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TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*: AN ATTEMPT IN THE FEMINIST TRADITION

ROSEMARY MOYANA

Department of Curriculum and Arts Education, University of Zimbabwe

Abstract

This article discusses Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions *as an attempt in the feminist tradition. It begins by examining the meanings of the words 'gender', 'female', 'feminist' and 'feminine' and then goes on to analyse the roles of the men and women in the novel to show why it should be categorized as feminist. It is basically through these roles that Dangarembga gives strength to the woman's voice.*

IN *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*[1] Tsitsi Dangarembga has portrayed men and women who interact with each other in a certain way. Women in particular have been portrayed from a different perspective from that portrayed in earlier Zimbabwean Literature in English.[2] The woman's voice here is significantly feminist and the evidence for this is found at the end of the novel where Tambudzai asserts herself with neither fear nor apology.

It is a process of becoming that she describes. 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'.[3] The women in 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 study and understand so that we can appreciate the kind of new woman created by Dangarembga in her work; so that we can understand why we say that this woman's voice is significantly feminist.

To begin with, let us formally decide whether or not this novel is indeed written in the feminist tradition. That would help us to understand the position of its female characters *vis-à-vis* its male characters. To do that, we should first define gender because it is central to our analysis of the issues in the novel. Anthony Easthope has pointed out three bases for considering gender, namely: the biological body; our social roles of male

[1] Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Harare, ZPH, 1988). Further references to this text will be simply by page number.

[2] See discussion of some of these women in Rudo Gaidzanwa's *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature* (Harare, The College Press, 1985).

[3] Treva Broughton, *Southern Africa Review of Books,* blurb at the beginning of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions.*

and female; and, thirdly, the way we internalize and live out these roles.[4] These three ways of considering gender interact at different times in the lives of people and that interaction can determine a person's outlook and treatment of others. On the same issue, Greene and Kahn state:

> Feminist literary criticism is one branch of interdisciplinary enquiry which takes gender as a fundamental organizing category of experience . . . [and that] the inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but *a cultural construct* and therefore a proper subject of study for any humanistic discipline.[5] (emphasis mine.)

The 'inequality of sexes' being referred to here comes about because different fields of knowledge and different cultures have been dominated by the assumption that the male perspective is the 'universal' perspective.[6] Greene and Kahn argue that that is why the feminist perspective 'leads to a critique of our sex-gender system', the 'sex-gender system' being:

> 'that set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human social intervention'[7] . . . [The fact] that men have penises and women do not, that women bear children and men do not, are biological facts which have no determinate meaning in themselves but *are invested with various symbolic meanings by different cultures.*[8] (emphasis mine.)

The above statements clarify Easthope's consideration of gender as it pertains to Dangarembga's work to be discussed here. Gender incorporates both the biological and the social constructs in humanity. However, the social construct often has an upper hand in determining people's interaction with one another, which explains the reason why feminists always find themselves confronting one universal truth: 'that whatever power or status may be accorded to women in a given culture, they are still, in comparison to men, devalued as "the second sex".[9] This is a crucial statement for us as we shall see later in our discussion of Dangarembga's novel. The statement

[4] Anthony Easthope, *What a Man Gotta Do?* (London, Paladin Grafton Books, 1986), 1.

[5] Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, 'Feminist scholarship and the social construction of woman', in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York, Methuen, 1985), 1.

[6] Ibid., 2.

[7] Here Greene and Kahn refer to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her article, 'Placing women's history in history', *New Left Review* (May-June, 1982), 14-15; and to Gayle Rubin's article, 'The traffic in women: Notes on the "Political economy" of sex', in Rayna Rapp Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975), 165.

[8] Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 2.

[9] Ibid.

is further elucidated by Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature'.[10]

Our second task is to pursue the question of whether the novel is in the feminist tradition. For this we need to understand the meaning of that term. Toril Moi has made a pertinent distinction between "feminism" as a political position, "femaleness" as a matter of biology and "femininity" as a set of culturally defined characteristics.[11] She goes on to elaborate that 'feminist criticism . . . is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle *against patriarchy and sexism*, not simply a concern for gender in literature . . .' [12] Greene and Kahn say the same thing in different words:

> Feminist scholarship both originates and participates in the larger efforts of feminism to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them; and as such it seeks not only to reinterpret, but to change the world.[13]

It is 'characterized by its political commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism [and] not all books written by women on women . . . exemplify anti-patriarchal commitment'.[14] The question is therefore, whether or not we can place Dangarembga's novel comfortably within the feminist tradition, or whether it is merely within the feminine or female tradition.

According to Toril Moi, female writing is that which simply describes women's experience and in most cases such experience is 'made visible in alienating, deluded or degrading ways';[15] experience exemplified by the Mills and Boon stories or for that matter, the kind of experiences described by Flora Nwapa in her two novels, *Idu* and *Efuru*,[16] which tend to reinforce the belief in the universal truism of man's dominance and superiority over woman and in the rightful place of the woman being in the kitchen. Such works are obviously not emancipatory reading for women even though they are written by women. Thus, the latter are within the female tradition and 'to believe that common female experience in itself gives rise to a

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. H. M. Parshley (New York, Vintage, 1952), 301.

[11] Toril Moi, 'Feminist literary criticism', in Ann Jefferson and David Robey (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory, A Comparative Introduction* (Totowa, New Jersey, Barnes and Noble Books, 1982, 2nd edn., 1986), 204.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 2.

[14] Toril Moi, 'Feminist literary criticism', 206.

[15] Ibid., 207.

[16] Flora Nwapa, *Idu* (London, Heinemann, 1970); *Efuru* (London, Heinemann, 1978).

feminist analysis of women's situation, is to be at once politically naive and theoretically unaware',[17] as Moi declares. The differences between the two traditions are clearly marked and the two traditions may not be mixed.

By the same token, many feminists have regarded the word 'feminine' as representative of *social constructs*, i.e., 'patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms'. Hence, "feminine" represents nurture, and "female" nature in this usage.[18]

Having examined the meanings of the terms gender, feminist, feminine and female, I would argue that Dangarembga's novel is in the feminist tradition. The author does not merely describe women's experiences and leave them there; neither does she simply describe the socialization of women into their roles. Rather she depicts some women who try to protest against their usual socially accepted roles while others engage in a debate on how they are being used or misused by the men-folk. Chief among the women who protest against their feminine roles are Tambudzai, the fictional narrator and protagonist of the novel, Nyasha, her cousin, and Lucia, her aunt. Nagueyalti Warren has called Dangarembga a "womanist" writer (as opposed to feminist), committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female . . .'[19] By 'womanist' I believe Warren is placing *Nervous Conditions* closer to the *female* tradition, but I hope to show that the novel goes beyond that level. In my understanding of it, it is closer to Bessie Head's *Maru*[20] or Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*[21] (though the protagonist is still a young girl by the end of the novel). Let us then discuss the gender issues at play in the novel and try to show why its woman's voice is significantly feminist.

It is my contention that Tambudzai, the fictive narrator of *Nervous Conditions,* and Nyasha protest and rebel against their gender or feminine roles, which their society normally accords female children. Lucia, on the other hand, simply acts and behaves in the way that pleases her, comments on issues that affect women and female children and knows how to use and manipulate the men in her life, namely Takesure, Jeremiah and Babamukuru, to get what she wants. In the end she escapes from poverty and illiteracy to become an emancipated woman in her own way.

Right from the beginning of the story, Tambudzai categorizes the women in her story: a story which is not 'about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and

[17] Toril Moi, 'Feminist literary criticism', 207.

[18] Ibid., 209.

[19] Nagueyalti Warren, 'Nervous Conditions', in *Sage, A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* (Summer 1990), vii, 1, 69-70.

[20] Bessie Head, *Maru* (London, Heinemann, 1987).

[21] Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* (London, Fontana, 1977, repr., 1982).

about Nyasha's rebellion — Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful' (p.1). So Tambu and Lucia 'escaped'; her mother and aunt (Maiguru) got 'entrapped'; and Nyasha, her cousin 'rebelled'. Except for the mother and aunt, these other three women's (or girls') life story is not just a narrative of their socialization and submission to social norms. It is a story in which they have a say in how that life is to be lived and shaped; a story that catapults them beyond the kitchen and into a world of their own. Even though Tambu says Nyasha does not succeed in her 'rebellion', she has at least rebelled as opposed to accepting conditions she feels are entrapping. It is precisely that struggle against those conditions which causes her mental and nervous breakdown. We shall discuss that entrapping condition later. So clearly the novel cannot just be womanist or female. It goes beyond that because these two young female children and Lucia, the grown-up woman, question and *escape* or *rebel.*

The next inevitable series of questions which come to mind are: from what or whom do Tambu and Lucia escape; against what or whom does Nyasha rebel and what or who traps Tambu's mother and Maiguru?

To answer these questions we need to go back to the first page of the novel where Tambu says,

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

The equation here then is logically that brother's death = Tambudzai's escape and subsequent liberation through the pen. I will indeed call it a liberation and explain what I mean below. Tambu escapes or gets liberated from what her brother, Nhamo, stands for in this novel: patriarchy and sexism. These are the gender issues which concern this novel and as Greene and Kahn assert,

> The social construction of gender takes place through the workings of ideology. Ideology is that system of beliefs and assumptions — unconscious, unexamined, invisible — which represents 'the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence . . .'; but it is also a system of practices that informs every aspect of daily life — *the clothes* we wear, the machines we invent, the pictures we paint, *the words we use* . . . it authorizes its beliefs and practices as 'universal' and 'natural', presenting 'woman' not as a cultural construct but as eternally and everywhere the same.[22] (emphasis mine.)

[22] Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 2-3.

Tambudzai suffers from such stereotyped ideological indoctrination early in her life. When she debates with Nhamo, her brother, why he cannot help her with her plot so she can also go to school as she desperately wants to, he argues that 'wanting [to go to school] won't help'. So she asks why not, and for an answer Nhamo says, 'It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl . . .' Tambudzai stops listening to him at this point and in fact, she informs us that her concern for her brother died an unobtrusive death from that moment (p. 21). It is also Nhamo who steals Tambu's maize cobs when they are ripe, just to prove that she could never send herself to school. It is Nhamo who asks Tambu, 'Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? You are lucky you even managed to go back to Rutivi. With me it's different. I was meant to be educated' (p. 49).

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 (pp. 9–10). It is no wonder therefore, that Tambudzai feels relieved when Nhamo leaves for further education at the Mission and does not feel remorseful when he dies. But we should question why a mere boy would display such chauvinistic, sexist tendencies. It is as if Nhamo gets socialized into his gender role even before he is born. Here we can agree with Easthope who asserts that,

> Every society assigns new arrivals [i.e. newly borns] particular roles, including gender roles, which they have to learn. The little animal born into a human society becomes a socialized individual in a remarkably short time . . . This process of internalizing is both conscious and unconscious.[23]

This seems to be the case with Nhamo. The process of internalizing his gender role as a male personality who automatically looks down on the female persons has been done consciously and unconsciously 'in a remarkably short time'. Carol McMillan has also expressed the same view when she says,

> The thrust of feminist argument has . . . for the most part, rested on the belief that since (apart from reproduction) there are not 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. 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.[24]

[23] Antony Easthope, *What a Man Gotta Do*? 3.

[24] Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature: Some Philosophical Problems with Feminism* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1982), ix.

Having been socialized as early as possible and liking, even enjoying, his gender role thoroughly, Nhamo goes about trying to socialize Tambudzai into her feminine gender role with relish, and of course, with the help of their father. The two of them are trying to develop the required feminine traits of 'self-sacrifice and passivity' in Tambudzai and the other female children in their home like Netsai. The father goes on to advise Tambudzai to stop worrying that she cannot go to school because, after all, she cannot cook books and feed them to her husband. Instead, she should stay at home with her mother, learn to cook, clean and grow vegetables (p. 15). When she yearns to accompany him and Nhamo to the airport to welcome Babamukuru and family from England, the father once again calls her aside to implore her to curb her unnatural inclinations. For it was natural for her to stay at home and prepare for the home-coming (p. 33).

This is the attitude to which McMillan refers when she says that women are forced culturally to concentrate their activities exclusively in the domestic sphere, thereby inhibiting their development into creative and intellectual people. Indeed, Tambudzai's father gets agitated when he sees her reading a piece of newspaper used to wrap bread by the grocery shop people, thinking that she was emulating her brother and that the things she read would fill her mind with impractical ideas, making her quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living. In order for him to get enough cattle for her bride price at the time of her marriage, her conformity is absolutely mandatory (pp. 33–34). What the father is doing here then, is to socialize Tambudzai into her gender role using the ideology he knows best as described by Greene and Kahn. He is thereby oppressing Tambudzai as a girl/woman and Greene and Kahn are correct when they argue:

> The oppression of women is both a material reality, originating in material conditions, and a psychological phenomenon, a function of the way women and men perceive one another and themselves. But it is generally true that gender is constructed in *patriarchy* to serve the interests of male supremacy. Radical feminists argue that the construction of gender is grounded in male attempts to control female sexuality.[25]

It is true that the father is worried about Tambudzai's behaviour not only immediately, but also for the future when she becomes a wife to some other man: hence the need to control her as father and custodian of her personality and sexuality on behalf of the next authoritative man in her life, the husband. Babamukuru does the same to her and sees it as his duty to ensure that she 'develops into a good woman [which is necessary he

[25] Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 3.

says] because there is nothing that pleases parents more than to see their own children settle in their own families' (p. 88). Even the education she gets is seen in terms of preparing her for marriage as he says,

> In time you will be earning money. You will be in a position to be married by a decent man and set up a decent home. In all that we are doing for you, we are preparing you for this future life of yours and I have observed from my own daughter's behaviour that it is not a good thing for a young girl to associate too much with these white people, to have too much freedom. I have seen that girls who do that do not develop into decent women (p. 180).

To emphasize the difference between girls and boys, Chido, his son, associates so much with Whites that he is hardly home and he is totally alienated from his family as a result. But because he is a boy, it is all right as far as Babamukuru's expounded ideology is concerned!

So the radical feminists' view above is pertinent; these are indeed male attempts to control Tambudzai's sexuality, which should be practised and lived out in a particular way prescribed by man. We see also the truth in the above statement that 'gender is constructed in patriarchy to serve the interests of male supremacy'. To put it another way,

> woman is traditionally a use-value for man, an exchange value among men, . . . a commodity. As such, she remains the guardian of material substance, whose price will be established in terms of the standard of their work and of their need/desire, by 'subjects' . . . Women are marked phallicly by their fathers, husbands, procurers . . . [26]

Tambudzai is constantly made to feel that 'the chosen standards for "femininity" are natural' and so when she seems to resist conformity she is labelled unfeminine and unnatural[27] by Nhamo and her father.

Tambudzai therefore consciously refuses to be compartmentalized into this gender apartheid from an early age, which is why she escapes (to use her own expression). The question is *how* she escapes. She does so first, by questioning things and ideas where every other girl including her sister would conform and take things for granted (see pp. 5, 15–16); by resisting oppression from her brother and trying unsuccessfully to conscientise her sister Netsai who is perhaps too young to understand (pp. 9–10); and chiefly by sending herself back to school at a time when the parents say they can only afford Nhamo's fees (pp. 16–34). For a child of eight to work on her own plot determinedly and successfully, in spite of

[26] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One* trans. Catherine Porter *et al* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1985), 31.

[27] Toril Moi, 'Feminist literary criticism', 209.

all the attendant problems and disruptions, to earn enough money to finance her whole primary education is a feat few could achieve. Yet Tambudzai achieves that feat with inspiration from her late grandmother (p. 17–19). That self-dependence and determination are what enable her to escape from the throttling patriarchal sexism and catapults her into a different world where she achieves her liberation, a liberation marked by the demise of her brother (as circumstances in her favour would have it — the author's form emphasizes this point here when she practically eliminates Nhamo from the scene to make way for Tambu's educational advancement) and her success in getting Babamukuru's help to go to the Mission school for upper primary education, and Sacred Heart for secondary education; a liberation marked, most importantly, by the ability to tell her own story which is the book itself, *Nervous Conditions*. It all started with that maize field as she herself acknowledges (p. 91).

For as Ann Rosalind Jones argues,

> What are the sites of resistance or liberation in this phallocentric universe? *One is writing.* If women have been entrapped in the symbolic order, they will mark their escape from it by producing texts that challenge and move beyond the law-of-the Father.[28]

Hélène Cixous vehemently endorses this idea of writing as a liberating factor in a woman's life when she writes:

> [woman] must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.[29]

That is why I said above that Tambu's escape leads to her subsequent liberation.

Indeed, Tambudzai ruptures and transforms her world in a painful and halting process to the point where she is able to declare that

> quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and to refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process . . . that process of expansion (p. 204).

This is the liberation we are talking about for this girl. She is free to articulate her feelings and even to declare that she did not feel saddened

[28] Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Inscribing femininity: French theories of the feminine', in Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 85.

[29] Hélène Cixous, 'Utopias', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.), *New French Feminisms, An Anthology* (New York, Schocken Books, 1980), 250.

by her brother's death, something she could never say within her cultural confines or without the newly acquired freedom. From this point of view, Dangarembga can be said to be feminist in her approach in this novel.

One would have expected Nyasha to have a better deal; to be better understood at least within her nuclear family environment. Here is Tambudzai who is emulating life of an educated, more enlightened and more civilized girl. She admires Nyasha who lives in the environment of a mission school, whose work is less burdensome than her harsh rural life. Yet ironically, Nyasha suffers from this very education and life. Before she went to England with her parents she was a different, even if younger, person who had definite roots and a definite identity (pp. 42–43). When she returns from England, she and her brother Chido are alienated and for a start, they no longer understand or speak their mother tongue, Shona (pp. 42, 51–52). Nyasha's problem is compounded by the fact that she is a girl whom her parents expect miraculously and automatically to conform to their traditional ways. It appears that the education that her parents have acquired is extremely alienating. Their traditional culture is conservative, sexist, patriarchal — regarding women as second class citizens and therefore as people who should work at home, tending their husbands and children with no opinion of their own to be vocally expressed. Her mother tries to play that feminine role and succeeds to a certain extent. So that even if she is educated with an M.A. degree, she has no control of her world, a situation she deeply resents. Her resentment shows in her sometimes sarcastic comments (pp. 72–76, 162); her refusal to help with shopping for Jeremiah's wedding as a protest (pp. 162–164); her rebellious outburst against her husband and subsequently leaving the Mission (pp. 172–174); her articulating her opinion about Tambu's going to Sacred Heart, an opinion she would never give before (pp. 180–181), etc.

Nyasha on the other hand, is modern, carefree, unpretentious and feels she must be able to speak her mind. The main obstacle to her happiness is her father, Mr. Sigauke and Tambudzai's uncle or Babamukuru. There is a vagueness in the novel about the kind of education that this man acquired. He too came back from England different (pp. 80–82; 102), and his whole behaviour is abnormal. He no longer interacts with his family freely and naturally. He is always aloof and people should not talk or make noise in his presence . . . his nerves are bad, we are told. When greeted he merely 'grunts' (p. 80), yet at the slightest excuse he flies at Nyasha to scold or reprimand her or to order her to shut up or generally to do what he says. The author here has not described enough reasons for this nor given enough background to Mr. Sigauke for us to understand why he has turned out this way. Whatever it is, it has to do with his education which has alienated him in a different way from the way it has affected his children.

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 the inmates of that homestead feel helpless, powerless and some even feel emasculated by his severe presence.

So far as women are concerned, perhaps we can agree with Lemmer when she explains that we should not assume:

> Education is the only nor even the most important variable in gender equality. Neither [should we] presume that society or the school is gender neutral; rather, [we should look] at schools as patriarchal institutions which have served to perpetuate women's position in society.[30]

Certainly this applies to Mr. Sigauke who does not consider women to be his equals, but second class citizens who should do what men like him say. He always feels he must subdue Nyasha for instance; she must do as he says. When she tries to tell the truth about herself, he feels she is challenging him (see p. 193). She must not read certain books. She must sit down at table and eat all her food because he says so, but must wait till her mother has finished serving him (or to use his expression, she must wait until her mother has finished waiting on him).

This home at the Mission, which should be pleasant and liberating physically and spiritually as imagined and visualized by Tambudzai, ends up being very stifling. In the village, at least Tambudzai could talk to her father and even ask questions sometimes. At the Mission Nyasha can do nothing of the sort. Her mother is nervous, unsure of herself, scared of her husband, appears delicate and childish, even though she definitely does not like her lot. Nyasha suffers more from these stifling, nervous conditions than her brother because being a boy, he can do what he wants. He is rarely at home, does not visit the village often and gets totally assimilated into the White people's culture as he associates more and more with the Bakers. This leaves Nyasha at the crossroads, not knowing which way to turn: either to the inhibitive new home culture, or to the African culture which these same parents neglected to teach her, or to the freer Western culture for which she is reprimanded time and again. The father does not approve of the words she speaks or the clothes she wears like mini-skirts, while the mother does not mind them and in fact buys the mini-dresses for her (which could be her way of protesting against the father's values — see pp. 37 and 109).

[30] Eleanor M. Lemmer, 'Gender issues in education', in Elise I. Dekker and Eleanor M. Lemmer (eds.), *Critical Issues in Modern Education* (Durban, Butterworth Publishers, 1993), 6. See also Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference,* 19-20.

Each time Nyasha works late at school, she is said to have been socializing with boys (p. 189). The day she comes home late from a dance because she wanted to learn a few more dance steps from Andrew Baker, she is accused of being a whore because 'no decent girl would stay out alone, with a boy, at that time of night . . . ' (p. 113).

It is these kinds of accusations, assumptions and orders that Nyasha rebels against. She cannot simply take them sheepishly, obediently, placidly. For example, on the Andrew Baker dance problem, in anger and frustration she ends up shouting, 'What do you want me to say? . . . You want me to admit I'm guilty, don't you. All right then. I *was* doing it, whatever you're talking about. There. I've confessed.' (p. 113) When he beats her, Nyasha cannot just stand there, taking it (c.f. p. 190). She returns the blow to her father's horror, who vows that he will kill her for challenging him that way (pp. 114–115). Ironically, because of her rural background and different cultural understanding of how children should talk to their parents, Tambudzai finds herself not approving of Nyasha's carefree nature either, particularly of the way she interacts with her parents.

There is also the pretence and hypocrisy in Mr. Sigauke. He worries more about 'what people would say' than what he is and what he should be or should do truthfully for his family regardless of outsiders' opinion. The author has not been explicit as to the source of this attitude in him, but it surfaces each time he 'disciplines' Nyasha (pp. 113–114). Apparently Nyasha should *appear* to be decent by not befriending or associating with boys, not for her own or her family's sake, but more to impress the people around the mission as he angrily pronounces,

> What will people say when they see Sigauke's daughter carrying on like that? . . . How can you go on disgracing me? Me! Like that! No, you cannot do it. I am respected at this mission. I cannot have a daughter who behaves like a whore.' (p. 114)

This episode also helps Tambu to become more conscientized about the gender issues involving herself, Nyasha and all the women in her life. She realizes that it is not a question of rural backwardness, urban advancement or even education that matters. It is a problem of femaleness versus maleness and that they are all victims as long as they are female (pp. 115–116).

Nyasha is no whore, as the reader and the other characters in the novel know She is an intelligent girl whose insight into social and political issues is very sharp. She analyses issues maturely and is the only other character (besides Tambu's mother) who seems to understand the crippling colonizing effect of Christianity. For example, she criticizes her father's solution to Jeremiah's poverty when the latter suggests a Christian

wedding. She gets quite annoyed with this and delivers a lecture on the dangers of assuming that Christian ways were progressive ways: 'It's bad enough . . . when a country gets colonized, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end.' (p. 147) She sees through Mr. Baker's interest in having her brother, Chido, attend a multi-racial school in Salisbury on a full scholarship, 'to ease his conscience . . . you know how it is, *bwana* to *bwana*: The boy needs the cash, old man! . . .' (p. 106). She forbids Tambu to join Lucia and her mother in over-praising her father for offering Lucia a job: 'Don't you dare [ululate] . . . Thank him, yes . . . but not make him into a hero.' It was the obligation of all decent people in positions like Babamukuru's to do such things (pp. 159–160).

Sadly, in the effort to assert this kind of human truth, to assert her rights and herself generally, she gets brutalized. She wastes away and finally succumbs to a mental and nervous breakdown which comes out through the food battle with her father. He constantly forces her to eat *all* her food as evidence of his authority over her and believes that she challenges him if she does not eat even if she is full or not hungry (p. 189). This makes Nyasha equally determined to gobble up the food and then throw it up, a symbol of final defiance of her father's maniacal oppression and she rebels against this ultimate symbol of patriarchal authority (pp. 189–199). In her delirium though, she partially but accurately identifies the cause of her and her family's misery . . . it is 'them [Whites, missionaries, colonizers] . . . *they* did it to them [i.e. her parents] but especially to him. They put him through it all . . .' Her anguish comes through when she says, 'Look what they've done to us, . . . I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you'. The real cause of her breakdown then is a combination of colonization and the father's desire to uphold his African tradition's patriarchal, sexist values. The latter is what really makes him feel that he cannot and should not listen to women or girls like Nyasha or children in general. After all, he is the man of the house, 'the father' (p. 189). He even fails to notice the symptoms of his daughter's suffering! (p. 199) In the end, Nyasha becomes a psychotic who suffers from not knowing what or who she is at the level of being.[31] It becomes worse for her after Tambudzai leaves for Sacred Heart because then she has no-one to laugh with and the latter being so young and still naive and impressionable, forgets to write comforting letters to her desperate cousin or even to respond to her letters (pp. 196 ff).

Tambudzai points out that Nyasha's rebellion fails and perhaps she is correct because Mr. Sigauke does not recognize Nyasha's illness to be a result of his treatment of her. He is not changed by it and neither is the

[31] Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, 'The sexual masquarade: A Lacanian theory of sexual difference', in Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher (eds.), *Lacan and the Subject of Language* (New York and London, Routledge, 1987), 151.

mother. So that while the child has made a strong statement to the reader, the parents have remained exactly the same, unmoved, and perhaps will even blame her for getting ill! The fact remains that Nyasha has not been subdued. She has rebelled and that is a strong enough statement to push the novel beyond being mere womanist or female. Because she has no other place to go or a different home to run to, her rebellion becomes a psychological one — as if to say if she cannot physically get away, she will psychologically not be tied down to these repelling conditions. So she ends up under psychiatric care.

Although Tambudzai's and Nyasha's mothers are entrapped, they do not like their woman's lot. The problem for both women, however, is that they do not know how to get out of their situations. Tambudzai's mother reacts in a variety of ways: in support of her daughter's project of the maize field though in an indirect, subtle way that fools the father into thinking that she is against it (pp. 17, 24–25); by trying to convince her daughter to accept her lot and enjoy it the best way possible (pp. 16, 20); by accusing Baba and Maiguru (especially the latter) of killing her son, Nhamo; and venting her frustration by ridiculing Maiguru (pp. 54, 139–140). When all her protest seems futile, she simply resigns herself to her situation (p. 153), withdraws into herself and suffers from 'unlocalised aches all over her body which she thought was a bad omen for the baby she was carrying'[32] (p. 129). She also stops cleaning the home, including the toilet, and eventually stops washing herself and her baby, and becomes a psychological invalid as she suffers from a serious depression. She even goes through the wedding ordeal mechanically, without interest (pp. 129, 162, 184–185). It takes Lucia, her more aggressive sister, to jerk her back to life (p. 185).

Yet Tambu's mother is quite a clever, intelligent woman; she is the second person in the novel who is aware of the racism in the country and how it makes the woman's position doubly burdensome (see p. 16). She is also aware of the alienating effect of Western education which she says 'took [her son's] tongue out so that he could not speak to [her]', referring to Nhamo who claimed that he could no longer speak Shona after being at the Mission for a few weeks or months. When Tambudzai tells her about Nyasha's illness, she identifies the problem immediately as 'the Englishness . . . It will kill them all if they aren't careful . . . to look at him [i.e. at Babamukuru] he may look all right, but there's no telling what price he's paying . . .' (p. 203). She proceeds to warn her daughter, 'You just be careful.' We know already the price Babamukuru is paying though he

[32] See Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, repr. 1974, Book 2, Chapter 9), 225. This condition reminds one of Mrs. Gradgrind who also suffers the same way, more from a psychological than physiological illness caused by a stifling environment of fact, fact, fact.

himself is oblivious to that fact. So her assessment and conclusions are correct. It is just that she sees no way out of this womanly trap. For instance, she has no power or control over her fertility,[33] a situation which, intentionally or unintentionally results in yet another baby, Dambudzo, and of course, he has to be a boy as if to replace Nhamo and please the patriarchy (see Babamukuru's comment showing that he has already started saving for him without thinking about the other girls in the family — p. 180). A lot of times, Maiguru reacts nervously and childishly to her situation of entrapment. Tambudzai thinks that because she is educated, her life is a bed of roses. But to her surprise, she learns that Maiguru does not even receive her salary! (pp. 101–102) She is childish in her talk at times, for instance when she coos, 'Nyasha-washa, my lovely dove' (p. 75); or 'my Daddy-dear . . . my Daddy-pie . . . my Daddy-d' (pp. 80–81) etc., and she does that when she is scared of her husband or when she is nervously covering up something about Nyasha or trying to excuse her behaviour. Yet she resents a lot of things that her husband does and how she has to work hard for his family. The climax is reached when she too rebels in her own way and walks out of the house to go to Salisbury where she stays with her brother for a week, though Nyasha does not approve of the fact that she has to run away to a man (perhaps this symbolizes the total entrapment for this woman — there is nowhere to go, she moves in circles — pp. 172–173). However, given time, she may work out her life differently.

So these two women, Tambu's mother and her Maiguru (notice we do not even hear their names) end up locked up in their situations but they have shown us that they do not enjoy their circumstances. In the village, Tambu's mother leads discussion against the patriarchy who try Lucia in her absence (pp. 137–142). The only problem is that these women end up victimizing Maiguru as if she is the problem, which demonstrates the women's fear of pointing at the real problem for them, the patriarchy. The fact that we know this means that the author has not just described a woman's condition and left it at that. She has demonstrated a certain kind of unrest which threatens to explode at some future point in time. That is why these two women are said to be trapped: that future is too far. We wanted it now!

Lucia on the other hand, does and says what she wants. She disciplines Takesure when he speaks nonsense about her (pp. 144–145); she flatters Babamukuru into finding her a job at the Mission (pp. 156–159); she frankly tells Babamukuru off for punishing Tambudzai and for forcing her parents into a white wedding without seeking their opinion about it (pp. 170–171); and she gives her sister a shock treatment to get her back to health when she degenerates into a psycho-physical invalid (pp. 184–186).

[33] On this issue of woman's control over her fertility, Lemmer argues that 'the development of the birth control pill in the early 1960s gave women an effective measure of control over their own bodies and their reproductive potential for the first time in history'. Yet Tambu's mother is in no position to benefit from it. Obviously Maiguru is in a better position seeing she only has two children and a career even though that has not guaranteed her happiness. See Eleanor M. Lemmer, 'Gender issues . . . ', 6.

Generally, then, she asserts her rights without fear of anyone, even the most revered Babamukuru. She uses men to get what she wants in life, including Takesure (whom she calls a 'cockroach') and Babamukuru, and her final triumph is that she enrolls in Grade One in order to fight illiteracy while working at the Mission. Hence, she escapes from poverty and male dominance. Her future is certain to be bright; she too has not been static in the novel and perhaps it is significant that she remains unmarried. But we also notice that the men are not changed or conscientised by her different attitude, with Takesure calling her 'vicious and unnatural . . . uncontrollable' (p. 145), and Babamukuru applauding her in her absence saying, 'That one, he chuckled to Maiguru, she is like a man herself.' (p. 171) It seems to be difficult for these men to acknowledge that Lucia is a person with her own good opinion and style of living her life independently of the fetters that bind other women. So they take her as a joke.

We must realize that in this novel it is not only the women who feel oppressed by the patriarchal system as enforced by Babamukuru. Other 'lesser' men feel the oppression acutely, particularly when they find it difficult to fulfil their masculine gender roles. These 'lesser' men are Jeremiah and Takesure. The two feel castrated or emasculated in front of the towering image of Babamukuru. The aggression they display towards the women is typical of men who have lost the grip on their manhood. Babamukuru's aggression in turn is typical of a man who displays the side-effects that accompany loss of face, loss of grip on his own culture, and humiliation elsewhere. He too has been emasculated or castrated by the colonial system or by the educational system which blatantly displays its inherent racism. He cringes to these foreign people (though we have to remember that the author has not been quite specific on this), so he has to bully the women and the other younger and less successful men to compensate for this emasculation. These are men who are no longer sure of themselves, of their gender roles within their own societies; it all seems to begin with Babamukuru who then pretends that everything is all right with him. It is these other men who do not know what they are doing. Hence, Tambudzai wishes his brother and father could

> stand up straight like Babamukuru, but they always looked as though they were cringing . . . I used to suppose that they saw it too and that it troubled them so much that they had to bully whoever they could to stay in the picture at all.[34] (pp. 49–50)

[34] See the same situation of female victimization by an emasculated or 'castrated' man in the short story, 'Man', in Alexander Kanengoni, *Effortless Tears* (Harare, Baobab Books, 1993), 107-114.

One symptom of this emasculation is, for instance, Jeremiah's improvidence. He does not work hard to fend for his family, so that in a year when all people around have a bumper harvest, his family's is poor (pp. 14–15, 45–46). It is his wife who then works hard enough to obtain enough school fees for at least one child and of course, that child has to be the boy not the girl, Tambudzai, even though the money has been generated through woman's toil, a situation Irigaray explains by saying,

> . . . From the very origin of private property and the patriarchal family, social exploitation occurred. In other words, all the social regimes of 'History' are based upon the exploitation of one 'class' of producers, namely women, whose reproductive use-value (reproductive of children and of the labour force) and whose constitution as exchange value underwrite the symbolic order as such, without any compensation in kind going to them for that 'work.'[35]

The other symptoms are that Jeremiah constantly begs from Babamukuru and others (p. 31); he takes credit for what he has not actually done but which is normally man's responsibility. For example, he takes credit for sending Tambudzai back to school when it is her own earnings that enabled her to do that (p. 46); he claims Tambu's money as his by virtue of his being her father (pp. 29–30); he and Takesure take credit for rethatching the huts at the village home (or the homestead as it is called in the novel), when in fact the latter had flatly refused to do so leaving Tambu and Lucia to do the thatching (p. 154), etc. In his turn, Babamukuru who commends these improvident men, does not even ask who did all these things, assuming automatically that it had to be the men of the house! I think the women here are far too modest. They could have set the record straight.

To further understand the behaviour of men and women in this novel we should also refer to Toril Moi's discussion of Beauvoir's main thesis (in the latter's book, *The Second Sex*), where she says:

> . . . throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men: 'woman' has been constructed as man's Other, denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions. Or, in more existential terms: patriarchal ideology presents woman as immanence, man as transcendence.[36]

[35] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is not One*, 173. One is also reminded of men like Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (London, Heinemann, 1977 — see especially Chapters 4 and 19), who are helped by the women to grow yams, yet the yam is then regarded as the *man's* crop, women having no authority in its distribution to their own households.

[36] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and N.Y., Methuen, 1985), 92.

These are the fundamental assumptions that

> dominate all aspects of social, political and cultural life and . . . how women themselves internalize this objectified vision, thus living in a constant state of 'inauthenticity' or 'bad faith' as Sartre might have put it.[37]

Babamukuru exacerbates the other men's condition by his patronizing attitude towards them and virtually everyone and everything else (see pp. 86–88). For instance he forbids his brother, Jeremiah, to kill oxen because they are his (i.e. Babamukuru's — p. 122); he orders Takesure to leave 'my house' meaning the village home (p. 124). Generally, he calls the homestead 'his' home (p. 127) and poses and acts as *the* benefactor for all these people who have also come to believe (seriously or in mock seriousness) that without him they would all die (see pp. 158–159, 166–169, 183 among other examples). Men like Takesure therefore succumb completely to this pressure and become totally useless, which is why Lucia can even discipline him in public. He has a family but cannot fend for it and so runs away to the homestead to enjoy Jeremiah's company as they go drinking (after all, Babamukuru was even saving money for him to finish marrying one of his wives — so why should he worry?).

To show that Babamukuru's presence oppresses these men, when he leaves the homestead after Christmas, they all give a sigh of relief: 'Whew! It was good to have *Mukoma* here, it was good . . . but it puts a weight on your shoulders, a great weight on your shoulders!' (p. 152) Besides feeling the weight on their shoulders, they no longer have a good self-image, which is necessary for one to function securely in society. 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].[38]

In the absence of this gender role, the men suffer and feel they must make others suffer too.

There are other women, 'the paternal aunts', who have been described by Tambudzai as having 'a patriarchal status' and so have the privilege of sitting with the men, not doing any house work and endorsing the men's decisions. It is a duty these aunts must perform. They rarely offer any of their opinions though, because the men, of course, do not expect that (see pp. 132, 136, 143). This is not to say that these women agree with the men

[37] Ibid.

[38] Jeane H. Block, *Sex Role Identity and Ego Development* (London, Jossey Bass Publishers, 1984), 2.

in all they do, as shown by Tete's ridiculing Babamukuru's 'cure for Jeremiah's indulgence', whether it should be by 'a cleansing or a wedding' (p. 148). Thus, Toril Moi correctly points out:

> The fact that women often enact the roles patriarchy has prescribed for them does not prove that the patriarchal analysis [of woman's position *vis-à-vis* man — see notes 33 and 34 above] is right.[39]

To conclude this discussion, we can say that both men and women suffer at the hands of the patriarchal system in this novel and both sexes also suffer from the effects of colonialism. However, women suffer more at the hands of the men as they are often abused and denigrated. Even Chido, Nyasha's brother, denigrates women implicitly in the one statement he utters when he says, 'I hope Nyasha has made my cake,' and when assured she has, he continues, 'Good. Because you never know with Nyasha.' (p. 88)

By placing this novel in the feminist tradition, one understands the issues more clearly, as Nelly Furman argues,

> Feminist criticism unveils the prejudices at work in our appreciation of cultural artifacts, and shows us how the linguistic medium promotes and transmits the values woven through the fabric of our society.[40]

Certainly this happens when one reads *Nervous Conditions* through feminist eyes. For as Mary Eagleton argues,

> the problem is not only who is speaking and how she is speaking but to whom she is speaking and on whose behalf . . . not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?[41]

Tambudzai the narrator of this novel has made it plain who she is, to whom she is speaking and about whom she is speaking.

In the final analysis, however, I feel that it is not a question of men and women fighting each other for dominance. Rather, it is a question of men and women cooperating and working together to achieve emancipation from stifling traditions. This point is demonstrated in the novel by Tambudzai getting assistance from Mr. Matimba, the teacher who helps her sell her mealies and then convinces her father that the money earned

[39] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 92.

[40] Nelly Furman, 'The politics of language: Beyond the gender principle?', in Greene and Kahn, *Making a Difference*, 59.

[41] Mary Eagleton, 'Finding a female tradition', in Mary Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory, A Reader* (Oxford and New York, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1986, repr. 1987), 5.

is hers. She also gets assistance from Babamukuru (with all his faults), who affords her the opportunity to complete her primary school and to continue to secondary school. These are positive actions from men to advance a girl's cause.