

**A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF  
Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*  
(1988)**

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis provides a feminist analysis of the Zimbabwean women writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), reading the novel as a critique of African patriarchy.

The thesis examines the different ways in which African patriarchy broadly manifests itself regarding the subaltern position of women. It then analyses a range of feminist theories, extracting from them concepts useful to an understanding of the novel.

Finally, the thesis analyses in detail Dangarembga's novel in the light of an understanding of African patriarchy and feminist theories.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1. INTRODUCTION

African women's literature is of significance for feminist theory because it focuses mainly on issues from women's perspectives and experiences such as sexism, gender relationships, marriage, politics, education and employment. In essence, African women's literature portrays their quest for emancipation from male dominance.

While recognizing the ambiguities of this term, 'African' in the context of this thesis refers to black females of the African continent whose lives were for a long period determined by colonialism. Various forms of sexism are treated in African women's literature, as understood and experienced by African women. In the black family domain there is a relatively strong influence of patriarchy and male dominance whereby the family is mostly male headed and male children are preferred to female children because male children can maintain the patriarchal system. The stereotyping of women as being less valuable than men often results in women's displacement, whereby young women are either married away or involved in some non-formal relationship with a married man.

In marriage and in dating situations, women are often exploited and abused by men in their lives. Within African communities there is a notion that the happiness of a married woman depends on her ability to have children, preferably male children. A woman without children is regarded as a curse and a failure. Abusive relationships characterise many marriages, which hinders women's progress in life. In African societies men marry additional wives without consent of their first wives.

The wider society is influenced by the family structure, where men are firmly placed at the centre of both family and community lives, while women are marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. Women's work domains are restricted to their

household. Women who try to acquire high levels of western education and to secure key positions in governments, business and religious organizations are often ridiculed and accused of being subversive.

Central to African women's literature are the motives of resistance, positivity, triumph, quests for a better life, and emancipation from sexism, racism and poverty. When in crisis many women do not just fold their arms in tears and self-pity but often seek liberation from subjugation through writing. African women's literature depicts African and diasporic women searching and finding success and happiness outside marriage, suggesting that marriage and motherhood are not the only keys to female happiness and fulfillment.

African women writers explore ideal and actual issues concerning black women using autobiography and other literary forms. Their literature is 'post-colonial' in that it explores new relationships and identities within societies that have recently acquired liberation from oppressive colonialists. However it is not confined to this period, also exploring pre-colonial and colonial life in Africa.

The Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is a novel that shares many of the preoccupations of African women's autobiographical writing, and is spoken throughout by a single narrator who may be defined as "a narrative voice" or "speaker" of the text, one who supplies the "I said" tags and descriptions. The narrator of *Nervous Conditions* is an internal participant of the story, and a seemingly reliable one since the rendering of the story and its commentary affords the reader the opportunity to accept it as an authoritative account of a non-fictional truth (Rimmon-Kenan 1987:87).

The narrator is a `woman who has already experienced the occurrences described in the text; the protagonist is a young woman trying to overcome hardships and develop herself to the fullest. As a woman she's undermined and deemed inferior. This subordination is further influenced by cultural ideologies that accord men a higher status than women. The text explores how a Shona woman being oppressed by cultural norms, patriarchy and race had minimal chances for social advancement.

### 1.1 THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study explores the gender, race, class and cultural experiences of black African women. It will analyze *Nervous Conditions* (1988) from a feminist point of view of women's subjugation. The main argument of this study is based on the notion that even though gender oppression against women is widely discouraged and is in the process of being eradicated, unequal power relations between the sexes still lingers. Women still suffer daily infringement of their basic rights as human beings and live with the ever present experience of sexual oppression.

The focal point of this exploration is an analysis of the role women play in the novel and to expound on how patriarchal oppression fosters discriminatory treatment against women. The established norms and decorum sanctioned by culture as a whole which relegate women to subordinate positions are investigated. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is used as a point of focus critically to investigate the oppressive experiences of African women, all of whom now live in post-colonial African societies.

### 1.2 PERSONAL MOTIVATION

Until recently the subordinate position of women was largely taken for granted. Women's place was in the home, and they were excluded from what were considered to

be the important activities in society. The greater recognition of gender disparities in recent years has led to the increased efforts by UN bodies, government and non-governmental organizations to combat all forms of gender discrimination. In the light of this many countries around the globe have gender equity firmly enshrined in their constitutions.

Women's organizations are bringing new issues to the agenda and perspectives for the development of more just and humane societies that will be based on equal opportunities for participation and decision making for everyone, women and men. Women challenge laws and constitutions that do not uphold gender equality. In addition they are moving into government, legislative, NGO's and other leadership positions previously the exclusive domain of men. They are fighting for female presence in areas where women were previously marginalized.

However, universal gender discrimination still persists; there are many obstacles that continue to stand in the way of women's absolute liberation from gender oppression. Our cultural traditions reinforce the power of men over women despite laws combating it. In some African societies, women who challenge notions of male superiority risk being ostracized by their communities since male supremacy is venerated unquestionably by the majority of women. In African societies a woman is still expected to be dependent on male leadership and the excuse for this is that it is "our culture". The so-called African culture and tradition deny women their fundamental human rights and a closer analysis of culture reveals its selectivity and discriminatory nature. Only those aspects of culture, which uphold the subordination of women, are being considered as culture. Culture and traditions are employed as excuses in explaining away the gross violations of human rights that women suffer. I therefore felt compelled to expose gender oppression prevalent predominantly in African societies due to traditional cultural norms, which accord men a higher status than women. This affects the lives of women to the point of inhibiting their aspirations for

social mobility. I am of the opinion that the high rate of women abuse, discrimination and ill treatment, male domination and sexual harassment amongst other forms of abuse should seriously be confronted.

### 1.3. WOMEN AND HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION

The household is often the main and sometimes the only place where women participate. Women are almost universally responsible for caring for children and other members of the household and for all domestic work that their caring role entails.

Wolpe observed that:

Many South African women are trapped in traditional roles because men do not take equal responsibility for family care and will not do what they regard as women's work. (1997:23)

Women have 'the primary responsibility for their families' health and for provision of food, water and fuel and their work is not only unpaid, but largely unrecognized as well. Their major responsibilities for the households' well-being do not always mean decision making power within the family' (Karl 1995: 03).

In many cases women do not have equal control over the management and allocation of family income, especially if the income has been earned by men in the family. This is clearly illustrated in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* where the protagonist's paternal uncle Babumukuru had entire control of his wife's income by virtue of being the family head.

Women are locked up into domesticity in their households. The subordinate positions that are held by women within the marital setup are disguised in idealized images of



women as perfect wives and mothers. Since the task of caring for children is often the responsibility of the wives, they are conceived by societies as transmitters of culture and traditions.

Working women carry a double work burden since they also perform all household chores. Despite their willingness to endure the heavy load placed on their shoulders their work is rarely valued. Women, who often accept their roles passively and are outwardly complacent, bolster their husbands' status within their community. The latter also enjoys respect for having 'docile wives'.

A man who assumes domestic chores like cooking and cleaning may be subjected to ridicule as he would be regarded as lacking authority and control over his wife. He may even be called 'a woman', because of the work he does. As it will be pointed out in the analysis of *Nervous Conditions*, Jeremiah and Takesure are portrayed as lazy and interested in drinking beer rather than helping MaShingayi with her daily chores.

Women's status in the household affects their ability to participate outside the home. While women can often assert influence in public through the males of their household, women's secondary status in the family frequently precludes them from taking a direct part in the outside world. Moreover since they carry a major burden of childcare and domestic work they often face severe time constraints on their participation outside the home (Karl 1995: 03).

Women's unpaid household work is usually not valued or considered a contribution to the economy. Karl explains that:

Lack of income on the women's part or lower income, reduces women's decision-making power in the household. The inequalities women face within their families have an adverse effect on women's self esteem. Studies have

shown that women's participation in the economic life affords them a basis for self respect and social dignity (4).

To conclude: partnership in household responsibilities will result in women's increasing involvement in society and the greater decision making power in the home.

#### 1.4 THE CONTENT OF CHAPTERS

Chapter one provides a preamble of the study. It describes the personal motivation for undertaking the study, the aims of the study and provides a literature review on women's household participation and how this precludes them from social mobility and political involvement.

Chapter two provides biographical information of Tsitsi Dangarembga. The similarities between Dangarembga's novel and her real life experiences are investigated.

Chapter three explains the role of women in African culture as well as the effects of gender discrimination on black women particularly of African origin.

Chapter four explains the theoretical framework of feminist theories i.e. Radical, Socialist, Post structuralism and black feminist theories. These theories are utilized to portray women's subordination in the novel.

Chapter five, deals with an analysis of the text, *Nervous Conditions*. Here I explain the manifold oppression that affects the lives of women in the novel.

Chapter six provides a summary and conclusions for the study.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2.1 THE AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

The novelist and playwright Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in 1959 in Mutoko in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). At the age of two she went to England with her family where she began her education in a British school. Like her central character, Nyasha in the novel, Dangarembga spent her childhood in England (age's two through six). Although there are many autobiographical parallels between Nyasha and Tsitsi, she says her novel is not an autobiography (Wilkinson 1992: 190); however, Tsitsi identifies herself with both of her central characters: Nyasha who received her education abroad and Tambu who was educated in Zimbabwe.

In an interview with Jane Wilkinson in 1989, Dangarembga said that she wrote: 'of things I had observed and had had direct experience with, larger than any one person's own tragedies... a wider implication and origin and therefore were things that needed to be told' (1992: 190). In the light of this Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* contains autobiographical elements in the sense that many of the events which took place in the novel are the things she confronted in her real life experience. The difficulties Dangarembga faced when she returned from England is clearly discernible in Nyasha who was discriminated against on the grounds that she was black, female, educated and most of all anglicized. It was at the age of six when Dangarembga returned to Rhodesia and concluded her early education.

Dangarembga returned to England in 1977 to study medicine at Cambridge University, hoping that she would serve the people of her society; however, she did not complete her studies. She then returned to Rhodesia just before it attained independence in 1980.

On her return to Rhodesia/Zimbabwe she continued with her educational pursuits. She enrolled at the University of Harare to study psychology. While studying in Harare, Dangarembga held a job at a marketing agency as a copywriter. She was also a member of the drama group affiliated with the University. Dangarembga considers this period as the most significant for her creative development. She wrote many plays that were put into production at Harare University. In 1983 Dangarembga wrote a play, 'The Lost of the Soil'. She subsequently became an active member of a theatre group called Zambuko which was directed by Robert McLaren. In this group she was instrumental in the production of two plays, 'Katshaa' and 'Mavambo' (Brüner 1993: 196-197).

In 1985 Dangarembga explored prose writing and she wrote and published a short story in Sweden, *The Letter*. In 1987 she published a play in Harare called 'She No Longer Weeps'. Dangarembga was almost unknown until she published *Nervous Conditions* which appeared in 1988. Her real success and popularity came at the age of 25 with the publication of this book. *Nervous Conditions* was the first novel to be published in England by a black Zimbabwean woman.

Dangarembga had some difficulties in getting *Nervous Conditions* published until she took it to Women's Publishers. Explaining how Dangarembga's text was rejected, Doris Lessing said, 'it was criticized by male critics as being 'negative', and presenting an unfair picture of the lives of black women' (Wilkinson 1992:03).

In 1989 Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Prior to this she had won a second prize in the Swedish Aid Organisation, SIDA's, short story competition. After *Nervous Conditions* was published in Denmark, she travelled there in 1991 to be part of the Images of Africa Festival. Dangarembga continued her education in Berlin at the Deutsche Film und Fernseh Akademie where she studied film directorship. While studying she made many film productions,

including a documentary for German television. She then made a film entitled *Everyone's Child* (1996).

*Nervous Conditions* derives its title from Jean-Paul Sartre's renowned introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which states that 'The colonial condition is a nervous condition'. Dangarembga's characters (Nyasha, Maiguru, MaShingayi and Tambu) experience nervous conditions brought about by gender discrimination, social class and the cultural norms, which relegate these women to inferior positions. Nyasha's identity crisis in the novel corresponds with Dangarembga's assertion that, 'I do not have a fund of our cultural traditions or oral history to draw from' (Wilkinson 1992: 02). Dangarembga acknowledges that during her early childhood she had not been exposed to her traditional culture due to the preponderance of western culture.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN CULTURE

A culture contains structures and practices that uphold a particular social order by legitimizing certain values, expectations, meanings and patterns of behavior (Weedon 1987). In general terms, culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, traditions and behavior patterns of a particular group (Peplau et al 1999:27). Every part of our existence is determined by culture; the lives of women and men are shaped in crucial ways by the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. As such gender relations are contingent on the observance and acknowledgement of the power of culture.

Social roles are prescribed by culture. How a member of each group should behave is influenced largely by the cultural norms. Traditional cultures define distinctive roles for male and female. The father is the acknowledged decision maker for the family. In *Nervous Conditions* the male dominance is an accepted way of life, as it will be demonstrated in the analysis. These traditional attitudes about gender are prevalent within African communities and are strongest in rural areas.

In these areas dominance and aggression is a province of men while female nurturance is the province of women. At times women take over the task of being bread-winners, and are thus not only confined to the primary responsibility of cooking and taking care of children. Peplau observes that in African culture the males have to demonstrate and earn their masculinity through engaging in awesome and strenuous efforts. Masculinity is something that boys must achieve through strenuous efforts, a process of virilization denied to women. These efforts require that they should be separated physically from females. The tasks that these males perform inculcate the endurance of pain and the

confrontation of danger. These gender roles have their roots in societal norms which expect women to be subordinate, as Peplau states:

The qualities that cultures link with masculinity and femininity are not innately male or female. Instead they are, in the language of social science, socially constructed (1999:19).

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 women 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.

Tradition and cultural practices reinforce the power of men in African societies and are often embraced without any interrogation. This point is clearly depicted in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. 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 and, later, her husband. Women are construed as perfect managers of the household who pass on societal values to their children.



Women in Africa often have their fundamental rights denied by governments who justify this deprivation through resorting to African culture. Butengwa corroborates this tendency by arguing that a closer scrutiny of this 'culture' would expose that 'only those aspects of culture which uphold the subordination of women are considered as culture' (1993: 27). According to traditions it is generally assumed that women will always be maintained by males – be it a brother, uncle, father or husband. Butengwa asserts that a woman is regarded as a legal minor, from birth to death (28). This is indicative of the oppressive nature of cultural norms, which perpetuate women's relegation to inferior positions.

In African communities the father is the ultimate decision-maker for the family and women are expected to remain docile. Women's powerlessness is portrayed in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* 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).

In traditional African communities the women has a limited choice, if at all, of a partner. The same applies to betrothal. Butengwa observes that marriage negotiations are conducted by men, without taking into account the women's interests. Some women are forced into marrying men far older than them. In such situations women conform to these demands, since denial on their part is construed as violations of cultural norms (1993: 28).

The role of women in traditional African societies is further demeaned by the possibility of polygamous relationships. This practice has been observed by Butengwa as another form of exploitation (28). Women are forced to relent to their husbands' desire for further relationships, and the emotional scars accrued due to this practice are not taken into consideration. At times African men seek additional wives regardless of their socio-economic status. In some of these situations men fail to cope with the demands of having more than one household. This is depicted in *Nervous Conditions* where Takesure, a distant cousin of Babamukuru, had ostensibly come to help Jeremiah in the fields. Actually, when he came to Jeremiah's homestead he was running away from his two wives, for he had no means of supporting them.

While a man in a traditional African society can marry as many wives as he wishes, a woman may only have one husband at a time. Female infidelity is socially unacceptable and often results in heavy fines of both the wife's father and her lover. If she persists she could be divorced and deprived of her children. However a man's infidelity commands no more than a rebuke from a wife's male relatives, who often politely suggest that they are not averse to providing a further wife if he can justify his need and ability to support her.

Though women relent to their husbands' desire for additional marital relationships the prevalent feeling of resentment and anger breeds hatred against her rival(s). She may seem complacent to her husband and co-wives about the situation; however lack of inner peace is sometimes signified by her retaliatory witchcraft attacks against her rival(s).

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. But educate her, help her to organise her efforts and she will respond to the changed environment. It is education and useful organisations that can give true freedom and enlightenment (Sharma & Sharma 1995: 22).

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).

In some cultures, autonomy and assertiveness are highly valued as personal qualities and equivalent for males and females. However female assertiveness is taboo in African cultures. Women are socialized into being silent and submissive. In most African marriages women's assertiveness leads to conflict between spouses and it is assumed that most physical aggression by men on women is induced by their assertiveness. Women's physical abuse is a common practice. Their tolerance of such abuse emanates from notions that women should submit and let their husbands have absolute control over their lives. Being submissive is indicative of being a good wife. In instances where women are aggressors, they receive strong social disapproval by neighbors and the shame of their own kinspeople. In *Nervous Conditions* Lucia exhibits the qualities of a female aggressor when she 'manhandles' Takesure in the presence of the clan's elders.

On the death of her husband, a woman is inherited by one of the man's brothers. She is obliged to conform to such cultural attributes. Should the woman refuse to be taken by any of the rightful heirs a claim may be lodged against her agnates for the return of the lobola (bride price) especially if she is still of child-bearing age. This cultural practice still prevails and is most common in rural communities. The hidden power dynamic in marriages is maintained by gender ideology and by unequal access to material resources. With all power assigned to men one may understand why men feel threatened by changes in the traditional family structure.

Unequal power relations between men and women upon marriage are observed by Basow when she states:

The wife lost her legal existence and is considered an extension of her husband's will and identity. A wife took on her husband's name and place of residence, gave up her right to accuse her husband of rape (he was legally entitled to her sexual services) and agreed to provide domestic services without financial compensation. (1992: 221)

In African communities both men and women fervently desire children. As Moore points out, they 'signify the productive potential of his household, the successful nature of his marriage, the continuation of lineage' (1986: 69). A man is regarded as wealthy when he has a significant herd of cattle, a large piece of land and many children. For a woman on the other hand, the birth of children is the confirmation of her sexuality, the guarantee of her social status and the provision for her old age. Children, on the other hand, relieve some of the crushing burden of agricultural labour. If they are sons, they also help to guard their mother's property rights. If they are daughters, they ease the burden of domestic labour. An example in *Nervous Conditions* would be the reluctance of Tambu's family to release her to go and study at the mission, as that would increase the workload of all those left behind.

On the dynamics of the interplay within the clan and productivity Moore states:

The relationship between the household and the clan is like the relationship between men and women - one of ambiguous and negotiable dependency. The production of the clan and therefore of society, depends on the productive and the reproductive potential of the individual household. The man who wishes to perpetuate his lineage and to maximize his personal prestige and wealth is also constrained in an analogous way by his dependence on the productive and reproductive potential of women. Ultimately the reproduction of society like that of the family and the clan rests on the labour and the procreative power of the women. This fact challenges the ideology of complete male control, for men only control women so long as they are able to renegotiate the material basis of their domination (1986: 71).

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.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4. FEMINIST THEORIES

In this chapter the issue of women's subjectivity is addressed in accordance with feminist notions of women's marginalization. The feminist theories - radical, black, socialist and poststructuralist - are explained to identify women's relegation as represented in *Nervous Conditions* (1988).

Feminism entails the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality. Women are united with a common notion that male domination is oppressive and there is a need for liberation from all forms of women's oppression. While feminism emphasizes the inequalities between men and women, black feminists emphasize the diversity within the concept of 'woman', which for much feminist analysis is construed as a unitary category. Black feminists claim that the interests of all women should be represented, pointing to profound class differences and antagonism among women. Grown, Cagatay, and Santiago argue:

Feminism constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. There is, and must be, a diversity of feminisms responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves. This diversity builds on a common opposition to gender oppression and hierarchy which, however, is the first step in articulating and acting upon a political agenda (1986: 41).

#### 4.1 RADICAL FEMINIST THEORY

The point of departure of radical feminism has been captured in the slogan, 'The personal is political' (Hartmann 1997: 63). Radical feminists see patriarchy as the

political imperative for structural domination over women. The pervasiveness of male domination is reflected in the labour force and career market. Men maintain their control over women by excluding them from some labour and career markets. They do this by occupying positions of power in the labour force, which enable them to dominate in decision-making processes. Hence controlling the labour force gives them power over woman. Millet portrays this type of control:

Our society ... is patriarchal. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that military, industry, technology, universities, science, political offices, finances - in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of police, is entirely in male hands. (1970: 25)

Although men differ, especially along racial and class lines, the patriarchal system nonetheless unites them in their dominance over women, by reducing the latter to economic dependency. Hartmann corroborates this dependency by noting that the social relations amongst men have a social base, which promotes interdependence and solidarity amongst men and enables them to dominate over women (1997: 101).

Women's biological (physical) 'weakness' is upheld by patriarchy. In comparison to men, women are seen as physically weak. The nature and social role of women is defined in relation to the norm: white heterosexual male. Women are accorded secondary status which is seen by Weedon thus:

Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male. This finds its clearest expression in the generic use of the terms 'man' and 'he' to encompass all of humankind (1987: 02).

Radical feminists argue that patriarchy creates the conditions for women to be systematically dominated, exploited and oppressed (Hartmann 1997). The very difference between men and women which allow men to exploit the situation to dominate women and rule the 'world' is the very difference that concerns radical feminists on a political level. Even though men and women may be viewed as 'equal', the differences between them accords a new meaning to the word 'equal'.

Radical feminism promotes womanhood rather than aspiring to integrate and assimilate into the male-dominated social arena. It is focused upon sexual oppression as a manifestation of women's oppression and social order. Radical feminism is premised on the solidarity of women that transcends class, race and ethnicity. This sisterhood of women is expected to enjoy bonds that are stronger than other existing bonds amongst men and women. Men who have empathetic overtures towards the plight of oppressed women are accommodated.

For the purpose of this study I appropriate the idea of patriarchy as a form of covert, systematic domination over women. The materialistic base on which social relations between men and women are cemented is the patriarchal system. Men have control over women's labour, women's power and economic dependency. This enables them to have dominance over women.

#### 4.2 SOCIALIST FEMINIST THEORY

Gender inequalities are explained by socialist feminists such as Hartmann (1997), by resorting to reproduction theory. This theory highlights the provision of cheap labour to fan the fires of capitalism. Socialist feminists find significance in class relations, in that one class is more advantaged than the other. The exploitative economic relations, where the worker is exploited by the dominant capitalist class, could also serve as an



understanding of gender relations. The women in *Nervous Conditions* occupy positions of exploitation in various forms, as it will be highlighted in the analysis (chapter 5).

Several conflicting accounts of the division of labour, which inform different commonsense assumptions about women's subjectivity and social role, exist. These include versions which are seen as natural, based on biological assumptions from our capabilities as women, mothers and wives, and from theories which see it as a socially produced structure.

The socialist feminist sees the position of women in several forms: The situation of women in the economic system, that is, the status of women and men as members of the same working class; every aspect of women's lives as instrumental in producing the capitalist system; and women as reproducers and their relationship to capitalist earnings.

Some argue that housework produces surplus value and that house-workers work directly for housekeeping and child-rearing duties, which is reimbursed by women being provided with food and shelter. This is portrayed in *Nervous Conditions* by the protagonist's mother, MaShingayi, who is responsible for all household chores; in addition she works in the fields to provide food for her family. This house work, according to Luke, is seen as 'natural labour', unlike wage labour:

It is through (public) wage labour that the subject becomes alienated from 'his' essence, his labour, the product of that labour, and finally from his species being. Alienation is thus posited as a male condition and a cultural (public) condition. Domestic labour, by contrast, which does not generate direct market surplus value, is implicitly rendered as natural labour (1992: 31).

Originally, as observed by Engels, the division of labour between man and woman was for the purposes of child breeding. Within the family the husband has been regarded as the owner; the wife as the means of production; and the children the labour. The reproduction of the human species was an economic function distinct from the means of production (Firestone 1971: 14).

Amos and Parmar (2001) assert that patriarchy is not only about gender oppression, but about power. They elaborate that the family has been the object of much debate in the feminist movement since it has been considered as a place of women's oppression. For the purpose of the study I appropriate the idea that a division of labour exists between women and men, and that women construct their identities upon their notions of domesticity and motherhood. In African societies women perceive themselves in terms of the socially constructed roles of domesticity. In *Nervous Conditions*, MaShingayi, the protagonist's mother, acknowledges the fact that being a 'woman' is a heavy burden yet she is prepared to carry the burden on her shoulders because that is what a woman entails.

#### 4.3 BLACK FEMINISM

The history of colonisation and enslavement has fused together a significant element of common experience between the women of Africa and the diaspora. This commonality is not as evident amongst women of all racial groups and classes. These differences will be highlighted in the succeeding paragraphs. Running through Black feminist analysis is the principle of the 'simultaneity of oppression'. (Hull et al 1982). Gender identity is conceived as inextricably linked to race and class. They argue that the social constructions of Black womanhood and manhood are linked to racial hierarchy and that gender takes on meaning and is embedded institutionally in the context of the racial and class order (Brewer 1993: 27). This argument was in response to the assertion that:

Women share a common lot; the factors like class, race, religion, sexual preferences, etc do not create a diversity of experiences that determine the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women! Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalised but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society (Amos and Parmar in Bhavnani 2001: 34).

Some radical feminists argue that the original and basic class division is between sexes. Black feminists challenges the notion of defining women as a class, and argue that women have different and antagonistic class interests and thus their experiences and perception vary, and thus working class women object to white feminist classism. Black feminists also challenge radical feminist analysis, arguing for recognition of the specificity of their experiences as black women living in a racist society. These ramifications are depicted by Amon and Parmar thus: ‘The white feminists have fallen into a trap of measuring the black female experience against their own, labeling it in some way as lacking, then looking for ways to harness the black women’s experience to their own’ (2001: 23).

Black women have criticised feminism for their apparent racism in universalising the superiority of white women. Much of the literature has rendered black women’s lives, and the specificity of their experiences, invisible. In addition they pointed out that black women’s experiences cannot be simply added into feminist analysis to overcome their invisibility. Rather, they insist that feminist theory must be transformed radically to take account of the institutional racism and thus the inequalities of power and resources which exist between white and black people.

Black women writers (Amos and Parmar 2001) emphasize that, in a racist society, their central concern is racial oppression and the gender specificity of racism. Whether they are middle class or working class, black women experience racism. The analysis of

racism centers around an understanding of the shared history of oppression experienced by black people as a result of colonialism and the ways in which some states continue to reproduce racist oppression. The use of the term 'black' signifies the commonality of black people's oppression. The unity between women of Asian and African descent emanates from the fact they share common historical experiences as victims of colonization and that their present experiences as second-class citizens create firm bonds between them.

One of the fundamental challenges the black feminists have made, relate to their analyses of patriarchal power relationships between black men and black women. The challenge has denied the radical feminists assertion that patriarchal power is a transhistorical phenomenon and that the oppression of women by all men is the most fundamental and intractable form of oppression (Amos and Parmar 1984). They argue that women experience different perspectives on roles within their family and women's relationships with members of their household and that colonization and its policies had the effect of either reinforcing existing gender equality or creating a new form which was more oppressive to women.

Some black feminists reject the notion that the dominance of black males can be equated with male dominance. Carby argues that to understand black women's lives and their family structures we have to examine how colonization shaped and affected the sex/ gender systems of a society, and how these are changed by migration. Similarly, imperialism may have reinforced and distorted oppressive relations within families, as well as destroying some of their more oppressive and communal relations. This may have lead to men gaining more power over women. Thus for black feminists the sexism of black males and their power in relation to black women is not condoned. The black feminists simply insist that these problems cannot be understood or tackled in the same way as the sexism and power of white men (Carby 1982).

It was not until the influence of both radical and Marxist feminist studies that black feminists began to focus on the implications of the relations between the mode of production and patriarchy. These feminists argue that the patriarchal mode of production constructs a gender relations-based class society in which a class of patriarchs owns and controls the means of production, and a dependent class of workers comprised of wives, unmarried daughters and younger sons provides the labour.

The organization of the domestic household is regarded as being closely connected with the nature of paid work undertaken by women in the labour markets. Women occupy a position within the sexual division of labour in which they have always been the primary carers of children and other dependent adults. Men are seen as the primary breadwinners upon whom women and children are assumed to be financially dependant. This sexual division of labour has weakened women's position in paid employment and has often restricted them to low-paid, insecure and part-time work. It is important to recognize, however, that women's experience of the sexual division of labour is mediated by their class position.

For Black feminists, even though the complexities of social relation of production are discussed at length by feminists, no workable synthesis of the concepts of gender and class had emerged. Patriarchy for them cannot be viewed only in terms of its relationship to capital and capitalist relations but neither is it merely an analytical tool which explains the oppression of women by men within a range of economic systems. To black feminists patriarchy is about gender oppression but it is also about power relations which are not gender specific. Amos and Parmar argue that:

A definition of patriarchal relations which looks only at the power of men over women without placing that in a wider political and economic framework has serious consequences for the way in which relationships within the Black community are viewed ( 2001: 22)

Black feminists challenge the way in which the role of black women in the family is usually defined by feminists. For Black feminists there is little or no engagement by feminists with the contradictions which constitute and shape black women's roles as women in the family context, as sisters, aunts or daughters. Black feminists also point to black women's positive experiences of family life where alliances and relationships are forged in resistance to racism. This does not mean that they ignore the sexism of black men or that they fail to recognize the fact that the ideology of mother or wife roles is oppressive to black women as well as white women. Black feminists question the view that black women are more oppressed in the family than white women. Bhavnani and Coulson sum up black women's experiences of the family:

Whatever inequalities exist in such black households, they are also clearly sites of support for their members; in saying this we are recognizing that black women may have significant issues to face within black households (Bhavnani and Coulson 1986: 88).

Although all women are affected by gender discrimination, they are not a homogenous mass and the way they are affected varies greatly depending on their diverse situations including their identity, class and income level and many other particularities. For the purpose of the study, I appropriate the notion that black women experience multiple oppressions i.e. racial, gender and class oppression. Set in the 1960's, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* highlights the different forms of oppression women suffered in the then Rhodesia. The protagonist, Tambu met difficulties (associated with race, class and gender) to achieve her desire for advancement.

#### 4.4 POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINIST THEORY

There are four female characters in *Nervous Conditions* who endeavour to find their identities within disparate social relations within patriarchal hegemony. A poststructuralist theoretical premise would succinctly describe this search for self (identity) by these female characters.

Luke and Gore (1992) are more specific in their description of poststructuralism. They assert that poststructuralism is an epistemology that rejects foundational truth located in disciplinary knowledge and a unitary rationalist subject. In poststructural analysis, discourse is understood as being constitutive, that is, meanings do not exist prior to their articulation, but are always socially and historically located in discourse. In every discourse, subject positions are made available to us. The subject positions we take up ultimately effect and determine our identity. Positions are discursively and interactively constituted as the discourse shifts. In speaking and acting from a certain position, people bring their history as a subject to a particular situation. We adopt the discursive practices and storylines as if they were our own individual experiences.

Delamont (1989) asserts that women as a “muted” group learn to express their ideas in terms of the dominant group thus suppressing their own voices. She uses Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus”, to explain the difficulty women have in being perceived as “lacking”. This leads them to limiting themselves and their identities. Thus she asserts that surrounding social, political and historical forces shape identity while women simultaneously influence their own identity: agency is not ignored in her analysis. Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* portrays how culture, race and gender influence women’s perceptions of their own subjectivities. However, the novel demonstrates how the four central characters (MaShingayi, Tambu, Nyasha and Maiguru) challenge and erode to some extent the unequal relations of power prevalent in the patriarchal society they inhabit.

Weedon (1987) asserts that feminist poststructuralism is a useful theory to address the issue of how social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class and race might be transformed.

For a theoretical perspective to be politically useful to feminists it should be able to recognize the subjective in constituting the meaning of women's lived reality (1987:9).

Hegemony expresses the advantaged position of dominant social groups (men) with respect to discourse. Foucault (1977) asserts that hegemony helps us to understand power as relational and dynamic. It circulates within a web of relationships in which we all participate. Hegemony is also maintained through discourse (ideas, text theories, and language) which are embedded in networks of social and political control that Foucault (1977) called 'regimes of truth'.

We should therefore not ask why certain people dominate, instead we should ask: how do things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those processes which subject our bodies, our thoughts, our behaviors? Foucault warns that

Power is not to be taken as a phenomenon of one dominating over another. Power must be analyzed as something that circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization and not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only inert or consenting targets; they are always also the element of its articulation. In other words individuals are the vehicles of power not its points of application (1977:234).

The normalizations of oppression in every day life are achieved when we internalize the attitudes and roles that support and reinforce systems of domination without question or challenge. Essentially then, both the agents of privilege and the victims of



oppression play a role in maintaining oppression: for example, the belief that men are more capable in positions of management and authority and women are more suitable to housekeeping and child rearing. Women often unquestioningly adopt dominant assumptions about what it is to be female.

The terms 'subject' and 'subjectivity' are also central to poststructuralist theory. While humanist discourses presuppose that what is central to women is, in essence, her heart, which is unique and makes her what she *essentially* is, poststructuralist theory proposes a subjectivity which is 'precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak' (Weedon 1987: 32).

Roman ( 1992: 556) defines humanist subjectivity as the stance taken by researchers in attempts to valorize the subjectivities, experiences and knowledge of research participants (and, conceivably, themselves) while relying on notions of subjective experiences that are not mediated by the historically specific analysis of the underlying structures, material conditions, and conflicting sets of unequal power relations. Because both stances are premised on the subject / object dualism, neither subjectivity nor objectivism can provide adequate causal analyses of the connections between the structures and processes that give rise to both these unequal power relations and to people's experience and knowledge of them.

Even though our subjectivities are, by definition, personal and individual, our desires and expectations are acquired in a social context. Unlike the term 'individual', the term 'subject' encourages us to think of ourselves and our realities as constructions (products of meaningful actives which are both culturally specific and generally

conscious). The term 'subject' calls into question the notion of a totally conscious self. The subject is therefore, always both conscious and unconscious. Weedon refers to 'subjectivity' as 'the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her way of understanding her relation to the world' (1987: 32).

The poststructuralist viewpoint is that subjectivity is produced historically and is the product of society and culture. The feminist poststructuralist takes this further and insists that the individual is always the site of conflicting forms of subjectivity. The meanings and values that women bring with them make them resistant to alternatives. However, as they move out of their familiar circles through education and politics they may become exposed to other ways of interpreting their experiences. For many women this is the meaning of the practice of consciousness-raising developed by the Women's Liberation Movement (Weedon 1987). In *Nervous Conditions* Maiguru interprets her experiences in a different way from that of MaShingayi, largely because of her education. It will be shown that Maiguru has to assert her identity in most challenging situations – to the extent that she ends up being labelled a witch, on the one hand, and having to walk out on her husband and family, on the other hand.

In poststructuralist feminist theory, experience has no inherent essential meaning. It gets meaning through language interpretation which may result in conflicting, distorting versions of social reality, in turn resulting in conflicting interests. This range of discourses and their material support in social institutions and practices are vital to the maintenance and contestation of forms of social power, since in social reality there is no meaning except in language. Values and interests of women have to be understood in the context of female sexuality and women's proper place and lifestyles which cross a whole range of modes of discursive fields (the concept 'discursive field' was produced by the French theorist Michel Foucault, as part of an attempt to understand the relationship between language, social institutions and power) from the

family, religion, education, and employment to the representations of women in the media.

For the purposes of the study I appropriate the following from the poststructuralist feminist perspective:

- That knowledge is always provisional, open ended and relational;
- Our journeys through our female lives are located in our historical and cultural contexts;
- Our conscious and unconscious thoughts dictate our actions.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

*Nervous Conditions* is focused on the colonized African clan (Sigauke clan, part of the Shona people) in the then Rhodesia during the 1960s. The novel explores the exposure of the Sigauke clan to westernization in various ways. At times this westernization would be at loggerheads with traditional customs, practices and beliefs, with disastrous consequences. As we shall see, colonialism is seen as a double-edged sword: on the one side, it is the 'carrier' of a discourse of western modernity which, in its emphasis upon education and democracy, enables a challenge to African patriarchy. On the other side, a colonial education alienates its African subjects from their culture, with disastrous psychological consequences.

The novel 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) 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 women also attempt to break out of the role of domesticity and servility to the surprise of the men.

Although the novel appears to be the story of Tambu and her ambition to educate and develop herself in the face of a myriad of obstacles, 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.

This analysis is about entrapment of the five women and their efforts at ameliorating their condition – the nervous condition; after all ‘the condition of a native is a nervous condition’.

#### TAMBU’S ENTRAPMENT: CLASS AND GENDER

The narrator, Tambu, portrays entrapment as the oppression of women with regard to class, race and gender. In narrating her story, Tambu places herself in the triple jeopardy of the black women writer. She is faced with having to betray men, as is the case with Tambu when she talks about her brother, Nhamo, and his ill-treatment of her. The black women writer also has to contend with the community that would regard her as a traitor because she assimilated some of the western cultural traits. Lastly she may have to be alienated from women that share a similar plight of subjugation, as the latter could be complacent with the status quo (Bosman 1990: 94).

The narrator’s opening remarks in the novel are those of the entrapment of MaShingayi (Tambu’s mother) and Maiguru (Tambu’s aunt). She depicts her cousin, Nyasha, as being rebellious and bent on challenging the status quo within the clan. Tambu views herself and Lucia (Tambu’s aunt) as having escaped. She says: ‘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’ (1988:10).

The extent to which the protagonist, Tambu, is trapped is portrayed by her mother's remarks that: 'and these days it's worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other' (1988:16). Tambu's story traces her hardships from infancy: she had to cultivate the fields, fetch water from Nyamarira river, look after her younger siblings, cook for the family, and sleep on the kitchen floor on cold days with a single, threadbare blanket as cover. Tambu also endured humiliation from her brother, Nhamo, who made her an object of mockery. Her father, on the other hand, viewed her feeble efforts in trying to educate herself as ridiculous. Her mother tried to teach her how to tolerate hardships as a woman.

While Tambu was culturally restricted to roles that denied her opportunity to rise above domesticity, her brother, Nhamo, on the other hand was able to study. He was privileged to attend school with the whites who were part of the ruling colonial class. Furthermore, Nhamo was able to attend school despite the family having to eke out a living. This was consonant with the patriarchal beliefs of empowering male members of the family for perpetual domination.

The relationship between Tambu and Nhamo was reduced to that of the privileged and the non-privileged. Nhamo had all the opportunities because of his gender, while Tambu had to be content with being groomed as a prospective bride. The relationship between these two siblings was mutually destructive. Nhamo tried by all means to bring her down, as when he stole her maize and gave it to friends, and to dominate over her as a male. Tambu, on the other hand, grew to hate her brother, to the point that even when he passed away, she felt no sadness as expected. In fact her opening remarks in the text are about her apathetic attitude to Nhamo's untimely demise:

Driven by a desire to educate herself, Tambu sought to sell mielies as a vendor. Incidental to this exercise as a merchant, she met a generous white lady, Doris,

who donated ten pounds towards Tambu's school fees. The question that arises is: why were the funds that were sent by Babamkuru from abroad for educating Nhamo and Tambu, not used to help out Tambu's education even before the donor came into the picture? Was it not that mindset of the patriarchal society that promotes male empowerment at the expense of the other gender?

This mindset is further corroborated by Tambu's father, Jeremiah, when he asked her whether it was possible to 'cook books and feed them to your husbands? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables' (1988:15). These remarks by Tambu's father served to worsen her contempt for her father, and brother. Tambu and her conservative father never agreed on anything significant and, finally, they simply co-existed in peaceful detachment. With the gender-based tension between Tambu and Nhamo, it is not surprising that at the time of Nhamo's death she showed no feelings; rather she had nursed sentiments of hatred towards her privileged brother. On the other hand her feelings for Babamukuru were somehow different because he took care of his family and provided all their needs. He provided for his wife a beautiful house that had furniture of quality.

In comparison to her home where there was no running water and electricity amongst other things, the cleanliness of her surroundings was of such a nature that it is echoed by her observation that: 'The absence of dirt was proof of the other worldly nature of my new home' (1988:66). This observation about the absence of dirt extended to economic, social and cultural features. The dualism felt by Tambu between Babamukuru's 'clean environment' and home was noticed by her mother, MaShingayi, when she said:

You think your mother is so stupid, she won't see Maiguru has turned you against me with her money and her white ways? You think I am dirt now, your mother. Just the other day, you told me that my toilet is dirt, it disgusts me, That's what you said (1988: 140).

This ideal image cherished by Tambu towards Babamukuru was reinforced by the clan's appreciation when Babamukuru had found a job for Lucia. When Babamukuru said, 'Not much. A little job. At the girl's hostel. You will help to cook food there at the hostel' (1988:158), this statement was received with joy and ululations. Lucia's response was to cite Babamukuru's ancestry. These praises are the highest that can be bestowed on somebody within the African context.

Of course Lucia was on her knees when she praised him. Tambu's mother performed a similar gesture, by kneeling and worshipping beside Lucia. Maiguru completed the picture by also kneeling on the floor despite her status accorded to her education. Tambu's admiration for Babamukuru was so great that she regarded him 'as the closest thing a human being could get to God'. (1988: 199).

Tambu's view of Babamukuru as a God demonstrates the amount of respect that she has for him and the reverent power that he has over her. In fact Babamukuru was respected by all the members of his family. Babamukuru's authority over all women within the clan portrays how patriarchy creates the conditions for women to be dominated, exploited and oppressed.

Tambu's concept of becoming a woman would be to imitate her aunt, Maiguru. As a child, Tambu used to compare the role played by her mother, MaShingayi, and Maiguru, her aunt, in their respective families, and within the clan. Whilst her mother, on the one hand, had to spend the greater part of the day working in the fields to eke out a living, Maiguru on the other hand would be in the classroom teaching. The definite symbol of empowerment has enabled Maiguru to hold down a decent job and a comfortable home. It was inevitable that Tambu would fashion her future around her successful aunt at the expense of her mother whom she referred to as 'no more than



another piece of scenery to be maintained... but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the part of my departure' (1988: 58)

However, the Sacred Heart College and its 'Englishness' proved not to be the sunrise on her horizon to freedom. Nyasha's identity crisis which led to a nervous breakdown proved to be a turning point in Tambu's conceptualization of emancipation. The illusion that if she were to be surrounded by all the modern trappings that money could buy then she would be content, was gradually replaced by the realization that there were other entrapments that were gender and racial in nature. This realization corroborates the black feminist argument that in a racist society, black women are victims of racial and gender oppression whether they are middle class or working class.

The impetus of this resolution was the cautionary words from her mother MaShingayi that Tambu should assiduously avoid being devoured by 'Englishness', as had been the case with Nyasha and Chido. This warning proved to be a wake-up call. She had nightmares on two consecutive nights. The warning instilled a suspicion in Tambu's mind that crystallized into guilt. Despite repressing this guilt, it suffocated her gradually, and was instrumental in prompting her to 'refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story' (1988: 204).

#### MAIGURU AND ENTRAPMENT: GENDER

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' (1988:172).

When in the company of her in-laws, she sat on the floor, as is customary for women, as patriarchy is unchallengeable according to tradition. No matter how discomforting an instruction could be from her husband, she complied without questioning or grumbling. Although she did express misgivings during one Christmas vacation when too much meat was purchased for the clan. As Babamukuru's wife, her own potential and aspirations are completely submerged in the role of wife and mother prescribed by Shona patriarchy. And, as the wife of the mission school headmaster, her submission is reinforced by the Christian ideal of the dutiful and obedient helpmate. Maiguru conceals her deep seated resentment and frustration brought about by her husband's control of her life.

On the eve of Jeremiah and MaSshingayi's wedding, Maiguru was reluctant to loan out her bridal dress. She employed her delaying tactics like forgetting, when she was required to lend a helping hand. As a wife to the head of the clan, the head who decided that Jeremiah and MaShingayi should get married, she was expected to assume a leading role in the preparations. Her delaying tactics were subtle indications of resistance if not rebellion against the traditional role of womanhood. Maiguru's husband, Babamukuru, was head of the clan by virtue of birth and economic power. He was powerful and influential within his clan. He was also regarded as a repository of knowledge. The narrator, Tambu, describes him thus: 'He didn't need to be bold anymore because he had made himself plenty of power. Plenty of money. A lot of education. Plenty of everything' (1988: 50).

Babamukuru enforces his power especially when he is challenged by those around him (Maiguru, Nyasha). However, Babamukuru is much a victim of the colonial system as his poverty-stricken brother in the farmstead. Dangarembga shows how Babamukuru himself suffers in the role of patriarchy. He was obliged to educate, feed and house his extended family and intervene at every opportunity to ensure that things run his way. Maiguru was also a financial provider within the clan, despite resenting her husband's lavish support of his family, partly from her earnings.

Though Maiguru seems a faithful and subservient wife and follows her husband's orders and understood her role as the wife of the head of the clan, she occasionally revolted against this customary order of things. She blatantly stated that: 'I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being a housekeeper for them. I am tired of being nothing in a home that I am working myself sick to support' (1988: 72)

For Maiguru to abandon her beloved family and stay with her brother in Salisbury demonstrated how strongly she felt about the issue of being relegated to marginalization when confronted with issues concerning her immediate family. She takes everything in her stride, but when the extended family was involved she tended to see red. She could put up with Nyasha's behavior but could not tolerate having to serve her in-laws.

It was Babamukuru who decided to take Chido and Nyasha to England - a decision based largely on his desire to control their progress and development. The narrator, Tambu, recollects gathering information about the decision from different people including Maiguru. Nothing is, however, recorded which indicates that Maiguru had expressed her opinion on the matter.

Maiguru's departure and subsequent return serves as a turning point in the order of power relations in the house. Babamukuru's decisions were no longer unchallengeable. When Babamukuru decided for Tambu that the convent would have a bad influence on her character, it was Maiguru who influenced the decision in favor of attending the Sacred Heart College. Moyana regards Maiguru as having been 'integrated into passively upholding the patriarch's oppressive systems ...she explodes as the pressure mounts and reaches boiling point' (1996:31).

#### MASHINGAYI AND ENTRAPMENT: GENDER AND CLASS

MaShingayi 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 15 without formalizing with a wedding, an issue that was to come up 15 years later. MaSingayi is trapped within the double bind of 'poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other' (1988:16), whose 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 19 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. She advises her daughter, 'this business of womanhood is a heavy burden...what will help you my child is to learn to carry your burden with strength' (1988: 16).

MaShingayi is aware that investing in education would safeguard her family from poverty. She has seen how Babamukuru was able to provide for the clan because he was highly educated. She envisioned that her son would become a provider for the

family, were he to be afforded education. She leaves no stone unturned ensuring that Nhamo receives an education. When there were no funds for children's schooling, she planted vegetables and sold them at the bus rank. With the extra cash she paid for Nhamo's education but not for Tambu's. As MaShingayi had the mindset that promoted male domination, she believed also, as argued by Creamer, that the education for the son would fulfill familiar expectations whereas the gains of a daughter would be inevitably lost to her husband's family. Creamer also highlights that MaShingayi translates food cultivation into education because she understands that a son's education is not an escape from poverty but an investment that will return to the family (1994:352).

MaShingayi associates her racial group with oppression due to colonialism in Rhodesia. These words were an echo of what was said by Tambu's paternal grandmother who narrated that 'wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land...wizards were avaricious and grasping, there was less and less land for the people..' (1988: 18). The statements by the mother and the grandmother were aimed at educating Tambu about colonization and its effects on the black people. This was part of customary education which was bequeathed by the custodians of culture (grandmother and mother). However Tambu could not consider Babamukuru (being educated and rich) a victim of colonization as claimed by her mother.

As a custodian of cultural values and practices, MaShingayi finds it difficult to accommodate strange practices as propounded by Maiguru and her family. Nyasha had problems with acclimatizing to Shona practices and customs, culminating in an identity crises and severe ill health, which justifies MaShingayi's criticism of Maiguru as not decent and as a witch. Of Maiguru's children and their westernization she says 'it will kill them if they are not careful' (1988: 202).

MaShingayi's complacency with traditional practices is demonstrated by her fear and dread of Tambu's academic progression. MaShingayi's concept of a woman is being subservient to the husband and looking after the family. When Tambu was about to enroll at the Sacred Heart College, MaShingayi experienced a breakdown. She feared that she was losing Tambu for good. MaShingayi believed that she was alienated from her daughter by Babamukuru (the ultimate decision maker) and his education. She stated: 'I've had enough; I've had enough of that man dividing me from my children and ruling my life' (1988: 184). MaShingayi's perceptions are in contrast with Sharma's observation that '...in the proper use of education lies the salvation of her sex. As long as she is ignorant, so long will she remain dejected, oppressed, and incapable of sharing man's pursuits and ideals' (1995: 22).

The alienation between mother and daughter emanates from her (MaShingayi) belief that when Tambu became more educated, she might get assimilated in the 'Whites' ways', a fear which was also echoed by Nyasha when she said that, 'the process was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precious few ..... they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them' (1988: 179). This is the only instance in the story where Nyasha and MaShingayi shared the same view about a specific issue. It is this fear of assimilation of 'white ways' that was instrumental in causing MaShingayi's breakdown and it is the experience of this assimilation that brought about Nyasha's nervous condition. MaShingayi, as a traditionalist who would never compromise her customary ways, occupies one pole and Nyasha another pole. These opposite poles that are occupied by Nyasha and MaShingayi are mutually destructive. The novel is centered on this tension between the two poles. Nyasha, on the one hand, has escaped poverty and is constantly pushing away the tentacles of male domination. Her assimilation of western values has eroded her anchor in African traditions. The absence of this anchor leaves her without a frame of reference – hence the nervous condition. MaShingayi, on the other hand, holds steadfast to her tradition and is wary of any possibilities that may change the status quo.

## NYASHA'S IDENTITY CRISIS

Colonisation did not only affect the politics and the land of the colonised, but also the mindset. It was not unusual for the colonised to aspire to be like the white colonists, in all respects. Adopting western values may alienate African people from their traditional communities. Those that endeavour to adopt the culture of the colonists may end up being rejected by both cultures. Nyasha in the novel is a portrait of the colonised African mind. Throughout the novel Nyasha is portrayed as a misfit, a condition that becomes very obvious towards the end of the novel. When Nyasha's family returned from England, they were given a majestic reception by their relatives. Nyasha arrived wearing a mini skirt, of which she was obviously conscious, as she kept pulling it down. This is the first indication of Nyasha's inaptness. In other words, she imitates everything European and fails to understand her 'true' needs, the need to be 'decently' attired according to traditional Shona custom. The narrator's disapproval of Nyasha is made evident when she states that: 'I would not give my approval. I turned away' (1988:37).

Tambu's disappointment with Nyasha revealed itself several times during the evenings of the festivities. Before Nyasha's family departure to England they used to converse in Shona and play together without any inhibitions. A few years on Tambu could not relate to Nyasha neither in Shona nor in tribal dance. Tambu invited Nyasha to dance, a gesture which was in keeping with the jovial mode that was prevailing that evening. Nyasha's reaction was to shut off the whole world. 'She clicked her tongue scornfully, it was a very abrupt way the way she did it' (1988: 43). It was as though she despised her traditional culture and kin, as she was non-communicative. In fact Tambu's parents thought Nyasha was a miserable child. She had changed from being a bold, ebullient and Shona speaking, to a girl that was duller and dimmer and wearing a very complicated expression.

Relations within the community are contingent on reciprocity, in that each action is judged according to the customary norms. Fanon observed that (1986: 109) the moment of 'being for others' requires a certain element of conformity and placations. This 'being for others' is noticeably absent in Nyasha's instance, as observed by Tambu.

Nyasha had taken to smoking – a habit that was unbecoming of a young girl growing up in a Christian mission. Such an act was a culmination of many other episodes that were improper for a Shona maiden. Tambu's shock at Nyasha's habit is expressed as: 'You smoke cigarettes; I was aghast. Babamukuru was right! His daughter was beyond redemption.' (1988: 84).

In fact, Nyasha's behavior is explicated by James and Busia when they say:

They can do nothing but imitate Europe even in ideas, generating none themselves but simply applying ideas and practices which were not conceived for their own societies. Within this cultural universe of third world dependency, the woman is the dependant of the dependant, being pulled along in the whirligig of neo-colonialist meaningless behavior like her male counterparts. She imitates everything European and despises her tradition and culture and race while fails to understand her own true needs (1993: 109)

A polite way of demonstrating respect and appreciation is by kneeling. African females in traditional households are expected to kneel whenever entering a gathering including men, whether bringing food or attending to address one or more of them. Anna, a



servant in Babamukuru's mission house, usually knelt when entering Nyasha's room. It is a habit that Nyasha finds irritating even though the sign was an act of obedience. The failure to kneel in such occasions will be tantamount to disrespect in terms of Tambu's cultural norms. This was not the only instance where Nyasha's disapproval of such obeisance came to the fore.

Tambu's observation of the acute cultural alienation experienced by her cousin, Nyasha, taught her that, for the African, education comes with a price. Determined to resist the insidious process of mental colonization, Tambu is nevertheless aware that in order to escape the fate of her mother and aunt, it is a risk she must be prepared to contemplate.

When Nyasha had a nervous breakdown her parents took her to Salisbury to see a psychiatrist who happened to be white. He analyzed her through eurocentric eyes and said that 'Nyasha could not be ill...Africans did not suffer in the way we described. She was making a scene we should take her home and be firm with her' (1988: 20).

Nyasha's crisis was preceded by tantrums during which she remarked:

I don't want to do it. Tambu really I don't but it's coming I feel it coming... they have done it to me, really they have (referring to her parents). It's not their fault they did it to them too. You know they did it to both of them, but especially to him. They put him through it all. But it's not his fault. He's good...he's a good boy a good mint....a bloody Good kaffir...why do they do it ...to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they have done? They have taken us away...they deprived you of you, him of him. Ourselves of each other (1988: 200).

Fanon observes experiences similar to Nyasha's when he notes that:

Completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?...All I have wanted was to be a man with other men ... some identified me with ancestors of mine who had been enslaved ....(1986: 112 – 113).

Fanon feels that he has been imprisoned by the whites. He is forced to become what is not compatible to his ancestry. A similar argument can be inferred from Nyasha's outburst that the whites 'did it to them' and her father has been reduced to being a 'bloody good kaffir' and a good boy. Nyssa's crisis did not find any sympathy from MaShingayi. She relegated Nyasha's plight to being too English. She warned that this Englishness could lead to their downfall if not kill them. We resort to Fanon's analysis when he says that:

A man is human only; human when he tries to impose his existence on another in order to be agonized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other that other will remain the theme of his actions (Fanon 1986: 206-207).

In fact a man's own human worth is dependant on recognition by other persons. It could be said that Nyasha had shortcomings in being a complete person in the eyes of the Shona clan. She thus could not exist as a bona fide Shona maiden. In fact MaShingayi says that "about that one that we did not even speak. It is speaking for itself...it's the 'Englishness'" (1988: 203). Owomoyela argues that people identify more with those who share their language and speech habits than those who share their culture (1988:06). In fact the Africans who utilise the European languages identify more closely with the Europeans than with Africans who do not use this language. Owomoyela characterizes European languages as an index of the domination of Africans by Europeans. Owomoyela alludes to Bank's assertion that: 'linguistically

dominated groups who regularly adopt the language of the dominant group experience a degradation of their subordinate group identity' (1996: 06).

Chido serves as an example of an identity in flux. It is customary amongst his family (Chido's) to congregate at the traditional family homestead during the Christmas period. However, Chido, partly due to age and mainly due to the observation highlighted by Owomoyela that a person would rather associate more with people who share the same linguistic and speech characteristics, prefers to spend holidays with white friends. The reluctance to visit the Sigauke homestead is also demonstrated by Nyasha, as it took a gentle persuasion from a not so convinced mother, Maiguru, and the stern father to make her daughter change her mind about visiting the homestead.

Nyasha suffers from anorexia nervosa and bulimia disorders generally associated with white middle class women. Nyasha's use or misuse of food cannot just be dismissed as culturally inappropriate. Every instance of bulimic purging comes after a verbal argument with her father, who forces her to eat as a way of asserting his control. Nyasha's violent purging in privacy indicates rejection of patriarchal order and discipline. Nyasha's violent rendering of colonial textbooks by tearing them with her teeth, calling them 'bloody lies', is also emblematic of the ideological diet of colonial history that literally sickens her. Her gendered identity is also constantly in torment, seeking the respect from her father and desiring a more respectable position for her mother than she sees possible. Nyasha, at the same time, hates her parents and herself for all their inadequacies.

It could be said that Nyasha had shortcomings in 'becoming a complete person' in the eyes of MaShingayi and other members of the clan. In fact, MaShingayi says that: 'About that one we do not even speak. It is speaking for itself. ...It's the 'Englishness' (1988: 203). Nyasha's mother wrote off her daughter as a misfit by remarking that: 'Nyasha's head is full of loose connections that are always sparking' (74). Maiguru

censors Nyasha's anglicised habits by trying to 'teach her the right manners... but it is taking time' (74).

Nyasha's relationship with her father was ambivalent. The tension between father and daughter often precipitated into violent confrontations, like when Nyasha returned late from a ball. Nyasha found her father too overbearing at times, especially when he exercised his authority as the family head. This confrontation across gender lines contributed to the distortion of the perfect picture held by Tambu of Babamukuru. The teenage rebelliousness exhibited by Nyasha and Babamukuru's intransigence pertaining to his daughter's dietary preferences and her other 'idiosyncrasies' left Tambu having some sympathy for Nyasha's plight and some resentment for the dominant male, who had been regarded as godly.

#### LUCIA'S ENTRAPMENT: CLASS

aShingayi had several miscarriages in her nineteen years of 'marriage' to Jeremiah. Her sister, Lucia, was, according to custom, expected to bear children with Jeremiah, to make up for her inability to give birth to live babies. In fact, Lucia was even prepared to become a second wife to her brother-in-law, had not Babamukuru put paid to these plans. Even when she fell pregnant, she claimed that Jeremiah was the father. However, the authenticity of this claim was suspect as she also had an illicit affair with Takesure, another relative of Babamukuru. Lucia had had several affairs before coming to live with her sister at the Sigauke homestead. Lucia is thus portrayed as a woman without any scruples pertaining to securing a partner. The patriarchal system, which was not averse to polygamy, would strongly object to a woman having more than one partner at a time. Lucia is alleged to have had sexual relations with Jeremiah and Takesure, thus the uncertainty about the paternity of her unborn child.

Her challenge to patriarchy extended further when she stormed into a meeting of the Sigauke clan and 'manhandled' Takesure in front of all the elders. Her temerity was

undaunted as she then proceeded to declare that rather than marry Takesure, she would wed Jeremiah. She defied the choice that the clan was making for her, namely Takesure, and opted to remain single. Lucia took on patriarchy when she:

strode in there, her right eye glittering as it caught the yellow paraffin flame, glittering dangerously at Takesure, who wisely shrank back into his corner of the sofa. ‘Fool!’ snorted Lucia, looming over him, arms akimbo. ‘Fool!’ And she whirled to face Babamukuru, so that now her left eye glittered. ‘Look at him Babamkuru! Look at him trying to hide because I’m here’. Takesure looked braver when he had only Lucia’s back to contend with, but his reprieve was brief. ‘If you have an issue with me,’ Lucia advised him, ‘stand up and let us sort it out plainly.’ In two strides she was beside him and, securing an ear between each finger and thumb, she dragged him to his feet. ‘Let me go, let me go,’ he moaned (1988: 143-144).

Although her attack was directed at Takesure, her challenge was aimed at the whole gathering of elders. Raising Takesure by his ears was a symbolic way of chiding the whole gathering for trying a case without the accused (Lucia). She had earlier on expressed her disapproval that a meeting about her ‘pregnancy’ was being held without her being represented. The sacrosancancy of the dare (meeting of the clan’s elders) was crumbled by Lucia’s audacity. As she was not married, she was not rendered ‘voiceless and rightless’, as was the case with women when with their in-laws. This limitation of married women is acknowledged by Lucia when she remarks: ‘Babamukuru ...maybe when you marry a woman, she is obliged to obey you. But some of us aren’t married, so we don’t know how to do it. That is why I have been able to tell you frankly what is in my heart’ (1988: 171). In this latter instance Lucia was a voice for Tambu, who was being punished for refusing to attend her parents’ wedding.

When she landed on a job in the girl’s hostel at the mission, her independence of Takesure and Jeremiah was reinforced. She could raise her child without the

interference of men. Tambu regards Lucia's progress as an escape from male dependency.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga provides a perceptive study not only of sexual oppression but also of the complexities of colonization, culture and class. In fact she depicts black women's agonies brought about by a myriad of oppressions. In *Nervous Conditions* all the female characters, with the exception of Tete (Babamukuru and Jeremiah's sister) have had their poignant experiences brought out into the open by one of them, Tambu. The latter has managed to break out of the cycle of silence by putting everything on paper. Although Maiguru was able to write about her experiences, her duty to her husband would have prevented her from doing so. Her loyalty to her husband outweighed her frustrations with the clan. Consequently, to write about her husband and his over-bearingness could be tantamount to betrayal. Maiguru's determination to remain a perfect wife made her avoid confrontations, and violations of cultural practices. When she was invited to contribute to the agitation that was brewing up in the kitchen, she recused herself. Even when the 'dare' (meeting of the elders) invited her to participate in the deliberations, she still declined. This humility can be contrasted with Lucia's bravado at the dare. Lucia thought it best to grab the bull by its horns, and face the consequences.

The oppressive nature of traditional African culture on womenfolk indicates that it is utilized as an excuse to explain away violations of women's rights. Surprisingly only those aspects of culture which serve to oppress women are considered as immutably cultural. Traditions should undergo alteration to suit the changed economic, political and social circumstances. In *Nervous Conditions*, one noticeable breakaway from male supremacy is the constitution of the 'dare'. Tete is a woman who sits in the 'dare', by virtue of being a blood relative to the patriarch. Even her duties at the Sigauke

homestead are minimal, compared to other women. At her in-laws, according to her culture, she is ‘voiceless and rightless’, as she is married.

Many women are still trapped in traditional roles of domestic servitude. Even those who work outside their homes are still responsible for the domestic work of the household and thus bear a double burden of work which is an obstacle to social and political participation. Partnership in household responsibilities will result in women’s increasing involvement in society and the greater decision making power in the home. Maiguru, as alluded to above, taught at the mission school and still slotted in domestic work, after hours. Even when visiting the rural homestead, she had no qualms in cooking for the menfolk – buying the food out of her own pocket. Compared with Jeremiah, who was indolent, she served as a ‘provider’ for her in-laws. Her escape from material wants was transformed into servitude for her extended family of in-laws. It was a bondage she could not easily get out of, even when she dared to walk out on the husband.

The unequal power relations in the marriage compel one to consider marriage as an oppressive institution. In African societies male supremacy is venerated unquestioningly since tradition and cultural practices reinforce their power. A woman should conform to her husband’s control and rejection is interpreted as a deviation from the expected role. In *Nervous Conditions* Maiguru returned to her husband after she had walked out on him, due to that she desired to conform to her expected role of a dutiful wife, rather than be a deviant and face rejection from the society. She weighed the prospects of freedom against that of bondage as a voiceless wife, and the latter was victorious. Even though she had seen countless episodes by her daughter, Nyasha, trying to break out of this yoke of being a woman in a traditional society, she opted for the security which was brought by this bondage.



As women we may share certain experiences of sexism and domestic responsibility and we may differ in ethnic origin, class or culture, but what unites most of us is our consciousness that it is other people who set the agenda. Thus, what serves to link powerless social groups are their experiences of 'otherness' and exclusion from the sites of power and meaning making. Lucia in *Nervous Conditions* served to break this exclusion by boldly striding into the 'dare,' and influenced the decisions.

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