

**NEGATION OF SELF : GENDER AND IDENTITY IN TSITSI
DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS***

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Abstract

When *Nervous Conditions* was published in 1988 by Tsitsi Dangarembga, it contributed to the newly emerging corpus of woman's writings in Zimbabwe. The novel set in the post colonial era during 1960's in most of the African countries is a breathtaking and agonizingly candid recollection of women's sufferings in patriarchal dominion. Gender is an important aspect and overreaching theme in the novel which Dangarembga portrayed a panoramic picture of the world where women suffered and struggled, sometimes, fatally, to overcome the stringent and rigid social and cultural practices that bound their life choices at an very early age. Denial, rejection and negation of Identity are also a conspicuous parameter in *Nervous conditions*. This paper studies the issues of gender and identity prevalent in African socio-cultural paradigm through the lens of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*.

Key words: Gender, Identity, Patriarchy, Denial.

Nervous Conditions (1988), novel by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembwa is her first novel which is set in the post-colonial Rhodesia during its pre-independent era. The novel traces

the gradual development of a young Shona girl, Tamburadzai Sigauke, from her early childhood, through adolescence to young adulthood in her native uncle's home. Right from the start, Tambu, main protagonist of the novel, is shown to have strong sense of identity and a clear vision of what she wants to be in life- a western education which she firmly believes to be her key to success and happiness. The whole novel is a study of how these particular desires for higher aspirations, in the long run pave way for her total disillusionment and ultimate awakening of the impending harsher realities of life.

Having a typical Bildungsroman- development of the character through the initial years of the youthful protagonist, Dangarembwa's penetrating analysis of gender and identity in the traditional Shona patriarchy and her bold endeavors in uncovering the ruthless social strata makes her novel a feminist enterprise. Gender inequality and search for deprived identity is the foremost concern of Dangarembwa in the novel. If probed deeper, one can find Dangarembwa's deep concerns for association with post- colonial politics, representation of feminist consciousness and female ambivalence towards sexuality.

Tambu was born a girl and that it is a fundamental and self-evident disadvantage for her, because in the male dominated African culture dictates that the oldest male child is deemed to be the future head of the family. The real twist in the story comes when Nhamo, Tambu's elder brother, dies. He was deemed to be the future head of the family. But his untimely death has given a jolt to the socio-cultural paradigm of the African tradition hierarchy as there is no other male child in the family to take the charge of the headship. Consequently Tambu steps into the role of future provider, though she is restrained with prejudices and other follies of the society as any other African women at that time faced. Her lone fight for education and better life is betted against by the gender factor. Throughout the novel, one can find that Dangarembwa has voiced her strong resentment for the gender inequality which is as infectitious as disease, that kills the aspirations of many African girls and discourages them from having any kind of higher ambitions in life.

The lessons of Tambu's early childhood are quite evident of what she is being taught. She learnt from her father and brother that it is no use wanting to go to school as it is a vain endeavor on the part of women in the society; *'it's same everywhere; because you are a girl'*. (p21). Her mother also extols her about woman's role in society when she tells her *"this business of womanhood is very burden...you can't decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, you are the one who has to make them...And these days it is worse, with the 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"*. (p16).

Later, in the progression of the novel she learns from her mother's sister, Lucia that it is possible to reject patriarchy but they have to pay the price as getting the label of 'whore' or 'witch' as they are denying the rules of the society. Nevertheless Tambu manages to fight the odds against this suppression, endurance and revolting against the tradition rules of society, in return managed to fund her own education in the school. This act of her determination caught the attention of headmaster uncle who secures her a well deserved place at missionary school, which is quite an achievement for Tambu.

The sudden turn of the events in her life catapulted her from her world of aspirations and dreams, gave a dazzling and alarming picture of the reality revealing the imperfections and trivialities of her new role in the family behind the disguise of its glamorous visage. Through this passing phase of Tambu's life, Dangarembwa tried to assert the White supremacy and its fatal consequences on the family and society. Though out the novel the Whites as such are hardly

appear but their presence is always felt as the delineating effect on family members. Dangarembwa's portrait of Tambu's Uncle Babamuraku reveals breathtaking results of white influence on the mindset of the family members. Babamuraku is well educated and is dean of the missionary school. Throughout the novel he is shown as a complex character, not being a responsible father and a family member. Babamuraku is shown desperately working towards securing the image of uprightedness and Christian devotion which earned him the accolades from the English missionaries. On the other side Babamuraku's family is completely dependent on him who sees him as a God-like image who will rescue them from poverty and destitution. This double burden on Babamuraku leads him to be uncompromisingly authoritative in nature of his ruling the household. Only his revolting daughter Nyasha protests against his domination thus showing the de-patriarchalization of the fundamental male dominated society.

Like her husband, Maiguru also suffers the oppressions between the two cultures. She is also a well educated woman who can provide for herself while working at mission school. Her brief stay in England had led her to become envious of her life as she thinks that she is more capable of leading a better life as in England. At one point of time she leaves her husband as she thinks that she is viewed as a second hand citizen, but later returns as she thinks it is better for her to say as in a passive role. Maiguru's desires and aspirations were also submerged under the demanding situation of her dual role as mother and wife though she is well educated and can be independent in terms of work and establishing herself on her own.

At the centre of Dangarembwa's novel are the women who are always in compromising situations with an innate desire for the quest for their identity as such in the patriarchal society. One can find the foremost victim of this societal dogma is Tambu's mother who is always trapped in the mesh of '*poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of women hood on the other*'. With no clue about her own identity in family, she couldn't conceive an identity for her daughter as well outside the marriage.

However Dangarembwa's novel *Nervous Conditions* shows one character which had always defied these societal restrictions that are meted out on the women in her family. Only in Lucia, the harsh and outspoken maternal aunt of Tambu, we find the glimpse of a possibility of an alternative route to emancipation. Lucia stays unknown relatively throughout the novel. She is believed to be having affairs with many men who is against the rules of the society. She is very independent in nature and wants to educate herself and not fall to the prey to the male domination as other women in the society.

The option for Tambu is very less and complicated compared to the situations she finds herself in. She ponders about the respective sufferings of her mother and aunt and the also of her cousin Nyasha whose violent rebellion against the patriarchy which though had led to a disastrous result. By constantly highlighting the utter disillusionment and plight of the women in the novel, Dangarembwa has shown the nervous conditions of them in patriarchal society where they struggle to have an identity of their own as such.

These situations and incidents surrounding Tambu's life have disturbed her equilibrium temporarily though it couldn't rattle her will to succeed and determination. With the shocking revelation of the Nyasha's condition, there developed an ever growing mutual affection and understanding between Nyasha and Tambu which in return ensures Tambu's awakening. With Nyasha's example serving as a warning to Tambu of her own vulnerability she, ultimately embarks on a painful journey of acquiring the wisdom which will help her in rescuing herself from the clutches of multiple oppressions which are trying to diminish and impoverish her. This awakening of hers helps her to defy the odds of societal constraints and she stands upright

against the gender inequality. That Tambu's newly found identity as independent women defying all the odds of the society is crucial to the novel. Her journey is one of a passage through the turbulent period of Oppression to Liberation. In that she provides herself as a role model for many other women whose example can inspire many others who can also save themselves. Her tantalizing comment on the end of the novel shows her solidarity and hope for better future as she says that there is enough material "to fill up another volume" (p204). Tambu though with her new found identity is always on her toes as she is cautious of her daily situations and nervousness of the conditions that surround her.

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