

THE AWAKENING WOMAN AS A MODEL OF RESISTANCE IN *NERVOUS CONDITIONS* BY TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

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Abstract

African writers have utilized fiction as a mirror to reflect prevalent cultures in our society that enforce the indignities meted out to women, denying them agency of their body and how women resist such oppression. This study focuses on Tsitsi Dangarembga's illustration of gender relations, gender violence and the awakening of women in Nervous Conditions. In particular, the study considers how literary representation of gender violence reveals a connection to the gendered ordering of our society regardless of the female character's position on the socio-economic ladder. This paper uses feminist theory to enrich the literary analysis of the selected texts, drawing on the tenets of ending undue discrimination and victimization of women in cultures underpinned by patriarchal ideologies. Consequently, the study suggests that the brutal instances of gender violence and the reaction of women to them are merely extreme manifestations of discursive and structural gender oppression that shapes every aspect of the female characters' lives.

Keywords: Nervous Conditions, Gender violence, Feminism, Feminist Consciousness

Introduction

Ngugi asserts that Literature does not exist in a vacuum; it is a conduit through which African writers have represented, mirrored and appraised their realities. It thus becomes justifiable that "Women writers have through their creativity attempted some affirmation of their realities, whether contemporary or historical" (Ekwierhoma 50). Their positions as scholars of literature become a vantage point for waging a relentless struggle regarding the culture and political audibility of African woman (Kolawole qtd. by Anfred 19).

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A growing awareness of gender based violence can be attributed to the consciousness raised by an upsurge in literature triggered by the feminist movement. During the Fourth World Conference on women which was held in Beijing, China, in 1995, violence against women was identified as one of the twelve critical areas that deserve urgent attention. The conference stressed the importance of participating governments to work towards the elimination of all forms of sexual harassment, exploitation, trafficking in women, gender bias in administration of justice, cultural prejudices, harmful traditional and customary practices and rape (Okwuobi 4). In spite of the laws enacted in various countries, gender based violence has remained on the increase; this is because it is supported by the social structures developed and sustained in cultures underpinned by patriarchal ideologies.

Gender violence is located in precisely those structures which give men a socially recognised power over women. This power is manifest in "cultural, political, and institutional factors [which] ... support and/or tolerate violent behaviour" (Dobash and Dobash 7). This also refers to the subtle and often hidden exploitation of the physical weakness and perceived cultural subservience of women by men. It is also recognized as a widespread and escalating phenomenon in the world, taking various forms – including physical, psychological, sexual and/or economic abuse against women – and occurring in both domestic environments and public spaces, with known and unknown assailants.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga's characters go through impassioned struggles to free themselves from the shackles of male brutality. It dramatizes their determination to overcome hurdles faced because of gender and reveals how the physical, psychological and mental abuses of women can have a negative effect on their wellbeing and society. Using feminist perspective as framework, this paper highlights the resistance of women in a society ordered by patriarchal hegemony.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of feminism pre-exists the tag. It originated from a need to respond the undue victimization of women because of their gender. As Blackman suggests, it is feminism that provides, "the impetus and the philosophical base for the naming of these injustices that accrue disproportionately to women within sexist societies and moved the problem from being one of "taboo" to "talked about openly" (10). There are different

shades to the idea of feminism, but at its core is a protest against institutionalized injustice against women.

Feminism theory is divided into three waves. The first wave appeared in the 19th century and early 20th century. It called for women's rights and women's suffrage seeking women's right to vote and to have their distinctive tradition of writing. The second wave emerged in the 1960s. It sought for women's equality and liberation, emphasizing women's experience outside home and sexual difference. The third wave began in the early 1990s. It continued to fulfil what the second phase asked for.

Feminist theory is anchored on feminism consciousness. A feminist critic views literature as a means by which inequities can be identified, protested, and possibly rectified. This study is concerned with gender roles, gender based violence, and the awakening of women to the injustices they face due to structural violence.

According to Julianah Okoh, "feminism consciousness means a woman becoming aware of a distortion or a wrong in her own social status as a woman, questions tradition and tentatively moves in directions in search for autonomy" (8). Consequently, feminism entails a woman awakening to the distortion on her social status as a human being (Amaefula, 165).

Toril Moi goes on to elaborate that "feminist criticism... is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature . . ." (204).

Tsitsi Dangarembga's works centre on themes which aim to delete the silent space of women in patriarchy. During an interview with Beti Ellerson at the 1997 African Literature Association Conference, Tsitsi stated that the African Women writer is an often rejected voice on account of being a woman. Hence, she posits that:

...When I was beginning my career in Zimbabwe, discrimination against me on the grounds that I am a woman was one of the biggest battles I had to fight. Men were reading the manuscripts and pronouncing my work as valid and uninteresting, and what have you, including *Nervous Conditions*, and so I had to fight that battle at that time. (3)

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga chronicles the female protagonist's walk to feminist consciousness. She shows that the liberation of women

comes when they start to awaken to how a patriarchal culture subjugates womanhood.

The Second-Class Position of Women in *Nervous Conditions*

Nervous Condition follows the self-development of the main character, Tambudzai, and the lives of the women around her in the face of a patriarchal society. It further explores inter-gender relationships in an African society, presenting some of the effects of gendered violence on women and the responses to such structural violence, further evaluating the various dynamics that constitute their lived experiences. Tambudzai states at the beginning of the story:

For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion.

From that instant, it becomes apparent that *Nervous Conditions* is not about men, but about the escape, entrapment and eventual rebellion of women in the story from the clutches of a patriarchal society. This move disrupts the societal norm of who is the focus; it shifts the centre from the male to the female.

Tambudzai's journey to self-discovery begins with a quest to have an education like her brother, Nhamo. A request which is dismissed by her father's words thus: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home and with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (17). In anger, she turns to her mother whose resigned response was:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden...aren't we the ones who bear children. When there are sacrifices to be made, we are the ones who make them...And these things are not easy: you have to start learning from an early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on... What will help you my child is to learn to carry your burden with strength. (16)

Her older brother also takes every chance he gets to remind her that the hunger for knowledge wasn't a privilege she owned because she's a girl (21). Though the story is told from a young girl's point of view, it does not stop her from grasping the unfairness that inhabits the society she lives in. Refusing to accept this as her lot, she asks for seeds from her parents to grow maize

which she would then sell and the proceeds of which will go towards her education. And this tactic was a success, but owing more to a turn of events which included her entitled brother stealing her corns in a bid to thwart her efforts.

Nhamo's behaviour towards his sisters points to how males are ingrained and socialized with a sense of superiority over females even at an early age. Nhamo would practise his sexism and male chauvinism on both Tambudzaidzai and Netsai by always asking them to go and fetch some of his luggage from the nearby shops even when he could have carried it all (9). *Nervous Conditions* opens with the following honest, cold statement of admittance by Tambudzai:

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling... Therefore I shall not apologize but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. (1)

From early on, Tambudzai recognises and fall victim to the patriarchal tendencies of her male side of the family, which includes her father and brother. It is not unusual to see a mere boy display such chauvinistic, sexist tendencies due to societal constructs of gender. Nhamo gets socialized into his gender role even before he is born. Here we can agree with Easthope who asserts that:

Every society assigns new arrivals [i.e. newly borns] particular roles, including gender roles, which they have to learn. The little animal born into a human society becomes a socialized individual in a remarkably short time . . . This process of internalizing is both conscious and unconscious. (3)

This socialization makes her brother cruel, leading to an erosion of sympathy and a build-up of resentment where it concerns her brother. Instead of viewing her brother's death as a sad event, it is instead viewed as a means to escape from the life her mother was subjected to, and the opening door to realizing her dreams of being educated like her uncle and his wife (Maiguru). Arriving at Maiguru's place to continue her education brings her closer to her cousin, Nyasha. For Tambudzai, she believed that access to wealth and education will wipe her problems but she receives a wakeup call in Nyasha's home. She quickly discovers that Nyasha suffers because of this same

education. Nyasha is a modern girl whom her parents expect miraculously and automatically to conform to their traditional ways. It appears that the education that her parents have acquired is extremely alienating. Their traditional culture is conservative, sexist, patriarchal — regarding women as second class citizens and therefore as people who should work at home, tending their husbands and children with no opinion of their own to be vocally expressed (Moyana 32).

Her mother's attempt to fit into this expected role succeeds to a certain degree. Though she is educated and works with an M.A. degree, she has no control of her world or her money which is lavishly spent by her husband, a situation she deeply resents. Her resentment shows in her sometimes sarcastic comments (72, 162); her refusal to help with shopping for Jeremiah's wedding as a protest (162); her rebellious outburst against her husband and subsequently leaving the Mission (172); and her articulating her opinion on Tambudzai's admission to Sacred Heart (Moyana 32).

Tambudzai's feistiness which the reader encounters early in the novel seems to be curbed and silenced in Babamukuru's home. This is as a result of her place as the needy relative and her gratitude to the benevolence of her benefactor. This new state made her find Nyasha's rebellion to her father and their society uncomfortable at first. She sees Nyasha as a person ungrateful for the opportunities in her life in spite of their closeness. She describes Nyasha as:

...Persistently seeing and drawing attention to things you would rather not talk about; shredding to bits with her sharp wit the things she thought we could do without, even if everybody else thought they were important. People like me thought she was odd and rather superior in intangible ways. (97)

This continues until Nyasha's fight with her father, where he calls her a 'whore' for staying a few minutes more to learn dance steps from her friend. This incident awakens Tambudzai to the gender issues involving herself, Nyasha and all the women in her life. It jolts her back to the journey that brought her to this point, the despair she lived in until her brother's death gave her a chance. It was no more a question of "poverty, lack of education or tradition" (115). It all simmers down to gender identity, a problem of femaleness versus maleness and that they are all victims as long as they are female (115-116).

The Awakening Woman in *Nervous Conditions*

The awakening woman is a woman who has become aware of “a distortion in her social status as a being” (Amaefula, 265). As posited by Okoh Julie earlier in this paper, this knowledge is what is referred to as Feminist Consciousness. The process to awakening happens through observation, questioning and/or knowledge. Women who have sleep-walked through their lives in a patriarchal society wake up when they realize that gender is an unfair premise for structural violence and begin to resist in different ways while some remain docile like Tambudzai’s mother. Dangarembga’s portrays her characters in different stages and forms of resistance. They resist through self-dependence, alienation of the body and exploiting the institutions that uphold oppression.

We find in Tambudzai the epitome of the awakening woman. Her awakening comes through interrogating the social order of things and ideas where every other female seem to have accepted the order as their unquestionable fate. This lights the fire in her heart to fight against patriarchy and sexism represented by her father and brother. She didn’t leave her future in the hands of others instead she makes an effort to send herself back to school at a time when the parents say they can only afford Nhamo’s fees. Even after her brother’s death, we find her in Babamukuru’s home, working hard to pass her exams and get a scholarship because she understood that through this she could keep her head above waters.

There is also Nyasha who yearns to speak her mind and live life on her terms but has to first face her father. Nyasha is an intellectual whose sharp mind is able to observe the patterns present in their society and also gain more knowledge from books. She resists in an effort to assert her rights as an equal being. Her father’s constant need to direct her life leads to an alienation of body which manifests as anorexia and causes a mental breakdown. She pointedly challenges her father’s authority and challenges her mother to live a more fulfilling life. Her mental breakdown is connected to her father’s desire to uphold his patriarchal, sexist values. The latter is what really makes him feel that he cannot and should not listen to women or girls like Nyasha or children in general. As the man of the house, he couldn’t accept his authority and rule over his family being threatened by his daughter.

Conclusion

As argued in the Introduction, Literature has the ability to make narratives human instead of abstract, thus making it easier for us to relate with the "Other" in literature and also find bits of our self. At its essence, literature and its representations of gender can influence wider cultural perceptions. Dangarembga achieves this through *Nervous Conditions*, by telling us a deceptively simple and striking story, which interrogates the gender roles and norms in society which lead to gender and structural violence. It is clear that the socialization of men from a young age is what makes them perceive women as the subservient sex and enforce limitations to their roles and desires in society.

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