

A Stiwanist Perspective of Patriarchal Limitations in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality exists in a situation where women are exposed to few opportunities, suppression of personal growth, limited personal choices and men's domination. Gender inequality has been a social problem in African societies partly due to the continent's encounter with colonialism. From a young age, Adichie (2014) explains that socialisation exaggerates the differences which biologically exist between boys and girls. For example, housework such as cooking and cleaning is mostly done by girls and women. Girls are socialised to be housekeepers and bear children, which places little or no value on the success of female education. The current study adopts a Thematic Textual analysis technique of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) which explores education as a tool which patriarchy employs, as well as the contribution of culture in shaping gender (in)equality in African societies. This novel was selected through Purposive sampling due to its portrayal of the limitations which arise from patriarchy and is buttressed by Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism.

Keywords

patriarchy, stiwanism, limitations, gender equality, socialisation

Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) can be referred to as a feminist novel because themes such as gender inequality; patriarchal stance and suppression of women are dominant throughout the narration. Patriarchal hegemony plays a significant role in the muting the voices of women and superior display of power by the male characters.

This study was prompted by the interest around how the rural Rhodesia, (now Zimbabwe) and urban Rhodesia moulded the contrasting characters of Tambu and Nyasha including the men in their lives. It is evident through the text that these two young women, of almost if not the same age, did not react in the same way to situations (similar and different) and this may be a result of their socialisation and influence from the environments which they raised in. Ngubane (2010) posits that in African culture and African traditional life, gender is defined according to roles and functions in the society. It is what it means to be male or female in a certain society that shapes the opportunities one is offered in life.

Theoretical Grounding

Stiwanism is derived from STIWA (Social Transformation including Women in Africa). After Ogundipe-Leslie's realisation that many African writers, especially women, were reluctant to be called feminists or even associate themselves with the term/movement, she came up with an alternative term which was intended to sound less intimidating to the African society. According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:229), some men cannot be allies of feminism because they find the focus on women somehow threatening...The discomfiture comes from being described by a word which encodes women (femina) so directly. Moreover, the introduction of Stiwanism at the time, was an

attempt to take African feminist discourses away from arguments about being or not being Westernised and imitative.

Social transformation ought to be inclusive of the entire people and needs to have marginalised groups as active participants at all times. Pertinent to African feminisms should be issues around women's bodies, their personhood, immediate family, society, nation, continent and locations within the international economic order because international economic dynamics have a huge impact on African politics which then affect women (Ogundipe 1994:228).

Thematic Textual Analysis of *Nervous Conditions*

The following themes form the basis of this article: education, tradition versus modernity and the father (male) rule.

Education

Tambu

Tambu is the narrator of the novel, Nhamo's sister and Nyasha's cousin. She narrates the events which led to her brother's death as well as their family set-up. One of the factors which contributed to the estrangement between Tambu and Nhamo is the fact that Nhamo was taken away to go get formal education while Tambu's interests in education were shrugged off. Education is one of the requirements for females to be active participants and beneficiaries of the social transformation which Stiwanism advocates for.

I understood that there was not enough money for my fees. Yes, I did understand why I could not go back to school, but I loved going to school and I was good at it...My father thought I should not mind. 'Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, its nothing,' he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever was easiest. 'Can you cook books and

feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean (15).

Unfortunately, poverty is one of the reasons why girls are kept to assist with chores which will prepare them to be wives and mothers, at home while boys are sent to school (Kuwonu 2015). These roles further assert roles of women as domesticated beings which feminists argue that such roles contribute to the few numbers of economically free women.

The introduction of formal education by the colonial missionary in Africa has led to further sexist subjugation because girls are taught from a young age to aspire to marriage (Adichie 2014) whereby they would be taken by a man who is seen as the provider. According to Lorentzen (2020:14), traditional gender norms 'expect girls to get married and the boy to get educated and work'.

But one day, when Tambudzai has done well in her studies, she will earn more than ten pounds a month. 'Have you ever heard of a woman who remains in her father's house?' growled my father. 'She will meet a young man and I will have lost everything' (30).

The traditional setup of marriage is that once a woman gets married, they integrate into the husband's family by taking his surname, living with him or his family and often changing her beliefs to those of her husband (Maenetja, Mogoboya & Nkealah 2021). The family of an unmarried girl sees no need to spend their resources in educating her since she will be married and be part of a new family. Therefore, male children are given preference in attaining education and this is part of the reason for Tambu's opening sentence in the novel, "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling" (1).

Research has shown that due to the constraints that prohibit girls from attaining formal education, they (girls) have more desire to learn than boys do and most girls perform better in school. When Tambu came to the realisation that her family could not afford to send her to school anymore, she devised a plan of growing mealies which she would sell in town and spend the money on her fees. The dual role of women as responsible for their households as well as working or learning, is always presented as an obstacle in order to discourage women from achieving both and are expected to choose one. Compared to her brother Nhamo, Tambu ceaselessly fights for her education while also fulfilling her duties of helping her mother with the daily household tasks (Corneliussen 2012). Babamukuru's wife, Maiguru, is also proof that it is possible to function both in the household and work, by being a good wife and mother while also working as a teacher.

When Tambu decides to sell mealies in order to generate finances for her school fees, she is discouraged by her father, brother and mother. Corneliussen (2012) explains that the attitude that Tambu's mother had, reflects an established perception of women's role in society maintained by generations before her. Corneliussen (2012:18) further explains that because Ma'Shingayi accepts the reality of her life and therefore does not support her daughter in her desire for education, this is an indication that

the ideology of women not going to school has been planted in Ma'Shingayi since her young age.

The men in Tambu's life kept on reminding her that due to her biological anatomy and social expectation, she should just forget about getting further education than the little she already had.

'My father thought I should not mind. Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, its nothing, he reassured me, with his usual ability to turn whichever way was easiest. Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean' (Dangarembga 2004:15).

Kuwonu (2015) explains that despite the huge numbers of girl enrolment for primary education, chances of them dropping out continue to be greater than boys. Tambu's father did not see any reason for his daughter to go back to school, because traditionally, a woman's place is said to be the kitchen, she was therefore expected to spend time with her mother in order to be able to please her future husband. Tambu understood that there was no money to go to school, but because she loved going, she made means, but she also narrates that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in her family were not considered a priority or even legitimate" (120). This could also stem from her brother and father's reactions when she attempted to fund herself, what she wanted was not taken into consideration but their culture which oppresses women was.

The Christian ideology influenced all the children who received missionary education, but had a particularly negative impact on the girls who were educated in the Victorian Christian ideal which ensured that women were taught in relation to domestic chores with the anticipation to serve their husbands as faithful helpers (Corneliussen 2012). From the observations that Tambu made when her relatives were around and from what Nhamo used to tell her about the mission, Tambu knew that the world of education would develop a new person in her, one that she would be proud of:

'At Babamukuru's I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead' (58).

From what Tambu saw in her uncle and brother, she could tell that an educated life was much better and more satisfying than one on the homestead, because education has the potential of eradicating poverty. Moreover, Tambu knew the impact of education especially for a woman, comparing her uneducated mother with Maiguru. Tambu is proof that in a patriarchal society, when girls are afforded the opportunity to pursue their studies, they do so with high motivation and do the best that they can.

Nyasha

Nyasha is Babamukuru's only daughter and Chido's sister. Unlike Tambu, she does not have to fight for an education but rather, she is set restrictions with the education that she receives. The type of education that Nyasha received which was influenced by colonialism, and social gender expectations differed strongly with her own view of the role of women in the African society, hence she blamed the government for the internal confusion that she had to go

through. Tambu was grateful for any form of education that she could get, that is why she was happy being at the mission, as compared to Nyasha who was not pleased with the missionary education because she knew that they could be offered better.

Both Maiguru and Babamukuru are educated and therefore know the importance of education, but also, Babamukuru expects his daughter to not use all that she is taught, especially in matters that they both do not agree on. Limitations are set on what she learns. Nyasha's parents understood the importance of education which made Nyasha's reasoning more advanced than other children of her age who were uneducated. This, though, irritated her father sometimes. Nyasha's intellect irritated her father because it enabled her to plead and reason with her father whenever they held different views. Women have always been seen as objects, first belonging to their fathers, then to their husbands that is why it did not matter much what they thought: 'This made Nyasha indignant, because she did not like being referred to in the third person in her presence; she said it made her feel like an object' (101).

Tradition versus Modernity

Children who grow up in between different cultures, especially African and Western, find themselves caught up in a space which Homi Bhabha refers to as "the third space" (Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin 1995). This state is defined as a psychological location emerging from both the existing and the imposing culture and therefore creates a hybrid space where two cultures interrelate. Nyasha found herself in this "third space" which led to her mental breakdown due to the difficulties that she had in finding ways to please those around her and please herself at the same time.

For most Africans, the post-colonial mixture of languages, religions and traditions created a clash of cultures which caused great difficulties in adaptation and incorporation, which often resulted in serious psychological conflicts within an individual (Mogoboya 2011).

Silence

Traditional setups of marriage and parenthood thrive on silence whereby a wife does not question or initiate concerning matters with her husband and children do as they are told by their parents without engaging or questioning their rules. Struggles over power and control are often battles over whose words get used, whose do not and over who gets to speak as well as who does not.

The censorship of women's expression with the intention to silence, manifests itself in various ways. According to Shangase (2000) African culture socialises women and girls not to be outspoken, as a result, they are expected not to backchat their seniors and husbands. This silence could be both literal and figurative whereby the oppressed do not communicate their true thoughts but say what they think is expected of them:

Beside Nyasha I was a paragon of feminine decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to, and then only to answer with the utmost respect whatever question had been asked. Above all, I did not question things. It did not matter to me why things should be done this way rather than that way (157).

Tambu sees herself as the epitome of a proper young woman because silence is a trait which she is very familiar with and voluntarily embodies, unlike her cousin Nyasha. Patriarchy also sets females against each other by having them compete for male approval by finding satisfaction in being socially better than the other woman. This form of silence Jack (1999) states that, is commonly used by women who grew up in socio-cultural, religious communities and families where silence is stereotyped as good femininity (Bosacki 2005:89).

I knew I had to come to a decision, take some sort of action, but I was not like Nyasha; I couldn't simply go up to Babamukuru and tell him what I thought (165).

Nyasha's early upbringing in England allowed for freedom of expression at all times and therefore she felt that she could ask her father anything which included standing up for herself to her father when she felt that she was accused of wrong. When Chido says, 'the little fool, [he whispered]. Why does she always have stand up to him?' (115), he expresses the fact that Nyasha always has something to say to her father whereas even her mother Maiguru, does not do that.

Regardless of a certain behaviour expected of her, Nyasha always communicated her true feelings and thoughts without fear. De Beavoir (1972), in her thesis, discussed how women from early stages in life are brought up to believe that denying their true self is the only way to achieve happiness and gain acceptance

According to Uwakweh (1995), "silence comprises of all imposed restrictions on women's social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned". D'Almeida (1994) posits that "silence presents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy". The women around Babamukuru were fearful of expressing their opinions to him due to the superior position that he held as an educated man and elder of the family. This fear was most visible through Tambu and Babamukuru's wife, Maiguru, who did not express their opinions freely or at all unlike Nyasha and Lucia.

Images of black women

Images of black females are under constant scrutiny in most parts of the world, these images include how females should dress and how big or small their bodies should be. Feminist discourse advocates for female autonomy and choice in how they look which this scrutiny rips women off. In Western countries, the perfect body for a woman is one that is slim/slender, while in Africa, women are defined by full curvy bodies. The African beauty myth which maintains that a woman must be curvy is not ideal for Nyasha who has taken an interest in western slenderness as the appropriate look. She thinks that Tambu's body is nice except for her 'rather large' bottom (92). Tambu does not understand Nyasha's attitude towards food and body size because she has seen people who had shortage of food, and studies also show that most African countries suffer from malnutrition so finds it strange that Nyasha does not eat much. As a result of trying to maintain a body shape which Nyasha perceived to be beautiful, she ended up suffering from an eating disorder where she did not eat or if she did, she would throw

up. Mahowald (1995) notes that many feminists are of the idea that eating disorders among women stem from a rebellion against patriarchy through rejection of one's own sexuality.

The policing of the female body extends to dress code whereby; a woman is given respect depending on how much her body is covered or not. Less covering clothes are associated with lack of morals and sexual temptation or seduction. Upon their arrival back home from Europe, Nyasha is said to have been wearing a short dress which, despite hardly covering her thighs, she kept pulling down. This could be because she realised that in the environment that she was in and the stares that she was given, it was rather inappropriate, and Tambu coming from a traditional background expressed her discomfort by saying:

Unfortunately, she had worn it. I could not condone her lack of decorum. I would not give my approval. I turned away (37).

African societies are accustomed to women wearing dresses and skirts that preferably cover below the knees. Tambu's reaction to how Nyasha was dressed shows that these two girls have been raised in different cultural societies hence Tambu reacted the way that she did. According to Corneliussen (2012), Nyasha's stay in England had alienated her from the Shona culture which she considered to be old-fashioned and authoritarian.

He wanted to know where his daughter thought she was going dressed up in such an ungodly manner and told her that, whatever she thought, she was in fact going nowhere. Then Maiguru appeared and innocently asked Babamukuru whether he was proud of his fine-looking daughter. Maiguru beamed and contrived to remain beaming while her husband half-heartedly accused her of compromising his daughter's decency (111).

Nyasha's dress-code was always criticised by her authoritarian father. In cases where her mother did not have a problem, just because her husband did then she also had to disapprove. Accusing females of sexually seducing males by how they dress, implies that men lack self-control and further perpetuates the objectification of female bodies.

Domestic violence as discipline

Domestic violence can be defined as fights which usually take place in the private household setting. This form of abuse is mostly practised by males as a way of reprimanding their wives and children. In incidents when Babamukuru could not agree with Nyasha, he resorted to beating her sometimes to a pulp almost killing her.

They went down on to the floor, Babamukuru alternatively punching Nyasha's head and banging it against the floor, screaming or trying to scream but only squeaking, because his throat had seized up with fury...(117)

Tambu had worshipped her uncle Babamukuru until she started to question his position as a male authority the day that he beat Nyasha because she was said to be disrespectful and a whore by staying out at night until late.

The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them...But what I didn't like

was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (Dangaremba 2004:118).

Before Tambu lived at the mission she always thought that the way that her father behaved was due to poverty and lack of education, but that night, she saw that men in Rhodesia and other parts of the world were all the same in the way that they treated women. Romito (2008:19) explains that in various countries and cultures, many men expect to dominate and control women, accepting no opposition or refusal, and are prepared to use violence.

The father (male) rule

A patriarch is a male of father and arch is a rule hence the domination of males is referred to as patriarchy. As a system, patriarchy arranges society in a way which encourages male domination at the expense of females, this is done through gender and sexual roles. As much as *Nervous Conditions* is a novel about the struggles of women, it is also about the contributions that the men of these women have made towards these women's struggles and daily lives, '...but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men...' (208).

Nhamo

The first male that the reader is introduced to in the novel is Nhamo, who was the brother that Tambu did not regret had died because he represented sexism and patriarchy. Nhamo appears briefly in the novel but his character depicts how society teaches males to disregard females from a young age. Babamukuru offered to take Nhamo to go study far from home in an environment which he considered to be conducive for learning. The change in behaviour that Nhamo expressed, made Tambu detest the idea of him getting education because he suddenly viewed himself as better than the family that brought him up. Moreover, Nhamo kept on reminding Tambu that as a girl, education was not a priority for her.

Nhamo usually carried some of his luggage home especially when Babamukuru could not drive him home, so he would have to catch public transport. His sisters would wait for him at the bus stop in order to welcome him back home and assist with his luggage. When he was due home during school holidays, Tambu sometimes did not look forward to his arrival because of the way that he treated his younger sisters because that is when he asserted his maleness:

Netsai's beating because of the luggage which was probably because it was too heavy for her to carry, should have made me realise Nhamo was not interested in being fair. Maybe to other people, but certainly not to his sisters, his younger sisters for that, matter (12).

It is Nhamo who further practises his sexism and male chauvinism on both Tambudzai 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 (Moyana 1994:28).

When his parents seemed to agree with him when he discouraged Tambu from trying to work to finance her

education, could also tell us that the parents made it seem as though was natural for Nhamo to discourage his sister by reminding her of her position. Nhamo also angers Tambu when he mocked her attempts at trying to send herself to school and asserts the fact that he went to school because he was a boy and Tambu cannot not go because she was a girl. Babamukuru

Babamukuru represents a typical patriarch as a husband and father. In Tambu's eyes, her father Jeremiah and her uncle Babamukuru were two different men mainly because Babamukuru was educated and valued education, for both males and females, while her father only saw it important for a male to get education. To Tambu, most of the things that her father said sounded senseless because they were negative and discriminatory 'His intention was to soothe me with comforting, sensible words, but I could not see the sense' (16).

Traditional ideals of the role of a man in the house inscribe him as the leader and embodiment of decision-making over his wife and children:

She has dared to challenge me. Me! Her father. I am telling you,' and he began to struggle again,' today she will not live. We cannot have two men in this house. Not even Chido, you hear that Nyasha? Not even your brother there dares to challenge my authority (117).

One day when Nyasha stays out until late and is questioned by her father, she receives harsh punishment for trying to plead her case. Babamukuru sees this as Nyasha making her own rules in a house which is ruled by him. This shows that Babamukuru would go to extreme measures just to assert his position as a father. It seemed though that the punishment was harsher because a girl was found at fault, Tambu explains that it seemed all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (118).

The fact that Babamukuru received his education abroad, had financial stability and was a principal, extensively cemented his command for respect:

And just as naturally I could not be angry with him since surely it was sinful to be angry with Babamukuru. Babamukuru who was my benefactor, my father for all practical purposes and who was also good, deserving all love, respect and obedience (151).

Stoically he accepted his divinity. Filled with awe, we accepted it too. We used to marvel at how benevolent that divinity was. Babamukuru was good. We all agreed on this. More significantly still, Babamukuru was right (88).

Babamukuru was respected for having attained education in other countries, but Tambu respected and adored him more for having granted her the chance to get educated, and the fact that he valued education than her father was the cherry on top of the cake. Tambu had respect for Babamukuru until he physically abused Nyasha, which is when Tambu was disappointed by the realisation that men are the same all over. Babamukuru had the chance to be a different kind of male model for Tambu but failed, which made Tambu

believe more strongly that it is neither education nor poverty which determines the way that men behave towards women. Nyasha and Babamukuru always fought about Nyasha's behaviour and the way she talked to him and other people around them. Babamukuru is the closest male that Nyasha has been exposed to and that could be the reason why Nyasha was always determined to prove her father wrong and act against his will. Babamukuru could be the main reason for Nyasha's actions because she experienced gender discrimination first hand in their home.

These men and others from the novel have been shown to be part of the reasons for the behaviour and the way in which the women in their lives turned out, especially for Tambu and Nyasha.

Conclusion

Although Tambu and Nyasha are of the same age and sex, they did not go through the same experiences and when they did, they did not respond to them in the same way. Tambu's observations of the women around her made her develop a consciousness which made her start questioning the value of the western education that she had always wanted. Since the introduction of feminist movements, Africa has seen slow progress with regard to the total emancipation of women (Masha & Mogoboya 2021). Even though education is predominantly attainable for both males and females, new modes of oppression exist for the educated woman. Furthermore, African cultures and customs are also transforming with the constant growth in globalisation and cross-culturalism.

Addressing issues which Stiwanism advocates for around women's bodies, their personhood, immediate family, society, nation, continent can better assist Africa from moving away from its patriarchal stance by ensuring the well-being of all its people.

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