father who vows to kill her for performing the taboo act of assaulting her own parent. After the fight, Tambu sits with Nyasha outside, shaken since she now knows that Babamukuru will victimize women just like Nhamo victimized Tambu for being female when they were children. Nyasha grows more

detached in the following weeks and Tambu tries to help assuage her guilt.

Gradually, as Tambu lives with Babamukuru, she discovers that Maiguru has a master's degree, but she does not have control of her paychecks. She feels sorry for Maiguru, but cannot believe her situation is too bad since she is married to Babamukuru. Similarly, Tambu's anger over certain situations was exposed as Babamukuru wants to throw a wedding for Jeremiah and Mainini as a means of cleansing the family of its evils, that they have been living in sin, though other relatives laugh about the wedding. Tambu panics when she thinks about it. She believes a wedding would make a joke of her parents though she believes she could not be angry with her uncle Babamukuru. She continues to agonize as the wedding date approaches. Her bridesmaid's wear fits accurately but she knows she does not wish to attend. On the D-day, she has an out-of-body concern and blatantly refuses to attend. She was punished,

and she received fifteen lashes from Babamukuru who makes her perform Anna's chores for over two weeks.

Tambu has been reading Nyasha's book and talking with Nyasha about various ideas, she has the skills and gains a scholarship. She loves the move since it is her dream. Nyasha discourages her on the grounds that the nuns would assimilate her into their tradition. Even Babamukuru agrees with Nyasha but Maiguru does not, she insists Tambu must go to the mission school. Though Jeremiah her father approves of this move, Mainini is afraid that Tambu may die just like Nhamo. Despite her parents' stand, Tambu remains resolute and moves to mission school on scholarship. She is one of the six black female students which is more than usual. She immerses herself in her studies. She receives letters of concern from Nyasha but she does not write back. She does not see Nyasha anymore until August by which time Nyasha had become a skeleton. She vomits

anything she eats and one night she experiences a mental break and screams that "they" have done this to her. Babamukuru takes her to a psychiatrist's the next day. The psychiatrist insists that Africans do not suffer like this but another psychiatrist checks Nyasha into a clinic. Tambu spends a few weeks at home, where Mainini insists that the "Englishness" is going to kill them all. Never mind, Tambu returns to school and does not start to question things until much later at which point she writes this story.

The title *Nervous Conditions*, is taken from the preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which says "the state of the native is a nervous condition." It is an insightful framing of the book, prompting you to reflect on how the experiences of life under colonial rule, interaction with western modernity, culture and pressures impact upon African individuals. The main point remains the way Tambu's worldview forms in relation to western culture and ideas of progress.

While Tambu is throwing herself into her studies at the mission, there are forewarnings of where this path of chasing the opportunities laid out by western education leads. Her cousin, Nyasha is a wonderfully dynamic character who, having lived for a time in England, is full of alternatives and possibilities that are beyond Tambu's current frame of reference. Nyasha is unwilling to accept things as they currently are without questioning and so has many struggles with her parents, often challenging traditional culture, yet also wary of the influence western culture has had on her. In the end, Nyasha becomes a symbolic victim of how western influences and exposure to modernity complicates one's sense of self and alienates one from all that you knew and were.

Conclusion

Throughout history, women have always struggled to gain equality, respect and the

same rights as men. This has been difficult because of patriarchy, and the ideology in which men are said to be superior to women. Women are seen as less important and do not have any say in the society except being good only in bed and to raise children. This ideology has permeated the social structure of many societies throughout the world and as a result, even in the new millennium, women are still struggling for rights that most men take for granted. We now see women clamouring to be liberated from all forms of discrimination so as to enable them fit into the society, just as their male counterparts. In most societies and cultures, women are enslaved, subjugated, humiliated and dehumanized. The origin of this distorted view of women can be traced back to the ancient times. Even Aristotle in his *Poetics* argued that "women were not full human beings and that the nature of women were not that of a full human person"(88). His view was that women by nature were defiant, not

to be trusted and should be looked down upon.

It is a universal phenomenon that women are not given equal rights with men and this has led to their being subjected to many inhumane treatment in the society. Women are made to play the second fiddle - inferior role in the society, family, social gatherings, politics, and in national issues.

Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is principally the story of Tambu, an intelligent teenager who was forced into growing her own crops in the hope of raising her school fees. Spurred by the increasingly tightening grip of poverty on her family, she disregarded the father's words and moved to city to sell her maize. There at the city, she met a white lady Doris and her husband who gave ten pounds sterling to Mr Matimba, her Sunday school teacher to pay for her education.

On the other hand, Nhamo, the only son and Tambu's brother, who was taken to the mission school in the city died and this gave way and opportunity to Tambu as the first

child of the family, to fully engage in western education, a dream she held so dear. The novel challenges traditional views and call for women's empowerment. It reveals that while modernity offers new opportunities, deep-rooted tradition often continue to shape women's lives, leading to conflict and resistance. Ultimately, the narrations encourage readers to consider the importance of supporting women's voices in their fight against inequality and the need for societal change and understanding of how modernity interacts with tradition to re-shape women's identities and their resistance within patriarchal society.

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