



Apartheid, patriarchal domination and the female search for self in Tsitsi Dangarembga's nervous conditions

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Abstract

Early Europeans stumbled on the South African landscape, and due to the temperate climate, mineral deposits and agricultural potentials started buying off lands, gradually displacing blacks and dispossessing them of their fertile land, as in the case of East Africa and other areas. Apartheid was enthroned as Black were discriminated against, and segregation was introduced. This ignited rebellion, leading to the agitation for independence and human rights, which was the birth of the African and journalists who opposed the system were killed or jailed or forced into exile. They include Dennis Brutus, Peter Abraham, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head among others. Writing creative work of art became difficult, especially as it faced rigorous censorship. This paper seeks to explain the correlation between apartheid and patriarchal domination in the affairs of women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* using the feminist/womanism approaches among others. The paper advocates the recognition of women's rights in the Zimbabwean milieu and seeks to liberate women from patriarchal bottlenecks.

Keywords: apartheid, patriarchy domination, oppression, human rights and freedom of expression

Introduction

Preamble

Literature expressly mirrors society, and most literary works creatively derive, not only from society, but from historical facts. Lending credence to the above assertion, Chinere Nwahunanya contends that "like most of their counterparts on the continents, many African novelists recognize the relevance of history to novelistic creative art, especially as the African novel tends to center on the immediate problem of contemporary African society" (289). It is against this backdrop that apartheid, a colonial form of government, was introduced in South Africa to undermine the integrity of blacks and create economic, as well as socio-political tensions in Africa. This direction forms the main thrust of this paper.

Apartheid can, therefore, be viewed as "setting the races apart" (Legume, 433). Many South African writers have used apartheid as the nexus for exploring economic, socio-political and race-related tensions in South Africa. Most Europeans preferred the South African landscape due to the phenomenal clement weather, large mineral deposits like gold and diamond, as well as the agricultural potentials of the area. They began to acquire land and gradually push the blacks into infertile lands and buying over mining claims of bankrupt miners, who did not have the wherewithal to handle mining prospects.

With the onset of industrial revolution in the western world, the white colonizers saw South Africa as a very reliable source of acquiring the much needed raw material. The Africans became helpless, especially as they were technologically backward. They lacked requisite capitals, ammunitions as well as the expertise to challenge these invaders. In addition, the Africans were often viciously

repressed by the machinations of the police and the military forces. There was widespread imposition of legal discrimination over virtually every aspect of African life. Obnoxious laws were created to keep Africans in check. Some of these laws include Bantu Laws Amendment Act, under which no Africa can claim the right to live or work in the designated "white area" not even if he/she was born there or had lived all or most of his/her life in that place. The Population Registration act was a rigid system of race classification, which enabled every person to be put into a separate, water-tight compartment. Mixed Marriages were also vehemently prohibited through an act, known as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act and the Immorality Amendment Act. The group Area Act provided for complete residential segregation between different races and another Act, the Native Law amendment Act restricted any African's visit to white areas in which they do not reside nor employed up to seventy two hours, without permit.

Trade unions were declared illegal, as the Industrial Conciliation and the Native Labour (settlement of Disputes) Act prohibited Africans from operating trade unions, while the Jobs Reservation Act enabled the Minister of Labour to reserve jobs for whites only at the expense of blacks. The Bantu Education Act and the Extension of University Education gave preference to whites, established different curricula and standards of education for whites and blacks and limited the amount of money spent on Africans, who seek to be educated. These forms of segregation and marginalization prompted Jane Bryce (1986) ^[8], cited by Okafor, to equate apartheid with tribalism (69).

Caged and frustrated by laws which infringe on their fundamental human rights, literary works from South Africa

suffered serious setbacks. Most South African writers like Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, Nardine Gordimer, Dennis Brutus, among others wrote mostly from exile. This is so because South Africa was characterized by violence, insecurity, marginalization, oppression and brutality, all of which are “inimical to the flowering of true imaginative art” (269), to borrow Gloria Chukukere’s expression.

The process by which Africans were brought under apartheid rule was greatly accelerated and extended out of South Africa into areas like Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Zambia and Malawi etc. These areas, like most parts of Africa, witnessed rapid expansion and extension of European power due to economic development in Europe and America. Emmanuel Ayandele attributes the above, “in South Africa itself, particularly, to the development of new, more efficient weapons and means of transport and communications, shifting the balance of military power decisively to the advantage of whites” (202). As European powers competed for land, and cheap labour force from Africa, it was important for these whites to prevent Africans in these areas from using the money earned in European employment to procure modern armaments so as not to endanger white supremacy.

In Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), colonial rule was first established by the British South African company of Cecil Rhodes. The white settlers in Zimbabwe brought with them the racist attitudes of the South. They were attracted to Zimbabwe by mining prospects as well as the abundant farm lands for planting crops, especially maize and for pasture. Chioma Opara opines that “in Zimbabwe, a considerable portion of the country’s land area is taken by pasture and range. Approximately half of the cattle are headed by black farmers, trying their hands out of traditional pastoralism” (80). The racial policy of this area was akin to apartheid. This created racial tensions and segregation as in South Africa. For instance, in *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga recalls through a flashback how Tambuzai’s grandmother had owned land, which she cultivated until white incursions and exploitation of the people’s land in Zimbabwe started. This led to alienation and enslavement of blacks in the area. Tambuzai’s grandfather was killed in the mines, her grandmother traumatized, left to raise her six children, alone. She later sent Babamukuru, her son, to the mission school because she wanted him to learn their wizardry.

Wherever the colonizers went, the missionaries were there for assistance. Kofi Awoonor holds that “the missionaries served essentially as harbingers of European political powers. Where the mission went, the military arm of its country of origin followed to protect the lives of the missionaries” (13). As the imperialists dominated Africans generally, the society became polarized, and African men began to dominate and exert authority over their female counterparts; due mostly to frustration of the apartheid policies. This gradually gave rise to male dominance, which Ernestine Fried views as “a pattern in which men have better access, if not exclusive rights to those activities to which society accords the greatest value, and by which control and influence are exercised over others” (164).

Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* is the first novel by a Zimbabwean. The novel calls for an end to all religious, traditional and social structures, which undermine the status of

women. This according to Imoh Emenyi is because “male and female children are socialized differently: the former is groomed to be a conqueror while the latter is trained to serve his needs. The prominence given to male traits are attributes that are positively valued, this has culminated in the institutionalization of male dominance” (38). *Nervous Conditions*, like Nzenza-Shand’s novels, *Zimbabwean Woman: My Own Story and Songs to an African Sunset* and others from this region, depict the triple tragedy of being black, being a woman and poor in a male dominated milieu.

Patriarchal domination and female search for self in *Nervous Conditions*

In Africa, as in most parts of the world, patriarchy has often been deployed to keep women in check, and relegate them to the backburner. Henry Maine is of the opinion that the earliest form of society was patriarchal. According to this critic, the earliest rule over people was the rule of the father (patria potestas) which include life and death authority over wives, children, children’s children, servants and slaves. Hartman argues further that “patriarchy refers to a set of social relations between men and solidarity among them, which enable them, in turn to dominate women. The material base of patriarchy is maintained by excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources, and by restricting women’s sexuality” (14).

Women therefore are supposed to be seen and not heard. They are “supposed to be docile, soft, passive, childlike, domesticated ...” (Adebayo, 30). Ojo-Ade reiterates that “... it is believed that women must keep quiet when men are talking. Woman is woman, mother, child-bearer, supporter of man. If woman talks too much she is considered uncouth, uncivilized. If she is educated, she is classified as a weird specimen” (159). Patriarchal domination is an age long tradition and patriarchal power according to Millet is ubiquitous.

Again, in Africa, gender roles are clearly defined. Helen Haste avers that “the meaning of gender is socially constructed: No culture limits the social definition of gender to biologically determined sex differences” (22). In *Nervous Conditions*, for example, Jeremiah, Tambuzai’s father endorses male education while the girl/child is kept at home to do domestic chores. The girl/child’s education is seen as inconsequential because it will benefit strangers. Tambuzai recalls that “he did not like to see me over-absorbed in intellectual pursuits. He became very agitated after he had found me several times reading the sheet of newspaper in which the bread from magrosa had been wrapped as I waited for the sadza to thicken ... making me quite useless for the real task of feminine living” (33-34).

Tambuzai’s mother, in her poverty and naivety discourages her young daughter’s ambition. Again, Chinyere Ojukwu states that “Tambu’s mother already, enervated by the burden of womanhood in a patriarchal society, encouraged Tambu to shoulder hers with fortitude, since she could not envisage any escape from it by any woman” (112). In this respect, she is like Ogbanje’s mother in Grace Osifo’s *Dizzy Angel* who wanted to keep her only daughter at home. Unlike Tambuzai’s father, Dolise, Ogbanje’s father encourages his daughters’ education, because he realizes that the young girl is smart and has great potentials, unlike his son, who had to repeat each

class. Jeremiah tells his daughter: “can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother, learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables” (*Nervous Conditions*, 15). Even Nhamo, her brother affirms that she cannot go to school despite the fact that Babamukuru her uncle sent enough money for the children's education. Emenyi et al remarks that “colonial education emphasized sex differences by placing men in public space while women were confined to the domestic space” (3).

In the African milieu, therefore, the woman's place is in the private domain, the home, where they are engaged in child-bearing, cooking, cleaning and farming. Helen Haste reiterates that:

What is believed about gender tends to become real. For example, the belief that females are incapable of making decision, may become true in a society where girls are given no opportunity to develop such skills. The belief that males are unable to sew becomes true when the culture makes sure that no boy ever gets his hand on a needle ... (23).

Nhamo becomes very proud, especially as he is to be taken from the village to live with Babamukuru. He does not want to be associated with poverty, and thus idealizes on the good things of life thus “... I shall wear shoes and socks, and shorts with no holes in them ... I will even have underwears, a vest and pants ... I will use fork and knife” (48). Nhamo's ranting and boasting estranges him from his sister. Despite the frustration and marginalization, Tambuzai is determined to go to school. She planted and when her crops were ready, they started disappearing. Nhamo stole and sold them or gave them out in-order to frustrate his sister's ambition. Nhamo's betrayal ignites the feminist streak in his sister. She fights her brother, “sat on him, banged his head in the ground” (22-23). Through the assistance of Mr. Matimba and Doris, a white lady, Tambuzai was able to go to school and excelled, to Nhamo's envy.

Although women in the husbandry have been relegated to the culinary sphere as angels in the kitchen (82), to borrow Chioma Opara's expression, Tambuzai's dogged determination despite her age is commendable. The lot of women who are subservient and docile calls to mind Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where women are described as the mule of the world. Nhamo's ambition is short-lived. Ola Rotimi notes in *The gods are not to blame*, that joy has a slender body that breaks too soon. Here the story moves from flashback to the present. Nhamo's sudden death shatters the peace in the family, giving opportunity to Tambuzai to actualize her dream. Like her late brother, Tambuzai is leaving her rustic body behind, to take up clean fresh body in Babamukuru's house. She reminisces, “this new me would not be frustrated by wood fire that either flamed so furiously that the sadza burned, or so indifferently that it became mbodzz” (*Nervous conditions*, 59). Tambuzai is transplanted into a new world to fulfill her ambition. The author uses irony here, what Tambuzai had disliked and envied her late brother for, is now what she craves. Opara observes that “Tambuzai's change of address consists in transplantation from deprivation to relative luxury. The squalor of her homestead is starkly contrasted with the splendor of the house-ensconced in the white-washed castle ... the grim of her homestead is pitted against the antiseptic

cleanliness of her new abode” (82). In Tambuzai's ambition to acquire western education and actualize self, she becomes westernized and drifts apart from her cousin, Nyasha.

It is at the convent school that Tambuzai experiences first hand apartheid. In the dormitory, all Africans are squeezed into an apartment, while the whites are comfortably spaced. The hypocritical Revered Sister explains “we have more Africans here than usual, this year, and so we had to put them all here” (194). Chinyere Ojukwu argues that,

The increase in the number of Africans who gain admission into the school in effect, warrant reduced comfort for each of them even in a convent school run by nuns. Thus the novel, apart from exploring the issues and intricacies of being a woman in a male oriented society also take a swipe at the pressures and concomitants of being black in a racial, multiracial environment (114).

However, going to Sacred Heart Convent School to Tambuzai was another form of escapism. Dangaremba writes that, “... going to the convent was a chance to lighten those burdens by entering a world where burdens are light. I would take the chance. I would lighten my burdens. I would go, if Babamukuru would let me” (*Nervous Conditions*, 179).

Tambuzai asserts her selfhood again when she rebels against patriarchal domination by refusing to attend her parents' white wedding organized by her uncle and benefactor. Having imbibed western education and life style, Babamukuru wants to impose these ideologies on his brother Jeremiah and his illiterate wife, Mainini. A church wedding would liberate their mind and spirit from witchcraft. Tambuzai views the idea as farce and mockery. Again, Opara opines that “a white wedding would, no doubt, be a reflection of the whiteness of the mission-the English place ... The Anglicized paterfamilias, headmaster and husbandman had insisted that every person in his husbandry must be whitewashed” (85-86).

Tambuzai runs away to the hostel, this is her way of rebelling against patriarchy and asserting herself. Later, she sleeps and refuses to get up, she slipped out of her body. Dangaremba writes:

The body on the bed didn't even twitch. Meanwhile the mobile, alert me, the one at the foot of the bed, smiled smugly, thinking that I had gone somewhere where he could not reach me and I congratulated myself for being so clever. (*Nervous Conditions*, 166).

These technique-two bodies in one lend credence to Tambuzai's action and strengthens her resolve in actualizing her selfhood. For refusing to attend the wedding, and defying patriarchal authority, Tambuzai is punished.

Tambuzai's cousin, Nyasha, a “been to” and, daughter of Babamukuru, is a clear instance of the (adverse) lack of fatherly love and patriarchal domination. Having lived abroad and returned home, Nyasha vassilates between two-cultures-African and European. She finds it difficult to speak Shona language; while her classmates think she is a snob. Her father is too busy with work and extended family matters, to pay attention to her reintegration into the African milieu, while her mother is timid, nervous and subservient, because she did not want to displease her lord and master. Nyasha wears shot dresses and smokes, she bonds with Tambuzai and is estranged from her parents. She shows little respect for her mother who could not stand on her own. This is perhaps why

Ojukwu insists that, “it is in Nyasha that Dangarembga fully demonstrates the conflict within the new woman in a patriarchal setting and the conflict of culture resulting from colonialism. Nyasha, torn between the value she has imbibed in England and those of her traditional African society, determines to resist the intimidation of her sex by the males around her” (116).

Nyasha’s exposure abroad has made her bold. In the absence of Tambuzai, she buries herself in her academic work, refusing to relax or eat. Her mode of escapism-staying late in school, reading and smoking are “her efforts to maintain academic equality with the boys, is also an expression of her refusal to accept the inferior posture of women in her society” (Ojukwu, 119). Opara adds that, by refusing to eat, Nyasha “is unequivocally rejecting the patriarchal English place and identifying more with her forebears” (84).

When Nyasha is wrongly accused by her father, after she comes home late from a Christmas party, she feels really insulted. Babamukuru is impatient, hasty in judging, and insensitive to his daughter’s feelings. He actually keeps awake to know when she comes home and examines her critically. The gaze is an abstraction theory used to describe the act of looking. Lack of communication and dialogue, between father and daughter, result in distrust, contempt and hostility. It is against this backdrop that Emenyi submits thus:

The novel has a dialogic imperative which is absent in other genres because it is polyphonic in nature; the novel speaks the language of ordinary people; and it engages the different voices in the society in interaction which are always impossible to resolve because of the multiplicity of meanings (7).

Babamukuru’s close examination of his daughter, according to Opara, calls to mind Luce Irigaray’s theory of specularization (84). This critic cites Toril Moi, who avers that:

Specularization suggest not only the mirror image that comes from the visual penetration of the speculum inside the vagina, it also hints at a basic assumption underlying all western philosophical discourse; the necessity of postulating a subject that is capable of reflecting on its own being (132).

Babamukuru not only looks and examines Nyasha, but being satiated, “he beats her and the latter fights back, punching him in the eye” (*Nervous Conditions*, 115), thereby “attacking the organ of speculation” (84) to borrow Opara’s expression. Her fight is borne out of frustration and her way of repudiating patriarchal dominance and authority. Babamukuru is subdued since hitherto none of his family members in the husbandry had so dared him. Opara insists that “the author had employed this reductive imagery for political purpose.” The women in his fold had been entangled in the “specular logic of patriarchy, Maiguru had chosen to remain passive and silent while Nyasha decided to fight like a man” (85). Recognizing Nyasha’s strength and boldness, her father states, “we cannot have two men in this house” (115). Nevertheless, it is against African custom for a child to fight his/her parent. Babamukuru is the archetypal patriarch who views women as second class, hence, he labels his innocent daughter a prostitute. Nyasha’s behavior places her in the, category of radical feminist which is anathema in African culture.

Nyasha is estranged from her parents and becomes depressed. Lindsay Aegester (1996) ^[2] cited by Ojukwu, suggest that,

Solitude breeds solipsism; while Tambuzai rushes with relish to Sacred Heart, a predominantly white private girls’ school, Nyasha is stripped of the strength - the healing laughter - that accompanies camaraderie. She quickly succumbs to the nervous conditions her friendship with Tambuzai had deferred. Frail and, fragmented, Nyasha continues to rail against her father (121).

The above critic adds that “Nyasha’s bulimia signifies her refusal to swallow a sexist ideology she cannot and will not stomach” (237).

Nyasha’s mother, Maiguru has been subjected to imbibe the patriarchal culture which enables her give up her selfhood in order to please her husband and extended family. Having been privileged to be -taken to England to study, this magnanimity has, rendered her docile and voiceless. In addition, Babamukuru is able to assist his people, financially, by using his wife’s salary. Maiguru is nervous and self-effacing, nothing in her shows that she had left the shores of Africa, Dressed in flat brown shoes and a pleated polyester dress, very much like the one Babamukuru bought for my mother in Christmas before he left, she did not look as though she had been to England (*Nervous Conditions*, 37).

Maiguru is not happy with her family’s lack of appreciation. She begins to question her husband’s spending habit and she having to cook for the entire clan during Christmas. As senior wife, she was in charge of culinary activities. Pushed to the wall, her departure from her matrimonial home is a clear instance of feminist rebellion. African literature is replete with instances of feminist rebellion, as in Ajanupu’s case in *Efuru*, Aissatou in *So Long a letter*, Enitan in *Everything Good will Come*, Kena in *Stars of the Long Night*, among others. Nyasha is happy about her mother’s emancipation. Remarkably, Maiguru “did not slink away in the dark, but, quite openly packed a suitcase, put on her travelling clothes, had her breakfast and left...” (175). She breaks the yoke of silence often attributed to women in her society. Windston Langley states that, “tradition has forced women to conform to codes that restrict their behaviour and make them subservient to men-whether fathers, husbands or brothers ...” (34). What worried Nyasha was the fact that Maiguru went to her brother’s house, that same symbol of patriarchy.

Babamukuru is again subdued hence he goes to bring his wife home after five days. Here, Dangarembga acknowledges that African feminism is accommodationist and recognizes part of Alice Walker and all of Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s views on womanism. The latter insists that,

Womanism is black-centered, it is accomodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. Unlike radical feminism it wants meaningful union between black men and black children and will see to it that men change their sexist stand (63).

Maiguru’s brief sojourn in her brother’s house changes her consciousness and she attains a new sense of maturity. The author recalls,

Maiguru had been away for only five days, but the change had done her good. She smiled more often and less mechanically, fused over us less and was more willing or able to talk about sensible things. Although she still called Babamukuru her daddy-sweet, most of her baby-talk had disappeared (*Nervous conditions*, 175).

Lucia, Mainini's junior sister refuses to be dominated by patriarchal forces around her. Lucia is single, and her affliction consisted mostly of dalliance with rich men who did not want to marry her. Takesure, Babamukuru's distant cousin, who has two wives impregnates her. She told lies and accredited the pregnancy to Jeremiah, her brother-in-law because Takesure was lazy and irresponsible. Jeremiah on his part was happy since he needed a lively and sharp woman unlike his dull wife. Possessing Lucia was "like possessing a thunderstorm to make it crackle and thunder and lightning at your command" (*Nervous Conditions*, 127). In addition, Jeremiah needed a son, irrespective of how the son was born. Orabueze holds that, "the birth of a male child heralds great jubilation" (109). Due to the scandal, Babamukuru ordered Takesure to leave the kraal with Lucia, but the latter is stubborn, and refused to go. She boldly informs their benefactor, Babamukuru that the two men-Jeremiah and Takesure were very lazy men. She humiliates Takesure further, by pulling his ears like a child's.

Dangarembga demonstrates another instance of patriarchal domination, where the men in the household held "dare" in deliberations about the family, excluding the women, For instance, Lucia is not allowed to tell her side of the story concerning her affair with Takesure. Feeling that the men are biased, she solicits Maiguru's support to no avail. However, Lucia redeems her battered image when she pledges to stay, behind to help her sister Mainini after childbirth. She is offered a job as a cook in the mission by Babamukuru, thereby alleviating her poverty. The use of the journey motif is a recurring decimal in African literature. Lucia's journey to the city earns her a job and gives her the courage to enroll in the evening school despite her six months pregnancy. She is therefore able to transcend immanence, unlike her senior sister. Her feminist streak is remarkable.

Conclusion

Patriarchal domination is an age-long tradition that has continued to dehumanize women not only in Africa, but in other societies and parts of the world. Today, women are rising up to question and challenge negative customs and traditions, false accusations as well as assumptions that underpin them. They want their inherent rights recognized as seen in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Tambuzai, Nyasha, Maiguru and Lucia are representatives of women throughout the world who are poised to fighting patriarchal domination. Gaining awareness of their importance and selfhood have also motivated and given rise to their feminist/womanist spirit which has helped in challenging the status quo.

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