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Depiction of Women’s Oppression and Gender-based Domestic Violence against Girls in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*

By Benon Tugume

Abstract

This article examines women’s oppression and gender-based domestic violence against girls in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988). The novel is set between two families in the Shona community of Zimbabwe. The focus is on women’s entrapment in the institution of marriage and gender-based violence inflicted on girls by male patriarchs to force them to bow down to patriarchal authority. Tambudzai, the main narrator and protagonist tells a story of how her mother, Ma Shingayi (a peasant housewife), and her uncle’s wife, Maiguru, (a teacher with a Master’s degree) get entrapped in the marriage institution where they have no voice, how she is discriminated against as a child and denied education by both her father, Mukoma, and her uncle Babamukuru until her only brother Nhamo dies and she gets the chance to go to school; and how she and her cousin Nyasha suffer gender-based violence in Babamukuru’s home. When Tambudzai and Nyasha choose the path of rebellion against the injustice and discrimination they are subjected to because of their gender, Babamukuru uses physical and psychological violence to establish and maintain his power over them. Consequently, Nyasha’s mental health breaks down. She suffers from schizophrenia and develops eating disorders. Her bulimia is symbolic of what awaits any woman who tries to liberate herself from male hegemony in a patriarchal home. Tambudzai is relieved of Babamukuru’s patriarchal control when she goes to the boarding school to further her education, which eventually enables her to establish her life as a single woman free from male control. Through her mouthpiece characters, Tambudzai, and Lucia (Ma Shingayi’s sister), Dangarembga underscores single womanhood as a form of women’s emancipation. In this article, I argue that Dangarembga’s notion of single womanhood aims at eliminating the concept of gender through isolation rather than the integration of women into the already male-dominated society.

*Keywords*: Patriarchal authority, Rebellion, Gender-based violence, Single womanhood

Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga is an African female writer who, through her writings, has made a remarkable contribution to the struggle for the liberation of women from patriarchal control. As M. J. Androne (2002) observes, her literature is “literature of revolt” and “renegade autobiography of resistance” (p. 323). Dangarembga was born in 1959 in present-day Zimbabwe. She grew up in England, where her parents had their education. Her early schooling was conducted there and as she moved to the British system, she gained more fluency in English at the expense of her native Shona language. She loosely recreates her early life through Tambudzai and Nyasha, her protagonists in *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Her creative talent is shown in her ability to take the autobiographical details of her own life,  

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breathe life into them, and bring into existence a multifaceted and very realistic novel enriched with psychologically rich and varied characters. Through her Shona traditional female characters in *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga strongly opposes the infiltration of foreign culture, which has openly been embraced by African men because it oppresses women and enhances their subjugation and servitude to them.

*Nervous Conditions* is a psychological novel that depicts the oppression of the female characters. Dangarembga derives the title of her novel *Nervous Conditions* from Jean-Paul Satre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), a classic text about the nervous conditions of the natives in colonial Africa; and as Carl Plasa (1998) asserts, the novel is a “narrativation of several of the ‘key concepts’ elaborated” (p. 35) in Fanon’s polemical work. In addition, her novel addresses the question of gender inequality, which “Fanon’s work fails adequately [to] theorize” (Plasa, 1998, p. 36). The main theme of the novel, as expressed by one of the female characters, Ma’Shingayi, that “womanhood is a heavy burden” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16), signifies the nervous conditions of women caused by patriarchal domination of the female gender. As Carolyn Martin Shaw (2007) states, “Dangarembga argues for women as independent, adult, sexual beings, but at the same time, she recognizes the awful responsibility, vulnerability, and loneliness that being in charge of one’s own life can bring” (p. 8). Although Dangarembga’s main character and narrator, Tambudzai (hereafter Tambu), struggles to liberate herself from patriarchy by acting and speaking out against discrimination and oppression of the female gender, her voice “is not a surefire solution to the problem of sexism” (Shaw, 2007, p. 16).

The story in the novel begins with Tambu expressing her callousness about the death of her brother, Nhamo. Tambu is greatly and remorselessly relieved in Nhamo’s death because he is one of the psychological burdens she has had to carry in her life. She, however, states that her 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 – Nyasha, far minded and isolated, my uncle’s daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 1)

This article, therefore, examines the above statement of Tambu. The focus is on women’s entrapment in the marriage institutions; Nyasha’s rebellion against her father’s patriarchal control; Tambu’s escape from her poverty-stricken family and discrimination as a girl child and her eventual freedom from patriarchal control; and finally, Lucia’s escape from male hegemony and entrapment in the institution called marriage. The analysis is on first, how a woman’s life is restricted to the boundaries of the kitchen and servitude in a marriage institution; second, how Tambu and Nyasha, as African girls in patriarchal homes, refuse to oblige to the autocratic syndicate of Shona patriarchy, albeit with disastrous consequences for the latter; and third, how Lucia enjoys her womanhood by staying single. Through single womanhood, Dangarembga aims at eliminating the concept of gender by portraying women’s liberation through isolation rather than integration into the already male-dominated society.

**Rebellious Daughters, Fate, and Mental Breakdown**

Tambu and Nyasha are cousins and daughters of Mukoma and Babamukuru, respectively. Babamukuru’s elder brother, Mukoma, is a poor peasant farmer, while Babamukuru is highly educated with a Master’s degree and is the headmaster of a mission school. The novel is set between these two families, and it portrays the plight of Tambu and Nyasha growing up in homes with different economic statuses, but both facing restrictions as
girls in their patriarchal family settings. At the family level, there is a division of labour, and women’s identity is constructed on their notion of motherhood and domesticity. The family is brought out as one of the contexts of women’s oppression. Thus, Tambu’s predicament, like many African women, dates as far back as her infancy, growing up with the burden of household chores. She must fetch water from the river Nyamarira, till the fields, look after her siblings, work and sleep in the kitchen, and endure some of the most daunting and humiliating remarks from her brother Nhamo, who enjoys the advantage of patriarchy. As a woman, Tambu must live with this disadvantage. Nhamo, by virtue of being a boy, has the advantage of being pampered with all the resources as an heir to the family. It’s only when Nhamo dies that Tambu may scrape off and usurp that position to become the future provider and family heir since he is the only male offspring of her father. But as of now, she must fall victim to the prejudices and limitations that shackle all women by virtue of their sexuality. It crushes their dreams, cripples their attitudes, and breeds an infectious disease that confines the female gender, dampening their spirits and causing constant tension and nervousness. As she says,

I think my mother admired my tenacity, and also felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it. To prepare me she began to discourage me. ‘And do you think you are so different, so much better than the rest of us? Accept your lot and enjoy what you can of it. There is nothing else to be done. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 20)

Her mother’s argument is that a woman is fated to be subordinate to a man. Consequently, reality dawns on Tambu that she was ordained to be restricted to play the domestic role, a prison from which she is never to rise, and a position with no opportunities at all. When she warns the reader at the beginning of the novel that her story is not a story of death, the idea of death is not the physical death, but of the spirit from which she must resurrect, rebel against, or simply get entrapped like her mother and Maiguru. Education is meant to enlighten and empower, but as things stand, it is only meant for male children and not the likes of Tambu.

So, when her father found her casually reading a newspaper as she waited for the food on fire to cook, he thought she was emulating her brother. According to her father, the things she was reading would fill her mind with impractical ideas which would make her quite useless for the real task of feminine living (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 34). Interpolating this logic means that only boys can sensibly read and be educated; women and girls easily get swayed away from their feminine role when exposed to a lot of reading material. Women are culturally excluded from the most social aspects of the community and relegated to the domestic sphere. This inhibits their development into socially integrated, creative, and intellectually independent beings. Thus, Tambu must be socialized with the only exposures that create a meek and gentle girl because it will determine the nature of the wife she will make in the future. It is her father’s role to shape her destiny now before another man takes custody of her as a wife and both become custodians of her destiny and sexuality. All the dollops of education a girl receives must be tailored to suit her role as a wife who fulfils the rules ascribed and prescribed by society.

On the contrary, Nhamo is destined to enjoy a boundless world of opportunities just because he is a boy. He is entitled to empowerment through education. Therefore, Babamukuru chooses him over Tambu to accompany him to school. He now boasts of it to his sisters in such a very derogatory manner when he says, “Babamukuru wants a clever person, somebody who deserves a chance. That’s why he wants me. He knows I’ve been doing very well at school. ‘Who else is there for him to take?’” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 48). As Tambu is groomed as a prospective wife, Nhamo is groomed to dominate the female
gender. No wonder he can afford to leave his luggage at the bus terminus when coming back from school for holidays and still command the much younger and weaker sister, Netsai, to fetch it (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 9). He builds on this attitude and mentality about gender roles as dictated by the Shona patriarchal society at an early age. In his masculine expose, he looks down and frowns upon his sisters. It is both a conscious and subconscious process that society inculcates upon him in the upbringing he is accorded. When Tambu engages him on why he cannot help in the garden, his response is blunt and apt: “How can you ask when you see I am so busy?” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 21). Nhamo is busy at school while Tambu is busy at home doing domestic work. When she says that she wants to go to school, Nhamo sarcastically reminds her that she cannot go to school because she is a girl: “Don’t you know I am the one who is supposed to go to school? […] ‘It’s the same everywhere. Because you are a girl’. It was out” (Dangarembga, 1988, pp. 20-21). The cultural sieve is too narrow for a girl brought up in this community to attain any practical liberation. Just like the African woman writer, Tambu is caught up in a complex scenario. She is held hostage by a system that will alienate her if she speaks her mind. At the same time, she cannot turn around to betray it because it is what sustains her. She takes the risk of being socially ostracized by fellow women who have become complacent to the status quo. Her story is the one that dates as far back as her infancy: a story of toil, mockery, endurance, and silent agony. On the contrary, Nhamo goes to school and enjoys the privilege of being educated by the white colonialists. He and his cousin Chido turn out to be such snobs, carefree and patronizing. They are merely upcoming Babamukurus who are destined to be even more severe, more sexist, inflexible, callous, and hard-hearted in inflicting chauvinist value systems on women with remarkably terse vigor and firmness.

Knowing education is the only means to a woman’s enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation, Tambu decides that she must go to school. She admires her aunt Maiguru and looks forward to hinging her liberation on her. When she compares her own mother, who has never gone to school, to Maiguru, she finds her mother totally deficient and wanting in her embattled life of servitude. Her mother works all day in the field and does household chores, whereas Maiguru spends her time teaching, earning a living, and living a decent life. She, therefore, looks forward to fashioning her life around what she considers to be her aunt’s successful story. It is this ideology that marks Tambu’s journey to school against all odds: “I shall go to school” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 17). However, her father assures her that there is no money for such a venture and Babamukuru’s philanthropic generosity cannot be extended to her because of his attitudinal latitude rooted in his patriarchal Shona society that promotes the male gender at the expense of the female gender. Her father insists she must stay at home and forget about going to school, as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

My father thought I should not mind. ‘Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, it’s nothing’ he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump 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. Grow vegetables’. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 15)

Her father’s above argument indicates that Tambu, like all women, is destined for the kitchen, the house, and the garden. Bargaining for equality, let alone liberation, becomes an impossible task, thus illuminating the complex relationship between the two sexes. Her mother, Ma’Shingayi, is already a victim of patriarchy as she is relegated to cooking and replicating the community through marriage and reproduction. It is this patriarchal system that Tambu seeks to challenge. Her rebellion is in both her thoughts and actions. She thinks it is unfair when the question of who should go to school arises and the dice obviously falls on
the boy child and never on the girl. She, therefore, offers to grow her own maize to raise school fees, a decision that draws a lot of skepticism from her parents:

My father was greatly tickled by this. He annoyed me tremendously by laughing and laughing in an unpleasantly adult way. ‘Just enough for fees! Can you see her there?’ He chuckled to my mother. ‘Such a little shrub, but already making ripe plans! Can you tell your daughter, Ma’Shingayi, that there is no money? That’s all.

My mother of course, knew me better. ‘And did she ask for money?’ She enquired. ‘Listen to your child. She is asking for seed. That we can give. Let her try. Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done’.

My father agreed. And a little seed was not a large price to pay to keep me quiet. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 17).

The scheme to raise fees through her garden is symbolic of Tambu’s attempt to challenge the status quo and escape from the nervous conditions. She looks at education as a means to negotiate her status in society. Her father, Jeremiah Mukoma, consents to this project but with every reason to believe that Tambu won’t succeed after all. His reaction is a burst of sarcastic laughter that speaks volumes of his demeaning attitude. Ma’Shingayi even makes it more pessimistic when she comments: “Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 17). This is a reaction from one woman who has seen it all happen and has now complacently resigned to fate. She is a typical product of the patriarchal ideological system. The women have been beaten to the corner of complacency, yet this is what Tambu wants to change, even when nothing seems possible anymore. Later, when the garden project and her presumed salvation are about to bear fruit, it is Nhamo who sabotages it by stealing the mealies and giving them to his friends. When Tambu confronts him, the boys encourage him to hit her: “Why talk? … Just hit her. That’s what they hear” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 23). So, when Nhamo dies, Tambu is greatly relieved of his sexist and chauvinistic mentality. It is a relief from the psychological burden and a stumbling block to her endeavours. Her own efforts to raise school fees amidst pessimism from her parents yield very little or no practical results at all because they are sabotaged by the system. As Kwadwo Osei-Nyame Jnr (2011) puts it, “Tambu’s apathy concerning her brother’s death should be seen as a real confrontation not only with her brother, but also with the patriarchal structures of the indigenous Shona society which co-opts women into dominated society” (p. 64). Thus, Nhamo’s death creates an opening for her as Babamukuru is determined to raise the status of his brother’s household. There being no other son in the family, the dice obviously lands on Tambu. This marks the beginning of her journey to enlightenment and empowerment as she enrols in school.

At the mission school, Tambu finds Babamukuru a patronizing patriarch. At least with her father, Tambu can ask questions, but at the mission, her cousin Nyasha is a total stranger to her father. The stifling inflicts and escalates the tension in Nyasha, unlike her brother Chido, who can act as he wishes without being reprimanded because he is a boy. As Moyana states:

The children, especially the boy Chido, and the cousin, Nhamo, turn out snobbish but happy and carefree. Babamukuru, on the other hand, has become much more severe, intimidating, less flexible and visibly more sexist, patronizing, unfriendly and ready to perpetuate the patriarchal values in the homestead which he claims to be his own with
such exaggerated firmness that inmates of that homestead feel helpless, powerless and some even feel emasculated by his severe presence. (Moyana, 1994, p. 33)

Babamukuru appears to be the custodian of Shona patriarchal values in his homestead. He discriminates against the girl child and does not allow her to act freely. He allows Chido to associate with his white friends so much that he is hardly at home, while if Nyasha tries to exercise such a right, she is branded recalcitrant or even worse, a whore. As Tambu says:

Beside Nyasha, I was a paragon of feminine decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to, and then only to answer with 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. I simply accepted that this was so. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 157)

Babamukuru admires Tambu’s unquestioning subservience to patriarchal authority. According to him, she epitomizes the ideals of “feminine decency, submissiveness and respect” (Plasa 1998, p. 39). He sees her as an exemplary young lady whose behaviour should be emulated by his daughter. Babamukuru misinterprets her total obedience to him for “Tambu is not learning how to become a good wife or mother […] instead she longs to be recognized as a knowledge worker and, ultimately a single female” (Stone, 2006, pp. 112-113). On the other hand, Nyasha’s western education has had an empowering effect on her to the extent that she cannot find space in Zimbabwean society where she can exercise her rights. She is suffering from an identity crisis because the western culture, which she acquired through her education in Europe, prepares her for a western lifestyle. She has an emancipated mind but cannot practice what she has acquired in her education because she is in the same system that is oppressing her mother. She is a loose cannon that must be reined in. The adoption of western values alienates her from her socio-cultural environment, and she becomes a misfit, thinking and dressing ‘indecently’ to her father, who now considers her a whore. At this point, Tambu realizes that oppression of women is universal. She argues:

Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I had felt victimized at home in the days when Nhamo went to school, and I grew maize. The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn’t depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it. And what was the problem? You had to admit that Nyasha had no tact. You had to admit she was altogether too volatile and strong-willed. You couldn’t ignore the fact that she had no respect for Babamukuru when she ought to have had lots of it. 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. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 118)

In the above passage, Tambu asserts that patriarchy uses a woman’s sexuality, which it considers inferior, to assign roles and codes of conduct that result in the oppression and discrimination of women. Accordingly, Babamukuru considers Nyasha’s smoking and flirting with boys a behavior that goes beyond the limits of a sensibly brought-up girl. On the contrary, Nyasha is trying to assert her independence and freedom to express her rights, which are being denied. Her Christian upbringing and tradition do not allow it. She presents the reality of the highly demanding gender roles of a girl brought up in a typical African society with very high demands on the girl child. She is crumbling under the weight of these
demands inflicted upon her, yet her brother Chido is left loose. She twitters between the Western and African versions of a woman, both of whom she belongs. It is a constant reminder of her duality. Menstruation and sexuality are two such symptomatic reminders, and the tampon and menstrual rags all serve to trivialize a woman’s sexuality in society.

When Nyasha chooses the path of rebellion, her father, Babamukuru, summons all his authority over her, forcing her to eat, restricting her movements and association with peers. She begins to waste away both physically and psychologically, eventually succumbing to a debilitating mental and nervous breakdown. She becomes a psychotic of disorientation, as shown in Tambu’s description below of one of Nyasha’s schizophrenic outbursts:

Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth (‘Their history. Liars. Their bloody lies’), breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jab the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bed clothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe, and trampling them underfoot. ‘They’ve trapped us. They’ve trapped us. But I won’t be trapped. I’m not a good girl. I won’t be trapped. Then, as suddenly as it came, the rage passed. ‘I don’t hate you Daddy,’ she said softly. ‘They want me to, but I won’t.’ She lay down on her bed. ‘I’m very tired,’ she said in a voice that was recognizably hers. ‘But I can’t sleep. Mummy will you hold me?’ She curled up in Maiguru’s lap looking no more than five years old. ‘Look what they’ve done to us’ she said softly. ‘I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you’. She fell asleep. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 205)

Nyasha’s outburst above portrays her as a typical case of a hybridized pedigree who has no social or cultural anchoring. She does not hate her father nor blame him for her suffering. Instead, she blames colonialism and traditional Shona patriarchal values for shaping her father’s behavior. She must find a new direction for her life, but that has remained elusive. The closer tie that is bred between her and Tambu at the moments of her trial is a display of oneness in a common fate. When her novel goes missing, obviously hidden away from her reach by her father, it is followed by intricate commands from him without allowing room for her to make choices. He hits back at what to him is a source of her rebellion—the theoretical book ideas. Even when she is forced to eat, she throws up as an act of blatant defiance. As E. Kim Stone (2006) argues, “Nyasha’s resultant bulimia develops in part because she chooses the wrong spaces to perform her rebellion, spaces so overlaid with patriarchal dominance that her protests are easily dismissed. Where and how one stages one’s, objections matters” (p. 122). Nyasha stages her rebellion in Babamukuru’s house, where she has no chance of success. As Stephanie M. Selvick (2013) asserts, “her behavior throughout the novel is not misbehavior, as multiple characters emphasize, but rather made up of persistent acts of defiance which destabilize the male/female hierarchy under which she constantly lives.” (p. 279). Babamukuru cannot allow her rebellion to succeed, for if the rebellion succeeds, it would be tantamount to overthrowing the patriarchy that grants him the power to control the female gender.

Through Tambu’s eyes and mind, we see the turmoil and devastation Nyasha is going through in trying to liberate herself. Her anorexic condition is both symptomatic and symbolic. It is a symptom of one who has been pushed to a tipping point by the oppressive forces that engulf her and is now at the brink of a mortal short circuit. It is symbolic in the sense that, first, it is a disease associated with white middle-class women who have an abnormal fear of being fat, and second, it is symbolic of what awaits those who try to fight the system. Through Nyasha’s nervous condition, Dangarembga “sharpen[s] her criticism of the systems [patriarchal and imperialist] by deploying the disease itself as a form of rebellion,
a refusal to be mastered” (Saliba, 1995, p. 142). She pays a very high price for her rebellion; it costs her, her health. When and if she recovers, the cycle will recur, or she will be married off to another man’s patronage like her mother. The gendered power politics in the society she lives in does not favour emancipation and independent thought. It is a well-grounded system with well-knit patriarchal structures in which Nyasha is trapped. Ma’Shingayi’s diagnosis of Nyasha’s condition is more apt than the white psychiatrist doctor in Salisbury, who dismisses Nyasha’s mental condition by stating that “she was making a scene” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 206). As Ma’ Shingayi argues:

‘It’s the Englishness’, she said. ‘It’ll kill them all if they aren’t careful’ and she snorted. ‘Look at them. That boy Chido can hardly speak a word of his own mother’s tongue and, you’ll see, his children will be worse. Running around with that white one, isn’t he the missionary’s daughter? His children will disgrace us. You’ll see. And himself, to look at him he may look alright, but there’s no telling what price he’s paying’. She wouldn’t say much about Nyasha. ‘About that one we don’t even speak. It’s speaking for itself. Both of them, it’s the Englishness. It’s a wonder it hasn’t affected the parents too’. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 207)

Nyasha suffers from the educated African woman’s disease of two-ness in one. She receives an education based on a foreign culture in which she is condemned to live and experience but not allowed to live and spend the rest of her life in yet another community in which the much-admired rules do not apply. This two-ness in her turns out to be a debilitating factor which psychologically damages and militates against her pursuit of happiness and meaningful emancipation. Observing Nyasha’s condition, Tambu concludes that:

If Nyasha who had everything could not make it, where could I expect to go? I could not bear to think about it, because at that time we were not sure whether she would survive. All I knew was that the doctor would not commit himself. Nyasha’s progress was still in balance and so, as a result, was mine. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 206)

The illusion that Tambu now discovers is that not even the Englishness that the Sacred Heart College offers can save her from the imprisonment of the fate of her sex. As Therese Saliba (1995) argues, Nyasha’s struggle “indicates that the destruction of the individualized self is detrimental to the collective women’s project” (p. 141) for, as Tambu states, as long as Nyasha’s progress was in balance, so was hers. Nyasha’s psychological breakdown and the crises provide Tambu with a new perspective on women’s liberation. Tambu realizes that a black woman in a patriarchal home is a victim of the entrapments of gender and sexuality hazards regardless of her education, money, and profession. Tambu manages to secure her freedom from patriarchal control many years after graduating from Sacred Heart because, “she is still outside heteronormativity, a single woman” (Stone, 2006, pp. 122-123), independent and free to tell the story of herself and the four women in her family. The education she acquired was for self-empowerment to enable her to live as a single woman independent of male hegemony.

**Women’s Emancipation through Single Womanhood**

Dangarembga, in *Nervous Conditions*, foregrounds single womanhood as a form of women’s emancipation through the portrayal of Lucia’s relationships and handling of male characters. Lucia seems to be free and loosely bound by patriarchal inhibitions because she is a single woman and therefore not under the control of any man. She does and says whatever she feels like and, in most cases, stands to challenge the system without reproach from the
men. Even Babamukuru seems to let her act that way. She is brave enough to handle the men. Unlike married women, Lucia has a way around the men who trouble her. She deals with them authoritatively and with a lot of confidence. She reverts to the weapon of sex, luring Mukoma, her sister’s husband, and Takesure into her net to master both. In this way, it becomes impossible for anyone to determine which of the two impregnated her in the case of paternity arguments. When the Sigauke clan patriarch sits to declare that her relationship with Takesure is irreligious and that they must both leave, Lucia storms the meeting to put sense into the patriarchs and discipline them. She aggressively commands:

‘Then what is this nonsense you are saying? Ha! You make me sick, the lot of you.’ She flung Takesure back to the sofa, where he sat rubbing his ears. ‘I shall leave this home of yours, Babamukuru, and I shall take my sister with me. She told my uncle. But before that, Babamukuru, I want to tell you why I refused to go. It was because this man, this Jeremiah, yes, you, Jeremiah, who married my sister, he has a roving eye and a lazy hand. Whatever he sees he must have; but he doesn’t want to work for it, isn’t it, Jeremiah? And why do I bother to tell you? You know it, all of you; you know it. So, could I go and leave my sister alone with this man who has given her nothing but misery since the age of fifteen? Of course not. It was not possible. As for Takesure, I don’t know what he thinks he can give me. Whatever he can do for me, I can do better for myself’ (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 147).

Lucia’s assertiveness, as demonstrated in the above passage, saves her from being sentenced to a sentence where she could not apparently defend herself. She has evolved into a self-conscious character, distinguishing herself from a hitherto known stereotyped woman in the Shona community, forcefully hatching out of the eggshell of docility. She defies a verdict by the men’s court for her to leave by giving such near impossible conditions for her departure. She basks in the glory of defying a deviant patriarchal section of imposing judges whose frailty now characterizes all their kind. She forces men to hear her story and reduces Takesure to whimpering as she pulls his ears, humiliating him before the men’s jury. Her attack on Takesure translates into an attack on the whole Sigauke clan elders’ gathering, who decide to hold a meeting to discuss her pregnancy without her, as if they know anything better about it than she herself. By storming the all-men meeting, Lucia does not only conquer the assembly but also redeems herself from the impending patriarchal decision that she was bound to suffer. Later, at the following Christmas celebrations, Babamukuru comes to find Lucia has stayed put. She had not budged. He tries to ignore her, but she assures him:

‘Even if you do ignore me,’ Lucia continued, ‘It doesn’t mean I’m not here. And anyway, Mwaramu may be, you can tell me plainly: where do you want me to go? We both know I can’t go home. Their sending me here in the first place, it was because there was no food, and no work either at that place, isn’t it? It’s true you know it. So where do you want me to go? As for going with Takesure, ha-a-a! I know it’s the way you joke Babamukuru. What would I go to do at Takesure’s home?’ (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 127).

Under normal circumstances, an ordinary woman would have complied docilely, but not Lucia. She has managed to wedge between Mukoma and Takesure to create a complex scenario that implicates the symmetry of the pregnancy and paternity triangle. When Babamukuru superfluously reprimands her for not carrying their luggage to the house, Lucia ignores him and instead chooses to address herself to Maiguru:
‘Don’t worry yourself Maiguru’, said Lucia. ‘Takesure and Jeremiah will carry all that when they get back’. But Maiguru chirped that she wanted to see her provisions all safely stored away and continued to lift the boxes out of the boot. Lucia knew she had been rebuffed and took it graciously. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 131).

While Maiguru does not want to risk making such a suggestion to the men, Lucia assigns the laborious task to them. This sharply contrasts with Netsai, who was always ordered by Nhamo to run to the bus stop to carry his luggage back home. Lucia wants to reverse this norm. Her actions and conduct do not correspond to her status as a woman.

In yet another incident, Lucia pushes Babamukuru to find her a job at the Mission. Unlike other women, Lucia has a way around the men who trouble her. She deals with them authoritatively and with a lot of confidence. With Babamukuru, she confers with assertive confidence:

‘I did not come to your home to bring grief, Babamukuru’. She told him seriously. ‘I have told you already Babamukuru, why I came – to look after my sister, isn’t it? But I see that I have brought problems instead. If going back to my father’s house were possible, I would go, but what would I eat when I got there?... Do you know what I was thinking, Babamukuru?’ she continued concentrating on her plate in an effort to remain calm. ‘I was thinking that if I could find work, any little job in this area, if I could find a little job here in Mutasa’s kraal, there would be no more of these problems. The problem of my living at home would be solved and my sister would have her hands’. (Dangarembga, 1988, p.159)

It is Lucia’s confidence, as depicted in the above passage, that enables her to push Babamukuru into getting her a job as a cook in the Mission School. She uses this opportunity to enroll in Grade One classes to fight illiteracy, which seems to be a crippling factor to women’s emancipation. She wants to acquire education for self-empowerment so she can live independently as a single woman. Babamukuru, and generally all the men in her life find it difficult to accept that Lucia is living her own type of life independent of subjugation and dominion. They simply take her as cantankerous and a non-issue, while she triumphantly rides on this loophole. She is not even married to any man, which gives her the audacity to act freely, as she emphasizes to Babamukuru:

‘Well, Babamukuru’ said Lucia, preparing to leave, ‘may be when you marry a woman, she is obliged to obey you. But some of us aren’t married, so we do not know how to do it. That is why I have been able to tell you frankly what is in my heart. It is better that way so that tomorrow I don’t go behind your back and say the first thing that comes into my head’.

Babamukuru applauded Lucia in her absence. ‘That one’ he chuckled to Maiguru, ‘she is like a man herself’ (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 174).

As stated in the above quotation, Lucia defies the men, and they fail to rein her in because she is not married to any of them. She even confronts Babamukuru on the issue of punishing Tambu and making her sister wed Jeremiah without seeking the couple’s opinion about it. Tambu unequivocally resists Babamukuru’s will that she must attend her parents’ wedding, serve as a bridesmaid, and help in the preparation for the feast. To quote her own words:
The whole business reduced my parents to the level of a comic show, the entertainers. I did not want to see them brought down like that and I certainly did not want to be part of it. So, I could not approve of the wedding...A wedding that made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 165).

Tambu opposes the wedding because the whole drama makes fun of her parents before the people. It also raises the question of her own existence as the legitimate daughter of her parents. Besides, “by refusing to go back to the village and prepare the food for the wedding feast—a kind of domestic labor that keeps women subservient to men—Tambu is not only rejecting Babamukuru’s shameful construction of her parents’ marital status, but she is also refusing to be re-placed in peasant space as a domestic laborer” (Stone, 2006, p. 122). Typically, Babamukuru does not have the patience and room to engage the little girl on why she does not want to attend the wedding; instead, he punishes her by caning her fifteen lashes in addition to her doing the housemaid’s work for two weeks; all this for what he calls her disobedience. The punishment infuriates Lucia. She bluntly asks Babamukuru: “Did you ask her what was on her mind? She demanded. “Did you ask my sister whether she wished her daughter was present? Even the wedding...I do not see that the child did you so much wrong by preferring not to be there.” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 173). Lucia challenges Babamukuru’s attitude of not considering children, especially girls, as having ideas of their own that must be respected. As Rosemary Moyana (1994) observes, “Lucia asserts her rights without fear of anyone, even the most revered Babamukuru” (p. 38). She manages to tell off men, including Babamukuru, because she is not married to any of them and so does not respect nor fear any man.

Marriage and Entrapment of Women

In Nervous Conditions, Dangarembga portrays marriage as an institution where women are enslaved by men. Maiguru and Ma’Shingayi find themselves trapped in homes controlled by their male patriarchs. They can neither escape nor rebel. They remain static in the miasmal mist and fog of male dominion, complacently devoid of the will and energy to extricate themselves from the bondage. Maiguru has a Master’s degree but is no better than the rest of the women folk. Despite her education, she is bound and answerable to her husband, Babamukuru, even when they are educationally equal. She too pays the price of being a woman in a patriarchal society. She discovers that education is not enough to set her free, even when she earns her own money. She has no power in the home she calls her own. Her ideas are never taken into consideration, nor is there room for her to voice them out. Whenever Maiguru is with the rest of the family, celebrating Christmas or attending any function, she sits on the floor like all women, as demanded by custom. Her husband’s orders are to be obeyed without question. Her role is that of a wife, a woman, and the master’s degree is simply erased into oblivion. She is reduced to a helpmate of the Head teacher, Babamukuru, of the Missionary School. When Babamukuru’s hostility is turned on Tambu for her refusal to attend the wedding of her parents, Maiguru masters enough courage to tell the husband of her frustrations:

‘Yes she is your brother’s child’ she said. ‘But when it comes to taking my money so that you can feed her and her father and your family and waste it on ridiculous weddings, that’s when they are my relatives too. Let me tell you, Babawa Chido, 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 I am working myself sick to support. And now even that Lucia can walk in here and tell me that the things she discusses with you, here in my home, are none of my business. I am sick of it Babawa Chido. Let me tell you, I have heard enough’ (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 174).

The above quotation shows a psychological torture going overboard. Her tension mounts to the level of rebellion, which does not eventually amount to anything at all, because even when she chooses to run away from Babamukuru, it is only to seek refuge with another man in Salisbury, who only this time is her brother. As Nyahsa argues, “she always runs to men […] there is no hope Tambu. Really there isn’t! The situation is pathetic” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 177). Her rebellion seems to have paid off some dividends, for when she returned to Babamukuru, she “flatly refused to spend another Christmas catering for the family of two dozen” (Dangarembga, 1988, p.185). Nevertheless, her freedom is likely to be short-lived if she remains married to Babamukuru.

Similarly, Ma’Shingayi, wife to Mukoma, is the unfortunate epitome of the burden of womanhood and oppressed passivity. She was married to Mukoma at the tender age of fifteen. She works very hard to eke out a living and sustain the family through farming. Unlike her sister Lucia, her problems are enormous and complex: her sexuality, poverty, illiteracy, and subjugation. She is caught in the hard palate of Mukoma’s social and economic impoverishment and Babamukuru’s domination. She expects to raise her daughters to carry on the role of resignation and subservient passivity. As an illiterate woman, she promotes Shona values and finds it difficult to accommodate the foreign values upon which Maiguru has brought up her children. She does not approve of Nyasha’s conduct in challenging patriarchy, which is a source of conflict between Nyasha and Babamukuru. She believes in complacency and caring for the family, and when Tambu is wrenched away from school by Babamukuru, she hysterically rants about it for days on end. Ma’Shingayi does not believe in the power of education for girls because it alienates them from their traditional roles and fills them with westernized attitudes towards life. It’s this worry that makes her break down when Babamukuru takes Tambu to the mission.

Conclusion

A close reading of Nervous Conditions reveals that the Shona community has a set of inter-gender relationships and any attempt to go against this order is regarded as mere rebellion. The family is the smallest unit of the Shona community. It is traditionally headed by a man who is the custodian of Shona patriarchal values. All attempts by educated female characters to challenge this order with their newly acquired intellectual wisdom gained from their western education are regarded as Englishness, a mark of heretic ideology, and a mimicry of European lifestyle. Babamukuru cannot allow their rebellion to succeed in his home because if it happened, it would be tantamount to overthrowing the Shona patriarchy that grants him power over women. Tsitsi Dangarembga’s feminist view is reflected in her advocacy for women’s emancipation through single womanhood. She roots for the reordering of society through the portrayal of Lucia as a single woman who achieves liberation from patriarchal control by shunning the institution of marriage in preference to having loose sexual relationships with men of her choice. Lucia, one of the formally least educated women, liberates herself and assertively establishes her identity as a single woman. Hence, she gets rid of patriarchy in her life completely.

The rest of the female characters in the novel suffer from nervous conditions under male domination. Each female character, however, responds to the situation in her own way. Ma’Shingayi and Maiguru get entrapped in the marriage institution and find it difficult to be free from patriarchal control. Ma’Shingayi resigns herself to fate while Maiguru, as the
burden of womanhood intensifies, breaks down and suffers from depression. Her daughter Nyasha struggles unsuccessfully to liberate herself from Babamukuru’s patriarchal dominance. Her rebellion fails because she has no other home to run to or a place to take refuge. She eventually breaks down into a nervous wreck suffering from a mental disorder. Tambu achieves her freedom from Babamukuru’s chauvinist attitude when she goes to Sacred Heart to further her education, which eventually enables her to live successfully as a single woman.

References


