

Men & Women: Gender Issues in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* & *She No Longer Weeps*

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In *Nervous Conditions*¹ and *She No Longer Weeps*,² Tsitsi Dangarembga has portrayed men and women who are antagonistic towards each other. Women in particular have been portrayed differently from those in earlier Zimbabwean literature in English.³ The woman's voice here is new and revolutionary, so that by the time we finish reading *She No Longer Weeps*, we are definitely stunned by Martha's solution to the problem she faces in her relationship with men. That ending also reminds us of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's stunning ending to his novel *Devil on the Cross*⁴ in which we see Wariinga, a woman who perhaps is brutalized less than Martha (because at least she retains parental support in spite of her illegitimate pregnancy while Martha gets thrown out of the home), finally defy law, custom and authority to mete out justice to her offender, seducer and symbol of her oppression in exactly the same form that Martha does to Freddy in *She No Longer Weeps* (p. 59). This indeed, is a new woman.

The ending of *Nervous Conditions* also heralds the birth of a new woman as Tambudzai, the narrator says,

Quietly unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion . . . whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume . . . (p. 204)

What is being described here is a process of becoming. Treva Broughton has correctly observed that *Nervous Conditions* 'is a hopeful book, both in its sense of impending change . . . and in the

scope and subtlety of its critique of gender relations within and beyond the boundaries of race and class.⁵ The women in both the play and the novel clearly undergo some struggle and they emerge as different persons at the end. It is the nature of this struggle and change which we need to analyse and to understand so that we can appreciate the kind of new woman created by Dangarembga in her two works; so that we can understand why we say that that woman's voice is new and revolutionary.

About her own writing, the author has said: 'I deal with women who break away from oppression but find themselves caught in a guilt trap . . .'⁶ When we begin with this statement to unravel meaning from her novel and play, we discover that the author 'has put masculinity in question by the very fact of asserting the rights of women and the claims of femininity. It is not only masculinity which is being questioned here . . . it is also tradition in a patriarchal society.'⁷ Thus, at the end of the novel, the author, through Tambu, makes clear what her preoccupation has been all along: ' . . . the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began' (p. 204).

For the novel, it all begins with Tambu's announcement that 'I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling' (p. 1). Indeed, it is a strange declaration. Yet not so strange when we, once again, consider what she says at the end about asserting herself, questioning and refusing to be brainwashed. These statements reveal a process of resistance brought about by the antagonism that exists between men and women in the novel and in the play. Hence, the focus is on gender issues in both works.

Perhaps we should define what we mean by *gender* if we are to proceed on a common premise. We can define the word in three ways:

1. as the body;
2. as our social roles of male and female;
3. as the way we internalize and live out these roles.⁸

For our purposes, all three definitions interact at different times as we apply them in the analysis of the characters in the novel and play. Yes, there are men and women here, biologically and we can apply Sigmund Freud's dictum that 'anatomy is destiny'.⁹ For the male characters in *She No Longer Weeps*, this dictum is especially pertinent because that is what they believe in, fanatically. But in the novel, the female and male roles interchange at certain times: men feeling emasculated and behaving

accordingly; some women, namely the Aunts, becoming part of the patriarchy and sitting at patriarchal meetings; others feeling so nervous that they lack confidence in themselves and therefore cannot express their opinion where gender issues are raised. All these interchanges can be explained through our understanding of definitions two and three above, and here we are free to reject Freud's absolute dictum in favour of Erickson's when he argues that 'anatomy, history and personality combine to form one's destiny. . . .'¹⁰ He is referring to the social roles and the way they are internalized and lived out by each individual. To further emphasize this point, Easthope has correctly asserted:

Every society assigns new arrivals [i.e., new borns] particular roles, including gender roles, which they have to learn. The little animal born into a human society becomes a socialised individual in a remarkably short time. . . . This process of internalizing is both conscious and unconscious. . . .¹¹

The above statement is pertinent and is applicable to Dangarembga's characters especially in the novel which we shall analyse closely later. Carol McMillan has also expressed the same view as she says:

The thrust of feminist argument has . . . for the most part, rested on the belief that since (apart from reproduction) there are no important differences between the sexes, nothing can justify a segregation of their roles. Any differences which may exist are said to be fostered *culturally* by forcing women to concentrate their activities exclusively in the domestic sphere [emphasis mine]. This in turn leads to the development of supposedly feminine traits such as self-sacrifice and passivity, which has the added consequence of inhibiting the development in women of their potential as rational, intellectual and creative beings.¹²

With this theory in mind then, let us now briefly analyse both the male and female characters in the two works, beginning with the novel, to demonstrate the nature of the women's struggle which brings about the revolutionary change in them. We will also see whether, indeed, all these female characters get caught in a guilt trap in their attempt to extricate themselves from the undesirable social conditions.

The women in the novel, particularly Tambudzai, Nyasha and Lucia rebel against their expected social roles. There is a concerted effort to make Tambu accept her lot; to subdue her 'wild', 'unnatural', unbridled spirit. When the family can only

afford fees for one child (ironically, the fees are raised by the mother through the sale of vegetables and other produce), it is Nhamo, the boy who gets the opportunity to continue with school. Tambu has to stay at home and of course, her father thinks that she should not mind. After all, he asks, 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband?' Then he advises, 'Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.' (*Nervous Conditions*, p. 15). Her mother goes even further in her efforts to socialize the child to her difficult feminine role in the home with:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. . . . How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear the children? When it is like that you can't just decided [sic] today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy. You have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength. (p. 16)

This is the kind of self-sacrifice and passivity that Carol McMillan is talking about which is being fostered on Tambudzai in the name of tradition and culture.¹³ Nhamo, her brother (a typical example of a 'new arrival' or 'newly born' who gets socialized into his role in a very short time and plays that role with excellence), rubs it in when he adds that wanting to go to school will not help. 'It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl. . . . What did you expect? Did you really think that you could send yourself to school?' (p. 21). It is after this conversation that Tambu says her 'concern for [her] brother died an unobtrusive death'. On her yearning to go to the airport to meet Babamukuru who is coming from England, Tambu's father disciplines her; calls her aside and implores her to curb her 'unnatural inclinations: it was natural for [her] to stay at home and prepare for the homecoming,' she is told (p. 33).

These are the kinds of ideas that bombard Tambudzai at an early age; ideas which she struggles to challenge throughout her childhood. While her father, mother and brother try to instil in her the womanly virtues 'seen as a mixture of timidity, tenderness, compliance, docility, softness, innocence and domestic competence',¹⁴ she rebels against such gender apartheid by struggling to find her own money to educate herself through growing maize

and selling it to raise her own fees which she succeeds in doing as she gets a £10 donation in the city, enough to educate her through primary school. This is the education which will change and revolutionize her life as she will be able to create her own economic base in future.

If we follow her story throughout the novel, we will find many examples of attempts to socialize Tambudzai at an early age into her feminine role which would in turn force her or train her to be uncreative and docile; the kind of qualities exhibited by Netsai, her younger sister whose character she analyses as pliable: ... the type that will make a sweet, sad wife' (p. 10). Netsai sees nothing wrong in strapping a baby to her back and carrying Nhamo's luggage while the latter walks on home, unencumbered!

Finally, Nhamo, who is a negation of Tambudzai, physically gets eliminated from the story through death (rather shrouded in mystery) in order to make way for Tambu's continuation with education beyond standard three and standard six to secondary school at Sacred Heart where we leave her at the end of the story. Her struggle and experiences throughout the novel result in her earlier declaration that she feels no sorrow after her brother's demise, neither does she apologize for such seeming callousness. The author endorses this brave articulation through her device of eliminating Nhamo at an opportune moment.

We did say that Nyasha and Lucia are the other rebellious women in the novel. Nyasha has problems with her father because of what he interprets to be her non-conformity. Babamukuru, her father, tries to subdue her by forcing her to eat all her food, by physically assaulting her. She returns her father's blows and rebels against the forced diet by vomiting all that she has eaten and therefore, suffers from anorexia and finally, a nervous breakdown. She is extremely mature for her age and analyses issues in a very rational manner (e.g. pp. 78; 159ff). Yet she suffers for these mature ideas as they are judged to be 'unnatural' by her father.

As for Lucia, she remains unmarried but becomes pregnant by her boyfriend, Takesure, whom she calls a cockroach and believes that 'cockroaches are better. They are easy to chase away, isn't it?' (p. 153). By remaining unmarried she symbolically refuses to fall into the traditional, socialized, expected role. She defies the men in the novel: Babamukuru, Jeremiah, Takesure, etc. She defies Babamukuru's order to leave her brother-in-law Jeremiah's home where her sister is married and lives a miserably poor life. Her resilience manifests itself throughout and when Takesure talks nonsense about her, she simply grabs his ear and pinches

hard! (pp. 143-88). Finally, when Lucia decides to leave, it is on her own terms and in fact, she goes to the Mission to look for employment and to attend an adult literacy class, preparing for further emancipation through education.

These are the women who refuse to be compartmentalized into their chiselled up roles. They question, struggle, and become liberated in different ways - Tambu and Lucia achieving their own independence, while Nyasha finds it difficult to cope with the demands of a patriarchal world complicated by alienation caused by western education acquired abroad and lack of good parental guidance. The outlet for her is, sadly, a nervous breakdown.

At the beginning of this discussion we did say that Dangarembga puts masculinity in question by the very fact that she asserts the rights of women. At this point then, let us analyse the very embodiment of this masculinity. Babamukuru is the living symbol of masculinity and therefore, patriarchy in this novel. He is the epitome of this culture - he is domineering, benevolent; the provider for his own and his extended family: but callous, unthinking, unimaginative, uncreative though hard-working in a stilted way. The author treats masculinity as the source of oppression, not only for the women, but also for what we shall call the emasculated male (to be dealt with later). Masculinity is manifested in such manly virtues as 'courage, endurance, physical stamina, wiliness, [sound] judgment, and a corresponding [and] complementary conception of what is right for women'.¹⁵ Whether in the form of father, husband or brother, masculinity is seen as oppressive and Babamukuru is the man at the centre of this oppression. Indeed, he does not mind that position since he enjoys being treated as 'the origin for everything, the light we all need to see by, the air we have to breathe'¹⁶ and the benefactor we all cannot do without! Several examples abound in the novel to support this view (see, for example, pp. 30-1; 120-48; 158-9).

His over-domineering masculinity, however, emasculates his less successful brother (and nephew, Takesure), who literally cannot do anything else but wait for provisions and deliverance from poverty from Babamukuru (see pp. 14-15; 30-1; chapter 20). In chapter 20, Jeremiah's improvidence is explained by resorting to the supernatural and to show how ridiculous these men's ideas are, Babamukuru suggests that a church wedding be held for him and his wife as a cure for his problems as an alternative to traditional cleansing with herbs.

Another emasculated character, Takesure, is brought to Jeremiah's home to help with work, but ends up doing nothing of the sort. Both he and Jeremiah cannot control Lucia in the

way they are used to (because her personality exudes self-confidence). So Takesure blames her for his misfortunes (p. 145). The climax in Jeremiah's lethargy is reached when even the homestead's huts fall while the two just drink on and watch. It takes Tambudzai and Lucia to fix the roofs and of course, Babamukuru thanks Jeremiah for the job, and the latter happily and unashamedly takes that full credit. For it is unthinkable that women could do such work!

These men are emasculated because they no longer have a good self-image. They are overshadowed by Babamukuru's terrible efficiency. As Jeane Block argues, 'sexual identity means ... the earning of a sense of self that includes a recognition of gender secure enough to permit the individual to manifest human qualities that our society ... has labelled [manly].'¹⁷ Jeremiah and Takesure have lost this 'sense of self' and 'gender security', and hence, we have called them emasculated males masquerading their roles. These are the men (including Nhamo and Babamukuru) to whom Tambu refers at the end of the novel when she says she tells her story, that of the four women she loved and 'our men'. It is legitimate for her to say that, because her life and that of the other women is tangled up with the life of these men.

There is Maiguru, after all, who is a living symbol of nervousness and fear. She is so engulfed by the fear of her husband that she suffers silently under his yoke for a long time instead of the two of them being companions and friends. The man is so unfriendly that when the wife and children greet him in the evening, he merely grunts inaudibly. So everything Maiguru does, even reprimanding Nyasha, is done in order to please or appease Babamukuru (for example, the case of Nyasha's book, pp. 81-5; also, pp. 137-9; 140-3). She even speaks in baby language to him: 'my daddy-yo', etc.

When she is called upon by other women to take a stand against the patriarchy, she declares that it is not her concern. She has thus been integrated into passively upholding the patriarchy's oppressive system the way oppressed people help uphold their oppressive systems. Later on though, she explodes as the pressure mounts and reaches boiling point. She complains to her husband about her ill-treatment - she never receives her salary, it all goes to Babamukuru - and runs off to her brother (pp. 172-5)! She is the type Dangarembga refers to in her comment about women and the guilt trap, especially if we take into account Nyasha's comment and analysis of her character on p. 175. As for the Aunts, they are clearly part of the patriarchy and although ineffective in that role, they too prop up the system.

This discussion leads logically to our consideration of the characters in the play, *She No Longer Weeps*. The protagonist, Martha, starts off as a girl who is in love, willing to live with her boyfriend Freddy and is knitting for her expected baby. The male characters in this play, Freddy, Joe and Lovemore, are so terribly male-chauvinist as to be repulsive. They delight in abusing women so much that by the time one finishes reading the play, a word like *bitch* rings offensively through one's ears! Here is a typical example of Freddy's abuse of Martha:

... You want to know? ... a bitch. Only a bitch would do that. You are a bitch Martha. Never forget that. No man will ever want you. Even if I hadn't spoilt you. You wear trousers like a man, you drink like a man, you argue and challenge men as though you were not a woman yourself. What you don't know is that that education of yours is good for only one thing ... it lets you earn money. That's the only reason why men like women like you, otherwise you are useless. But even that education of yours is gone now ... pregnant. You are finished. Women like you have no place in Zimbabwe. (p. 9)

Later Lovemore, Martha's new boyfriend, asks how many 'rape' or 'wife beating' cases she dealt with at work.

Frankly I find the male characters in this play more of caricatures. The way they enact their role as men is typical of those who believe that 'anatomy is destiny'. They denigrate, humiliate and insult women in a manner that is unreasonable. Martha's father and Babamukuru of *Nervous Conditions* are carved from the same stone, as are Maiguru of that novel and Martha's mother in the play, except that the latter is more cruel and callous. Both are a bundle of nerves. As parents they are all incompetent; they worry more about public opinion than the welfare of their daughters. Thus, Martha's parents prefer to send her away to her uncle so that the father can go on preaching with honour (pp. 33; 38). The hypocrisy here is glaring.

The other female characters in the play, Mrs Mutsika and Mrs Chiwara who run a club for single mothers are no better. So that in the final analysis, they too are victims of the patriarchal society from which they cannot extricate themselves. Although they try to help other women who have been victimized, they fail to articulate the issues convincingly and they end up insulting Martha instead. Their situation is similar to that in the novel where Tambu's mother and others try to protest against the injustices of the patriarchy (pp. 137-41), yet feel too afraid to direct their anger to the correct place. They find a scapegoat in Maiguru and Tambu's mother champions this tirade of insults

against her! Yet we should remember that she is the one woman who suffers tremendously under the heavy weight of womanhood; to the point where she adopts a fatalistic attitude as she asks Lucia:

Does it matter what I want? Since when has it mattered what I want? So why should it start mattering now? Do you think I wanted to be impregnated by the old dog [her husband, Jeremiah]? Do you think I wanted to travel all this way across this country of our forefathers only to live in dirt and poverty? Do you really think I wanted the child for whom I made the journey to die only five years after it left the womb? Or my son to be taken from me? So what difference does it make whether I have a wedding or whether I go? It is all the same. What I have endured for nineteen years I can endure for another nineteen, and nineteen more if need be. Now leave me! Leave me to rest. (p. 153)

Maybe the only way she redeems herself is towards the end when she correctly identifies the cause of Nyasha's nervous breakdown as being 'the Englishness' of her parents and their whole way of life (pp. 202-4). Otherwise such a fatalistic attitude to life is self-destructive, and there is absolutely no need for it.

The crucial issue the author seems to be addressing in both the play and novel is centred on the debate of whether or not, 'given equal educational and occupational opportunities, women will in fact prove themselves in the world of "reason"'.¹⁸ Martha certainly proves that she is equal to anyone in her law profession, male or female, and her new material conditions are a proof of this success. We can actually see Martha as the grown up Tambu, having charted her way determinedly against all overwhelming odds, through to completing her education and professional training, and therefore, acquiring the kind of emancipation and independence she needed. The experiences both girls have had to endure harden them to the point where Martha can 'no longer weep' and Tambu can no longer feel apologetic for feeling no sorrow after her brother's death; it was a good riddance!

On the question of how to deal with the likes of Freddy, symbols of patriarchal, maniacal oppression, Martha's solution is simple - like Wariinga's solution - *kill them!* which she does without flinching and without fear of reprisals; something similar to what Tambu does, in spirit, to Nhamo.

The portrayal of women in the two works is complex but one thing that emerges unequivocally is the fact that women must deal squarely with their social problems. Young girls must also struggle for their advancement, educationally or socially, the way Tambudzai does. She is an inspiration to those who find

themselves having to leave school because there is not enough money to educate both boys and girls in the family, especially under Zimbabwe's Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1992. The stabbing of Freddy at the end of *She No Longer Weeps* should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally. Those women who struggle without giving up hope, herald the impending change that Broughton is talking about: change in attitude for both men and women as they evaluate and re-evaluate their social roles towards society and towards each other. It is in this way that the two works differ in their portrayal of woman from earlier Zimbabwean literature in English. Few portray men and women in such glaring antagonism with women ending with the upper hand. In Dangarembga, gender issues are dealt with controversially.

NOTES

1. Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988). References to this text will be by page number.
2. Tsitsi Dangarembga, *She No Longer Weeps* (Harare: The College Press, 1987). References to this play will be by page number.
3. See discussion of some of these women in Rudo Gaidzanwa, *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare: The College Press, 1985).
4. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann, 1982): 254.
5. Treva Broughton, excerpts in Publisher's blurb to Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*.
6. Fiona Lloyd, Margaret Waller, Tisa Chifunyise, Ann Holmes, Laiwan, *Zimbabwean Women in Contemporary Culture, 1992 Diary-Notebook* (Harare: The Zimbabwean Women in Contemporary Culture Trust, ZWICCT, 1992) page opposite 11-17 May 1992 of *Diary-Notebook*.
7. Anthony Easthope, *What a Man Gotta Do?* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1986): 1.
8. Easthope: 2-3.
9. Jeane H. Block, *Sex Role Identity and Ego Development* (London: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1984): 2.
10. E.H. Erickson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), quoted in Jeane H. Block, *Sex Role Identity and Ego Development*: 2.
11. Easthope: 3.
12. Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature: Some Philosophical Problems with Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982): ix.
13. McMillan: ix.
14. Brenda Almond, 'Women's Right: Reflections on Ethics and Gender' in Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whiteford, *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (London: MacMillan, 1988): 42.
15. Almond: 42.
16. Easthope: 12.
17. Block: 1.
18. McMillan: x.