

How does Dangarembga illustrate the double oppression faced by Zimbabwean women in *Nervous Conditions*?

Nervous conditions was published in 1988 after Rhodesia gained its independence and became Zimbabwe. Dangarembga's novel reflects on the ordinary lives of Zimbabweans during colonisation. She uses characters to represent the lives of Zimbabwean women across the country as a whole. In correlation with the effect colonisation left on the people of Zimbabwe, Dangarembga focuses on the double oppression faced by Zimbabwean women, who dealt with oppression from both British colonisers and systems of Patriarchy heavily imbedded in Zimbabwean society. As a native Zimbabwean Dangarembga's life experiences match events in the characters' lives. It is clear Dangarembga's life experiences as a Zimbabwean woman have influence on the novel. This brings the book to life, effectively making the topics discussed in the novel more than just fictional but political topics of concern in both feminist studies and postcolonial studies. In 2018 *Nervous Conditions* was added to BBC's list of books that changed the world. Dangarembga illustrates the importance of education and women being given a voice. This is shown through the main character Tambu; being the narrator and assumed writer of the book. Telling her story is both empowering and inspiring to other women.

In this essay I will be discussing the various ways Dangarembga conveys the double oppression faced by Zimbabwean women in *nervous conditions*. My first point of focus will be how patriarchal traditions in Zimbabwe held back the progression of the females in the country. My next point will discuss how the double oppression of colonisation and patriarchy creates a double consciousness that effects the female characters behaviour and perspective of the world. I will then link this to colonisation, analysing how characters in the novel are affected by colonisation and how the characters view their blackness, their poverty and where they stand in society, particularly female characters. Lastly, I will conclude by analysing how

the two main characters Tambu and Nyasha rebel against patriarchy in order to emancipate themselves.

Dangarembga creates scenarios that convey the systems of patriarchy in Zimbabwean society. These scenarios are told from the perspective of the young and naïve narrator Tambu. This presents an unbiased true account of the events allowing the reader to understand the extent of male domination in Zimbabwe and how this impacted women all throughout their lives. One of the first accounts of patriarchy the reader is presented with, is in the inequality of treatment between Tambu and her brother Nhamo. 'I was not sorry when my brother died'¹ Nhamo is a symbol of all that she cannot have. The novel beginning with this quote is significant, Nhamo's death only opens up opportunities for her. Tambu grabs this opportunity gladly and without guilt; this is where her journey to freedom begins.

Nhamo is given school fees while Tambu is forced to continue working on the home stead. 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.'² Tambu's desire to go school is of no importance to her parents. This passage identifies the clear gender roles Zimbabwean society enforces onto children from a young age. Despite Tambu's age, her father is concerned with making her a good wife. This illustrates the lack of importance of female education and self-development but the importance of being a subordinate wife and essentially a slave to her husband. This is further reinforced by the common practice of husbands paying for their brides called dowry. 'In many African societies, for example the patriarchal system defines the inheritance rights of males to children, property and wife'³. Pauline Ada Uwakweh identifies patriarchy as the

¹Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) p.1.

² See above

³, Pauline Ada Uwakweh 'Debunking patriarchy: The liberational quality of voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*',

system that benefits men and provides them with the opportunities that are not available to women. The inequalities of patriarchy is veiled by the notion of tradition and culture. 'Through the myths this society imposed its laws and customs upon individuals.'⁴ Simone de Beauvoir recognises the systematic constructs put in place designed to keep women from protesting against Patriarchy. By employing the words 'laws and customs' De Beauvoir explains there is a sense of manipulation in the traditions used to suppress women in patriarchal societies. This is also identified by Nyasha. '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.'⁵ Dangarembga creates the character Nyasha as voice of reason and consciousness within the novel. Through her education she has gained the ability to think for herself and recognise the bigger picture beyond her father or other family members being her oppressors but a whole system that traps women. In this passage the reader understands the difficult position Nyasha has been placed in. Although she is aware of these systems of oppression she understands that she cannot fight this alone and is therefore trapped in limbo, unlike other uneducated women who remain blissfully unaware and accept their position in society. 'This business of womanhood is a heavy burden.'⁶ In contrast to Tambu and Nyasha, Ma'Shingayi has accepted her fate as a servant to the men in her life and makes no attempt to resist. The difference between Tambu and her mother separate the two of them. This may represent the difference between the old and young generations and suggests the slow but progressive change in women's mindsets offering hope for the future. However, in order for Zimbabwean women to progress and emancipate themselves it requires the help of all the younger generation to rebel against these systems. Dangarembga seems to project this social implication: that the female quest for awareness and resistance to

⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, '*the second sex*'. trans. by H. M. Parshley, 1st (France: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc , 1949).

⁵ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004)

⁶ See above

traditional female subordination cannot be sustained if it lacks the necessary support base.⁷ Pauline Ada Uwakweh recognises the need for female solidarity in order to rebel against patriarchy. There appears to be a lack of solidarity replaced with judgment from characters within the novel. For example, Tambu does not support Nyasha in her rebellion against her father. 'you had to admit she was altogether too volatile and strong willed. You couldn't ignore the fact that she had no respect for Babamakuru'⁸. Tambu is aware of how unfairly Nyasha is treated yet her concern is Nyasha's disrespect towards her father. This conveys Tambu's instinctive submissive and obedient inner consciousness. Both Tambu and Maiguru remaining submissive towards Babamakuru only further isolates Nyasha and enhances the idea that she is simply a misbehaving child without a cause. After the fight between Nyasha and Babamakuru, Nyasha's health and strong mental state declines. Dangarembga uses this to symbolise the importance of females coming together and supporting each other. Although Nyasha was strong for so long she could no longer fight alone.

W.E.B du Bois created the term Double consciousness. This is a term describes as the feeling of an individual having more than one social identity, this impacts their perception and attitude towards the world, creating a challenging and conflicting sense of identity. Double consciousness can explain the psycho-social split found in female characters in *Nervous*

⁷ Pauline Ada Uwakweh, '*Debunking patriarchy: The liberational quality of voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions*',

⁸ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) p.118.

Conditions. Female characters in the novel are simultaneously experiencing the oppression of colonisation and patriarchy. Both these aspects contribute to the eradication of female identity. 'Women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy.'⁹ feminist Ifechelobi suggests Patriarchal ideologies force women to view themselves negatively. Women are viewed as insignificant and incapable of dealing with matters beyond house hold duties, these values are re-enforced by colonisers viewing Africans as uncivilized and needing to be 'saved'. 'Every single empire in its official discourse has said that ...it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort'¹⁰. Edward Said presents the perspective of the west. This passage implies the West assumes they are superior and therefor have the right to invade other countries. Colonisers attempted to destroy local cultures and employ new ideologies such as speaking English and creating missionaries to impose these new ideologies onto native people. Females in the novel are defined by their poverty, gender and roles in society. The lack of identity and sense of self seen within the characters, entraps them into colonial constructs and patriarchal oppression, with no other sense of self the characters accept themselves as subordinates and allow the oppressor to define them. This creates a sense of alienation causing Zimbabwean women feel like second-class citizens in their own country. 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, the measuring of one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'.¹¹ Du Bois explains double consciousness as the dictation of a person's thoughts and actions through the dominant other. Women in the book are forced to measure their worth in terms of how their oppressors will view them. Nyasha displays aspects of double consciousness as a character with a both British and Shona

⁹ Ifechelobi, J.N, *Feminism: Silence and voicelessness as Tools of Patriarchy* in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, African research review 8 vols. vol. IV, (2014)

¹⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014).

¹¹ W.E.B, DuBois *The souls of black folks* (Chicago: McClurge & Co, 1903)

influence. In the time Nyasha moved to England life, British society became contemporary, people were looking to equality and progressiveness. She brings this back with her to Zimbabwe. However, these ideologies are rejected, and she is expected to behave as a submissive and passive woman. Nyasha expresses this conflict in identity. 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you.'¹² She feels she is neither British nor is she entirely Zimbabwean leaving her as a hybrid of both cultures, seen as barbaric and uncivilized by the British yet rebellious and disrespectful by her Zimbabwean family. On top of this conflict in identity, Nyasha is placed within a patriarchal society that denies freedom of expression from women. The pressure of this ends up being too much for Nyasha, eventually leaving her physically and mentally damaged. Dangarembga shows the psychological damage of double consciousness. Despite Nyasha's efforts to fight for her identity she is crushed by the weight of colonisation and patriarchy this is represented in the fight between her and Babamakuru. 'Dangarembga seems to suggest that patriarchy as is expressed in all forms of male domination of the female heightened by the contradictions of colonial experience, creates the nervous state or psychological conditions which afflicts the female characters in varying degrees of intensity.'¹³ Uwakweh identifies the pressures that lead up to Nyasha's psychological break downs. In the novel Nyasha is taken to a psychiatrist to be seen but her illness is dismissed. 'The psychiatrist said that Nyasha could not be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described. She was making a scene. We should take her home and be firm with her.'¹⁴ This shows how Zimbabwean women's issues are not taken seriously. Dangarembga shows the flaws in dealing with mental health in traditional African society.

¹² Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) p.201

¹³ Pauline Ada Uwakweh, 'Debunking patriarchy: The liberational quality of voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*'

¹⁴ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) p.201

Tambu's mother represents traditional Zimbabwean values as a woman accepting of the burdens of being a woman. 'And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength.'¹⁵ Tambu's mother encourages her to passively accept the forces she feels are too powerful for her to control. This passage shows the differences not only between the two women but between the older, more traditional beliefs and new attitudes emerging in a more contemporary Africa. Tambu represents hope and progression in Zimbabwe. Throughout the novel the audience see the emergence of her consciousness. She begins to understand the systems in place that oppress her.

'condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I had felt victimised at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it. And that was the problem.'

¹⁶Tambu argues that it is not poverty or being black that makes her a victim but her 'femaleness'. Tambu does not see colonisation as the problem but her own traditions. Contrary to Tambu's belief Nyasha sees colonisation as the reason for her identity being taken from her. 'It's bad enough . . . when a country gets colonized, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end.'¹⁷ Nyasha having been in England and also living in the missions understands the invasion of British culture into Zimbabwe and how its impacting people. She watches Tambu's fascination and Nhamo's excitement to speak

¹⁵ See above

¹⁶ See above

¹⁷ See above

English and sees this as the colonisation of Zimbabwean people. Nyasha anticipates the assimilation of British and Shona culture tainting Zimbabwean culture and native people.

Colonisation changed Zimbabwean politics and infiltrated Zimbabwean culture. Due to colonisation Zimbabwean systems and processes replicate British systems.

Babamakuru is the symbol of colonisation as the sole provider and educator, he dictates what happens to the family members. He presents his way of life as superior. After coming from England his family look up to him to provide a solution to their poverty. Nhamo takes on a similar attitude after moving to the mission for his education. 'my brother had become a stranger to me'.¹⁸ Nhamo slowly adopts a western identity. His altered identity only exacerbates his treatment towards his sister as he views himself as superior. He refuses to carry his own bags and behaves as though he is no longer from the homestead. He trades in his Shona for English and becomes ashamed of his homestead. '[...] "I shall no longer be Jeremiah's son," he shouted, speaking father's name in such derogatory tones'¹⁹. Nhamo distancing himself from his father signifies his desire to be western now that he has experienced life with privilege and security. Dangarembga shows how western influence causes Zimbabwean identities to fragment and separate people from their culture and families. Colonisation not only effected education systems but forced British values onto Zimbabwean women. Homecrafts clubs were created by British women to domesticate Zimbabwean women. According to Ranchod- Nilsson, Homecraft clubs helped in sustaining colonialism by involving wives of African elites into a gender ideology of the elite class that

¹⁸ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) p.56

¹⁹ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) p.48

focused on domesticity. African women's role in society was strictly bound to domestic duties. Women were not put in positions of power and had no control over what happened in their country or their own lives. 'The women of this country have not yet experienced war on their doorsteps and have not yet had time to acquire a balanced and sane outlook which one finds in the women of older countries.'²⁰ Rhodesia Herald implies Zimbabwean women are not equipped to deal with political matters he has described women as too emotional to deal with matters accordingly. Colonialists not allowing women to be in power ensures women do not have a say in their own country and insinuates women are incapable of reaching positions of power. This speaks volumes to the women of Zimbabwe. Women come to accept their place in society as uneducated house wives and child bearers. This acceptance is passed onto their daughters who are taught women cannot have power but have to bear the burden of being a woman, remaining invisible and unappreciated. This is evident in the relationship between Tambu and her mother. The author perhaps creates this character in order to push other women to progress beyond their parents and strive for better in order to elevate and provide role models for Zimbabwean women.

Tambu and Nyasha can be seen as the rebellious women in *Nervous Conditions*. The two girls fight for the equality they deserve and rebel against patriarchal oppression, both in their

²⁰ Law Kate, *Gendering the settler state :White Women, Race, Liberalism and empire in Rhodesia,1950-1980,The Politics of Pots and pans* ,(New York: Routledge,2016) pp.52 in *Routledge Research In Gender and History*

own ways. 'Quietly and unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself to question things and refuse to be brainwashed.'²¹ This passage shows Tambu's inner conflict in abandoning her submissive character and learning to think for herself. Using several adverbs Dangarembga conveys the conflicting experience of gaining consciousness when one has grown up in a patriarchal society. Tambu throughout the novel develops dramatically yet she still feels she has to fight against these notions of patriarchy 'quietly and unobtrusively'. As the reader we are inclined to question Tambu's commitment to rebelling against patriarchy. Although Tambu is aware of these systems of oppressions she remains the 'poor grateful relative'. 'The narrator Tambu achieves voice through narration an act that gives her liberation from her patriarchal imposed silence and offers hope in the resilience and success of female challenge.'²² Uwakweh argues that Tambu is not passive but uses her educational skills to tell her story and free herself from oppression. Nyasha takes on a more assertive method, she voices her opinions despite the consequences she later becomes aware of. This is evident even after her nervous breakdown. Nyasha's anorexia can be seen as a protest over her lack of power. 'She must eat her food, all of it. She is always doing this, challenging me. I am her father. If she doesn't want to do what I say, I shall stop providing for her fees, clothes, food, everything.'²³ Nyasha complies with her father's demands and eats the food but she throws up the food right after. Nyasha uses bulimia as a rebellion against male domination proving she cannot be controlled.

Dangarembga plays an important part in African feminism she expresses an alternative ending for female characters instead of death or marriage. Dangarembga conveys the importance of education as it enables women to have a voice and question traditions they

²¹ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) P.204.

²² Pauline Ada Uwakweh, 'Debunking patriarchy: The liberational quality of voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*'

²³ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, (Oxfordshire, Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd 2004) P.189

previously blindly accepted. Around the publication of *Nervous Conditions*, African women began to express important matters and used their roles as writers to break the silence around female identity. Feminist writers writing their stories inspired women to create new movements in Zimbabwe such as The Mothers of Revolution²⁴, A group of women who spoke about their hardships and protested against various forms of male dominance. Movements such as this help to give women a voice and end the suffering caused by the double oppression in Zimbabwe. *Nervous Conditions* is not only a novel about rebellion, patriarchy and colonisation but a novel about hope and emancipation.

²⁴ Rooney, Caroline. 'Mothers of the Revolution: Zimbabwean Women in the Aftermath of War.' In *African Languages and Cultures* 4, no.1 (1991) pp 55-64.

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