Traditional Laws and Feminist Trajectory in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Orji Eze

Abstract

Indeed, the need for development in post covid-19 calls for deliberate promotion of gender equality and enabling laws within African societies. In recent times, there has been growing awareness in the development sector of the crucial significance of gender questions and laws for both understanding and promotion of egalitarian society. Issues surrounding gender and law are therefore not peripheral but central for all round achievement and development in Africa. Therefore, there should be a paradigm shift in all approaches to harness the potentialities of women. This should serve as a gauge towards achieving complete social transformation, independence, equality, freedom and dignity of the African woman in a highly inhibitive patriarchal legal system. A feministic approach is used as a discursive and interpretive slate for understanding the paradigm shift as regards the nature of women's oppression and domination on the one hand and total freedom from subordination and marginalization on the other from inhibitive cultural laws. A panoply of factors and forces (laws) have been noted, if not understood by most feminists in their multifarious feminism discourses to be responsible for gender inequalities, oppression and subjugation between opposite sexes around the globe. It follows that, in the absence of a holistic, stable, well-grounded, and coordinated strategic paradigm of thought and action to approach and settle womanbeings emancipatory agenda in the post covid-19 era, the success of women's collective or individual determination to initiate radical social change and a total transformation of the conditions of their lives from traditional/cultural practices remain low in the face of restrictive and inhibitive laws even in our modern era. Consequently, this paper makes an attempt to discover and uncover what some of these practices are and the different ways, in which they militate against, constrain male/female relationships in the African society and the world at large as could be seen in Shona traditional society as portrayed in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. This article advances the argument against the antagonistic reception of post covid-19 feminist trajectory against obnoxious norms in an African milieu occasioned by colonialism. To this end, such determinism for radical social change and law transformation by womanbeings is within the ambit of paper.

Keywords: Feminist trajectory, traditional society, Freedom, Equality, Colonialism

Introduction

Is being a woman actually a burden? As the Shona traditional law requires, why would one not feel sorry for one's brother's death? In *Nervous Conditions*, the story is not after all about death, but about escapism from adverse societal restrictions; about entrapment; and about rebelliousness - far-minded and isolated, women/daughters, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful if not for their revisionist mind set against the burden of inhibitive cultural norms.

Feminists see society as patriarchal, that is, a society ruled and dominated by men. In this assumption, men "are the ruling class" and promulgate laws that favour them while women "the subject class" bear the brunt and burden of the unfavourable laws (Sibanda 2016). They see the family in modern African societies as the key institution in oppressing women. They believe that women have always been oppressed and exploited and therefore revolutionary social change and transformation can present the possibility of their emancipation, equality, dignity and freedom. Freedom from inglorious cultural practices for the African woman would require autonomy, responsibility and rejection of dependency and marginalization enshrined in the obnoxious traditional laws. For the radical African feminist, "freedom is acquired by conquest of the abrogative patriarchal domination, not by gift" (Sibanda 2016). To ensure total freedom for women from some societal rules and regulations that keep them down, it must be pursued consistently, constantly, and responsibly.

Liberty and equality are not ideas located outside of man; or are they ideas which become myth. They are rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. In this vein therefore, this study looks at the process of contesting the (Shona) patriarchal and male-centered cultural traditional laws and assumptions that have become gender discriminatory, derogatorily inhibitive in approach and deteriorating in application. This paper is purposed to discover and uncover impediments, contradictions and challenges which forestall the triumph of women in achieving their liberation and emancipation in Africa as projected by Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions*. It follows that to secure freedom for the African womanbeings, the African black women's emancipatory agenda and reclamation in post covid-19 must assume a collective struggle within their families which form a critical landmark toward human harmony and survival.

Therefore, the spectrum of modern African feminist thought is given a wider dimension in *Nervous Conditions*. This is a most welcome development primarily because it has filled the nostalgic problematic gender gap between male and female in unwarranted laws within the African milieu.

Patriarchal Norms (Laws) and Gender Inequality in *Nervous Conditions*

The different social profiles and statuses of men and women in any society provide a window through which we establish the different challenges which women face and the limitations they encounter in dealing with and coming to terms with such challenges obtainable in that

environment as the Shona patriarchal society and traditional laws portray. Damlegue Lare describes a patriarchal society as:

> a society which lays too much emphasis on the social functions of men as public decision makers, heirs of family properties, community leaders and wisdom keepers, relegating women (to) secondary positions as home-keepers, child-bearers, housewives…the appendages of men. (Lare 108)

This conception clearly showcases the asymmetrical power relations between men and women and the different privileges the opposite sexes have in terms of access to opportunities. This is the case in most African patriarchal societies where power and socio-economic privileges are enjoyed by men more than women. Again, it is all about the needs and sensibilities of women in a typically stereotyped African society (family) where they are not being considered a priority, or even legitimate. It is not about those days women felt the injustice of the society they were actually part of but what is also obtainable in present African society. Feminism as Orji Eze opines, decries oppression and marginalization of women as upheld by the societal norms as well as the subjugation of womanhood in the world of men (34). But then, the situation every time is about women being thought and seen as an insignificant other in a society that belongs to both sexes. Tsitsi Dangarembga asserts through Tambu that thinking about and feeling the injustice of it all, this is how one comes to dislike her own brother, father, mother and in fact, everybody.

Talcott Parsons sees the role of women within the context of the family. According to him, a woman has an expressive role, while a man has instrumental role in the family (1959). A woman's expressive role provides warmth, security and emotional support which are necessary ingredients for socialization. The man's instrumental roles lead him to stress and anxiety. The expressive female according to Ityavyar (12), heals the tension of the instrumental male by providing the latter with love, kindness and friendly understanding. Today, the rural, back-house, timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman has been replaced according to Helen Chukwuma by "her modern counterpart, a full rounded human being, rational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own" (2). Formerly, African female folks trained ambition revolved round marriage and procreation, with no individualism, no assertiveness as could be said of Tambu's mother, Mainini. Her female obligations according to traditional legal codes, ranged further to cooking the family meals, honouring her husband's bed on invitation, and other times merging with the home environment peacefully. On the contrary, time has gone when woman's individualism and freedom are asserted only through such positions. Unexpectedly, prostitution appears to be the only way of bursting the legal system of male domination within the marriage institution as Maiguru, Tambu's aunty does. In a show of defiance, she runs away from her husband's home for a brief interval - but only to her brother's house thereby substituting one male authority for another.

On gender inequality, the traditional Marxists argue that socialism is the more fundamental answer to female oppression. Equality between the sexes can only be achieved in a socialist society where the forces of production are commonly owned. The wives cease to be merely producers of heirs to the husbands' wealth, because there will be no private property to be inherited. With the transformation of means of production into social property, wage-labour will disappear as well as the proletariat (Ityavyar 21). Based on the biological inequality thought, socialist feminists in the work of Shulamith Firestone had argued that historically, women have borne the greater burden for the perpetuation of the species (1970). It is the biological inequality of the sexes that gave rise to case-like system in which men receive "ego gratification" and enjoy creature comfort from their domination of women. Biological inequality has been extended to socio-economic inequality. Feminists believe that sex inequality stems from these facts of biological inequalities and not from the mode of production or existence of private property as Marx and Engels claimed. They advise that women must go beyond nature to ensure liberation. Even though they may have explained why men dominate women, they have not provided a plausible explanation of how women's and men's roles are socially constructed. Consequently, the natural act of procreation even conspires against women in that without a man's orgasm conception cannot take place. Nowadays, it is a different story because that law and the game have long been changed in favour of the womanbeings.

The capitalist mode of production and the ideological mode of patriarchy must be analyzed separately. Roberta Hamilton suggests that both Marxist and feminist accounts must be used in the analysis of women in society (1978). Feminism is then concerned with the study of how biological inequalities and differences are transformed into their social meanings and institutionalized. The first, requires a socialist revolution, the second, working on the preconditions of developing technology requires an overturning of that which has been considered natural (Hamilton 91-2). There should be a blend between Marxism and feminism such that while Marxism deals with the social relations of women and men within a given mode of production, feminism will concentrate on forms of patriarchal ideology within a given mode of production.

In furtherance, Social Biologists (Robin Fox, Lionel Tiger and Murdock) – a group of early functionalists have explained gender differences. They argue that the biological differences between the sexes are the necessary and effective causes of the division of labour by sex in all societies; they believe that women are naturally inferior to men and this is inherited from our primate ancestors (1972). This according to them informs how tasks are assigned to men and women in society. Tiger and Fox evoke the concept of bio-grammar and project it as the most important determinant of sexual division of labour in society (qtd in Ityavyar 1992).

The bio-grammar programmes men for politics and economic activities outside the homestead, while it assigns women only reproductive and domestic responsibilities (Ityavyar 1992). This is

an inhibitive model for an egalitarian personality like Tambu. She dismantles this view as she later on moves to the Mission and ends up struggling to find herself and to keep a connection with the land she loves. Tambu never opposed the core culture that supported her perspective and pursuit in life rather she metamorphosed through cultural contact and rebirth. This is seen in how she gradually blends when she is unaware of how to eat with a knife and fork due to the fact that the body, more specifically the hand, is used in her Shona tradition to consume food. She undergoes an out of body experience which mirrors that sort of African rebirth when she states, "but I was slipping further and further away from her, until in the end I appeared to have slipped out of my body and was standing somewhere near the foot of the bed" (168). This occurs when her domineering uncle, Babamakuru, tries to force her to attend the Christian wedding of her parents. This resistance signals the death of the passive Tambu and the birth of a young woman who knows what she needs to do to fight back. The interactions between her own culture and colonial culture induce within her a cultural schizophrenia characteristic of what Elleke Boehmer describes as "a process of both 'reincarnation' and self-splitting, in which Tambu - is forced to inhabit borderlines, at one and the same time losing, and yet retaining loyalty to, the traditions of the Shona home" (qtd in Giarola 228).

One must understand that access to resources does not necessarily imply the power to control them because to control a resource is to impose one's own definition upon the others resources. Access can be determined by others, but control implies that one is the determining force. Access and control over use is different from access and benefits derived from the mobilization of resources. Women may always access the use of resources but may not always realize the gains from their use based on prevalent traditional laws and legislations. For example, in most of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in South-Eastern Nigeria, men own palm trees, but women process the palm oil and sometimes, the income goes to their husbands and at other times is used for subsistence in the family. Women's access to and control over natural resources have received considerable international and local attention as witnessed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women in 1985 and the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly of Women in 2000, according to Bashaw (2016). She believes that access to and control over natural resources have been characterized by a mix of rhetorical and political dimension which are far from the critical questions of locating where power really lies. She argues that it is only when access to and control over resources is problematized, that disparities in who has real control over the produce of the land stand out. Against this backdrop, Marvin Harris believes that "women…control the nursery, and because they control the nursery, they can potentially modify any life style that threatens them" (qtd in Chinweizu 26).

The above assertion informs the observation of restricted female power seen in Zimbabwe which is based on past African inhibitive socio-cultural law experiences that prevailed in that part of Africa Dangarembga hails from; there is a welcome diversion from the canon. Her female characters have emerged strongly from their cultural cocoon, basking free from such inhibitive

laws to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder from the African inhibitive paradigm that have kept them bound over the years. This generates important questions: where were they all the while when their mates were sold away to domestic slavery, when they were given away as child-brides to aged husbands of parental choice when they were denied the opportunity of school or any exposure? When they were deemed outcasts because they were not virgin brides and when after marriage they were victimized for infertility and derided for fecundity of the wrong sex? The answer according to Helen Chukwuma is very simple; the fire brand emancipated woman had not been born then (3). In Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, the potential African modern assertive female character, the egalitarian and essential female, Tambu has just emerged to challenge the status quo.

Drawing from the theory of the dysfunctional family, Al Gore posits that, environmental problems go beyond the way individuals relate with nature, but that equally has to do with the way we collectively determine our mutual relationship to the earth and one another (2007). In the family, before the scientific era, children easily locate their place in the world because they could define themselves in relation both to their parents and to a god who was clearly present in nature. But during the scientific era God is presented as having receded from the natural world to an abstract place, the patriarchal figure (the father) effectively becomes god's viceroy, entitled to exercise godlike authority when enforcing the family's rules. Children and even women started getting confused about their own roles in the family system. The fathers were accorded godlike authority to enforce rules and along the line the strongest rule that emerged was that the rules cannot be questioned. The way these rules were enforced was through teaching the separation between mind and body and suppressing the feelings and emotions that might otherwise undermine the rules. As could be inferred from the novel, the most important unit in society is the patrilineage, or family line descending from a common "male" ancestor. At the time of the novel, adult males and their wives and unmarried children according their cultural law and practice often lived in the same homestead or cluster of homesteads. The extended family was a tightly knit unit; in the novel Tambu's uncle and aunt call her "daughter" and plainly regard her as such. Her uncle, Babamukuru, the school headmaster patriarch of the extended family exerts godlike authority over his relatives according to the traditional laws.

As a stringent rule in Tambu's nuclear family, her mother, siblings, and any property they have belong to her father, a shiftless man who fawns over Babamukuru for the handouts he gets from his more successful brother. Yet Tambu's father wields authority in his own nuclear household. It is worthy of mention that according to Shona traditional norms, at marriage a man gives to his prospective wife's family a *roora*, or bride-wealth, usually a mix of cash and cattle. The *roora* legitimizes the husband's right to his wife's labour and to sexual access to her body. He also gains authority over her reproductive powers - the right to possess all children born by her.

According to traditional regulations, the wife's subordinate status manifested itself in daily stereotyped inhibitive customs. As the narrator portrays, the center of the traditional homestead is the hearth, three stones that supported cooking pots, above which sat a horizontal bar on which fish, meat, and maize cobs are dried. This is meant for the women to keep. It is their duty post. Again, if there is a gathering, the women would sit on the ground, perhaps on reed mats, while men sat above them on a mud ledge.

These customs had begun to change by the time of the novel, as reflected in the chairs and couches with which Babamukuru's home is furnished. Despite this fact, it is questionable according to Hyginus Chibuike Ezebuilo "whether the constitutional protection of gender equality is making a difference to women living in communities with strong commitment to traditional norms and practices" (252). He argues that these compromises on women's right to equality can thus be interpreted to mean that "women, as opposed to men, do not have inherent rights" (253). Despite the sexist customs and laws, women appeared to have exerted some leverage even in the traditional household. Consequently, Tambu, the narrator fights to hold on to her womanbeing instinct as she tears down the cultural veil and law while gaining access and control of her own resources. This is typical of modern African society where women undergo metamorphosis in unveiling inhibitive patriarchal laws and colonial entrapments for the gaining and regaining as well as asserting of their Africanness, individualism and womanhood. The novel depicts characters whose roles are pivotal in the maintenance of folk culture where a synchronicity of body and cultural landscape are created for a common goal: the transcending of the African feminist trajectory.

Colonialism and Stifling Traditions against Female Emancipation in *Nervous Conditions*

Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonizing the Mind* opines that the way in which colonial education estranged African children from their own families and cultures begs for reassessment. He explains that imposing English as the language of communication caused African children to suppress their authentic selves and assimilate into a colonial identity. He decries the fact that "Language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our worlds to other worlds" (28). Ngugi stresses the fact that colonial education begins with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. To him, it is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a large social scale, it is like "producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" (Ngugi 28). Of course, our modern African woman assertive personality does not swallow everything there is in colonial education. This explains why the novel ends with the assertive Tambu reassuring herself that she is capable of refusing to

be brainwashed as she makes efforts to advance herself because she can no longer "accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on her horizon" (*Nervous Conditions* 203). Babamukuru's homecoming with his wife and children from England, and the extended family's reception of them at the ancestral Siguake homestead is instructive here. Tambu captures not only the excitement of the family at the arrival of their head, but also her disappointment with her cousins, Nyasha and Chido, who speak only English and have forgotten the Shona language. Babamukuru, together with the rest of the Siguake patriarchy, decides to send Nhamo to the mission school, to help improve the miserable economic conditions on the homestead. Tambu is jealous, but concludes that Babamukuru knows better; his decision must be wise and justifiable.

Tambu's recognition of the invasion of her community by the upper echelon of her society does not sit well with her. This connection with and the recognition of her landscape as an integral part of her Shona tradition influences her to radically criticize her brother, Nhamo, for not liking to walk the countryside or to come home on holidays from the Mission where he attends school. She also chastises Nyasha and Chido for forgetting their Shona after going to England. A metamorphosed modern African woman, Tambu's growing and selling of her mealies demonstrates her freedom as well as connection between body and land, "The year I grew older, stronger and sturdier than any eight-year-old can usefully grow" (*Nervous Conditions* 20). This strikes a chord in the maintenance of the traditions which the Shona people embrace. Consequently, the landscape in Dangarembga's novel serves as a socio-cultural umbilical cord for Tambu where the words of her grandmother enlighten her more by giving her a "history that could not be found in textbooks" (*Nervous Conditions* 17). This is also the same role the land plays in every black enclave, whether Afro-American or the Caribbean. One's ancestral core values are seen as a symbol of identity and essentially a passage which connects the African woman to her ancestral heritage and existence. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga through the character of Mainini, acknowledges that "this business of womanhood is a heavy burden" (*Nervous Conditions* 16) due to some inhuman treatments from her husband as a result of colonialism and twist of societal values in favour of men. Certainly, Mainini is a victim of Shona belief system and sexist laws and practices introduced by colonialism and infused in Shona's traditional way of life via white supremacist ideology and agenda. To this end, *Nervous Conditions* is a first-hand account of colonial experience under the governance of the British Empire of the second half of the twentieth century. It brings up the voices of the formerly silenced African women as part of pioneer account of their perception of Western intrusion. The narrative portrays the upsetting experiences of the era of colonisation and explores its insidious consequences on women living in such society. Consequently, the narrator speaks back to the canon and exposes the suffering of its subjects (women), thereby depicting the grim atmosphere of the colonial project and shows the effects of the domination, oppression and discrimination suffered by native women. The novel as a life narrative reveals facts not recorded in history books. It raises the bar of resistance in the context of colonisation and it queries traditional

notions of identity formation and common practices inhibiting women emancipatory agenda. With unique means for resistance and survival, the novelist offers a challenge to the existing beliefs.

Dangarembga also illustrates that irrespective of one's gender and civilization, there is need for the male actors to maintain culture, values, and norms when she highlights Babamakuru in his struggles between a Western lifestyle and an African consciousness. This becomes evident when he forces Tambu's parents to engage in a Western wedding which goes against the Shona tradition and customary law, yet he beats Nyasha into submission for not conforming to a traditional African woman's demeanour. He curses Nyasha and condemns her to whoredom thus proving that the body is as important to Babamakuru in preserving morality as it is essential in the maintenance of cultural norms.

Colonially informed patriarchal laws (norms) and attitudes are also found in Christianity and these have strengthened the traditional customs which men use to control women's sexuality. Tambu's mother, Mainini is a product of Christian religious indoctrination, brainwashing, mental and psychological conditioning which prepare the ground for the creation of a model woman whose response to patriarchal repression is passive, hesitant, fragmented and fragmentary, devitalized and exhausted. She believes that it is the natural responsibility and duty of the woman to take care of the man and more importantly, that a woman ought to be unquestioning, obsequious and silent in order to effectively protect her man. Tambu recounts more of her brother's behavioural changes during his three-year residence at the mission (Christian colonial school); to the pain of his mother but the delight of his father, he forgets the Shona language and becomes estranged from his nuclear family. The family expects Nhamo at the homestead, but he never appears. Late that evening, Babamukuru drives up and announces that Nhamo has died after catching the mumps. Babamukuru laments the fact that there is no other male child in the family to assume Nhamo's duty, but suggests that Tambu, now 13, "be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family before she goes into her husband's home" (*Nervous Conditions* 56). After some resistance from her mother, Mainini, Tambu is allowed to attend school at the mission and live in Babamukuru's modern home with her cousin Nyasha. Less obvious but also embedded in the novel is the idea that African tradition and European colonialism were complicit in the subordination of women. Tambu recalls the time before her uncle's return from England, and relates how her relationship with her brother deteriorated when he tried to stop her from attending the local school. Tambu's family wanted to send Nhamo and Tambu to school; however, the family was poor and could not afford tuition fees for both children. When Tambu complains that she loves school, her patriarchal father assures her that since a woman cannot cook books and feed them to her husband, she is much better off staying home and learning to cook and clean. This is an ideology patriarchal African African colonial society infused in Tambu's culture to suit and favour the male folk. The colonial system renders Tambu and other native women doubly burdened. In the colonial context, female subordination is maintained by cultural consensus that regards women as second-class citizens. The narrator reveals the system

of double oppression; the British colonial authority oppresses the indigenous men and in turn, the indigenous men themselves oppress their women. Tambu explains that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate" (12). This informs Tambu's father, Jeremiah siding with the oppressive system and operates as an antagonist to Tambu's educational prospect by saying "can you cook books and feed them to your husband?" (15). This he says in solidarity with the oppressive patriarchal colonial ideology as portrayed by Ketu Katrak assertion that "in general, female education, governed by Victorian ideology and Christian missionary zeal, was aimed at producing women as good wives and mothers" (50). This notion poses a direct threat to Tambu's highly desired education. Dangarembga's through her different female characters in the novel outlines the consequences of this British colonial thought as it affects women in Zimbabwe. She further illustrates through her narrator the nuisances of the colonial rule that extended from 1890 to 1979 in Rhodesia during which according to Laurie Vickroy "the white minority dominated and oppressed the native population and divested them" (22). Again, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* decries colonial system and ideology as he sees the colonial world as "a Manichaean world, in which the world of the native is the negation of the world of the settler" (v). As a result, Dangarembga goes beyond the limits of Fanon's canonical master narrative of post-colonial perception and literary criticism and presents patriarchal and colonial domineering and debilitating attitudes from women's point of view. She explores more realistically the role of gender in the colonial context while underlining how the sexualities of native women are contained and mortified by colonialism, Shona and Western patriarchy respectively. She seems to imply that the condition of the female native has additional burdens as a result of the African colonially impacted patriarchal practices. The author illustrates this in Nyasha's desperate attempt to free herself from the patriarchal oppression. Her struggle for emancipation within Zimbabwe is a precarious matter, because her sexuality is a contested term. Her uprootedness makes it increasingly difficult for her to belong within the constraints of traditional patriarchal norms embodied in and enforced by her father, Babamukuru. Nyasha cannot fulfil the traditional expectations (laws) of female obedience and silence. Consequently, her father's attempts to have a traditional daughter, obedient to his will, backfires in the terrible dramas around food. Her European influenced view of women is at odds with the African concept of female subordination. Nyasha's struggle to free herself from the traditional expectations of her father ends tragically in her ailment when she attempts to take control over her life.

In addition, the issue of patriarch society and colonial exploitations of women leads Babamukuru and his family to drive Tambu to the multiracial convent in Salisbury, where she is to sleep in a segregated African section. After they left, Tambu becomes so overwhelmed with her studies that she does not have time to see Miss Nyasha and the rest of her family. Consequently, Nyasha writes, complaining that she has become isolated from the girls at school, who consider her a snob and an unauthentic Shona female. This is possible based on the colonial ideology of law of separate development, colour bar and divide and rule mentality entrenched in African by the British colonial masters. At this point, Nyasha feels that she needs Tambu badly which the

colonial oppressional ideology in African milieu (school) could not permit them to fulfil their natural obligations to each other at school as she asserts that "In many ways you are very essential to me in bridging some of the gaps in my life" (*Nervous Conditions* 196). By the time they meet again, Nyasha has grown overly thin, the result of a problem that began before Tambu left for the convent. When Nyasha's father, a typical African patriarch, forced her to finish her food, she complied, then went into the bathroom and made herself throw up in order to free herself. This is a deviant approach and a way of rejecting the colonial infused patriarchal laws against the African woman. Three months later, when Tambu comes home on another visit, Nyasha is looking skeletal. She grows weaker by the day, losing weight steadily, and studying herself into frenzy. Her health deteriorates until she has a nervous breakdown.

The autobiographical novel centres around two main female characters, Tambudzai (Tambu) and her anglicised cousin Nyasha growing up in colonial Rhodesia. It is a first-person narrative told from Tambudzai's point of view. Dangarembga provides a sophisticated insight into the consciousness of a native coming-of-age character, Tambu, in her colonial environment, who has to endure colonialism and patriarchal traditional norms (laws) and attended practices. Tambu's highly self-reflexive analysis of her predicament as a young African woman growing up in a colonial world arises to a great extent from her accurate observation of her same-age cousin Nyasha, who suffers much more under the colonial situation in Rhodesia. Dangarembga's novel outlines the consequences of the British colonisation of Rhodesia in 1980. She illustrates the nuisances of colonialism and colonial ideologies that are not favourable to African women. This is portrayed in the prologue of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* by Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion which depicts "The condition of native is a nervous condition" (v). As could be inferred in Jean-Paul's preface to Frantz, there are striking similarities between Dangarembga's book and Fanon's writings. It could be said here that colonial education of the heroines and the ethical choices they make in the face of colonial ideologies and inhibitive traditional norms and practices while growing up in changing societies are the preoccupation of many Africans coming of age feminist writers like Gloria Ernest, Chimamanda Adichie, Nawal EL Saadawi etc. In a number of their novels like *Dear Kelechi*, *Purple Hibiscus*, and *Woman at Point Zero* respectively, the protagonists struggle with the alienation and patriarchal segregation which they experience from their different African cultures a result of their colonial education and their quest for emancipation. Such novels point out scholars' concern more than the individual experience. Again, such authors bring to limelight the postcolonial cultural laws and practices that are not favourable to women while affirming the African female identity and individualism as they struggle to achieve independence and a sense of self-worth in the face of such obnoxious cultural norms. The novel illustrates how colonial patriarchy works on African men as representatives of colonial hegemony. In the epigraph to the novel, Dangarembga omits the ensuing clause of Fanon's sentence, "The status of a 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent" (40). The three most colonially implicated male characters of the novel, Babamukuru (Jeremiah's elder brother), Nhamo and Chido (Babamukuru's son), "give a sort of coerced consent to their status as agents

of colonial hegemony" (Fanon 41). The colonial system offers Babamukuru a privileged position. He was able to receive colonial university education in South Africa and attain his Master's degree in England. In return for his academic career and prosperity, which enables his position as the provider for his extended family, he has to fulfil many obligations. He works for the colonial system and is the headmaster of the mission school which Tambu wishes to attend. He represents the system's indirect ruler who works as a transformer between the colonial authority and the marginalised natives, and whose law "becomes the law of the white men" (Fanon 42). Therefore, Babamukuru impersonates an African patriarchal traditional leader and the custodian of the cultural law. Sugnet underlines, "with all his advanced degrees and Christian ways, Babamukuru is an impressive kind of 'native,' created by the British colonial system to serve its purposes" (Fanon 43). Fanon's psychoanalytical work condemns colonialism for the disruptive forces it releases on the side of the colonised. He claims that colonialism "dislocated and distorted the colonised's psyche" and "eroded his very being, his very subjectivity" (86). He further suggests that "the colonial experience annihilates the colonised's sense of self" (87). *Nervous Conditions* mirrors his position with regard to colonialism. Fanon describes the colonial condition "as psychopathological, a disease that distorts human relations and renders everyone within it 'sick'" (88). The novel demonstrates, quite in Fanon's sense, how the process of colonisation distorts human relationships and erodes the very subjectivity of the colonised. Tambu's mother Mainini makes consistent references to 'Englishness', which she relates to colonialism. She identifies Englishness as a deadly social disease, with an ability to destroy one's identity and split families apart. It is depicted as a symbolic sickness that poses danger to the life of colonial society, brought about by the process of colonialism. She blames Englishness for the alienation of her children. Mainini warns Tambu, "Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English, all the time" (187). When she speaks of the anglicised siblings Nyasha and Chido, she blames 'Englishness' for their plight: "'It's Englishness'… 'It'll kill them all if they are not careful'" (207).

Nyasha's deep cultural hybridity shows the serious consequences of Englishness as symptomatic of the infection of Western influence. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon analyses "the harm done to marginalised groups by continuous exposure to 'a galaxy of erosive stereotypes' (129), which causes them to develop feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatre." (89). Similarly, in the novel, Nyasha's exposure to Western concepts of beauty provokes in her feelings of inadequacy and thus the urge to adjust. Nyasha has internalised the European ideal of female beauty and tries to adjust to it by reducing her food intake. She prefers angles to curves and disapproves of Tambu's traditional female physique, "Pity about the backside… It is rather large" (92). In a possible transference of Black Skin, White Masks onto Nyasha's character, she becomes the black person adopting white masks. The white mask causes a disturbing experience in a black subject because there is always a gap between the black skin and white mask. This gap is marked by the impossibility to transcend it. By putting on a white mask the black subject tries to make the fact of his blackness vanish, but never succeeds. This disturbs his or her psyche and

shatters his or her very being. Nyasha's depiction in the novel supports Fanon's argument that "the colonial subject cannot escape the blackness of the skin and is 'forever in combat with his own image'" (Fanon 81). Schatteman argues that Nyasha "is an extreme embodiment of the white-masked black with her desire for slimness, her definite British accent and her western concepts of feminism" (92). Nevertheless, her white mask cannot make the fact of her black skin vanish and thus, tragically, advances her into nothingness. The tension between performance and appearance prompts Nyasha's self-destructive behaviour and leads her into anorexia. This inescapable situation traumatises Nyasha's psyche, as for Fanon "psychic trauma results when the colonised subject realises that he can never attain the whiteness he has been taught to desire, or shed the blackness he has learnt to devalue" (93). This situation of imitation "reflects the miserable schizophrenia of the colonized identity" (94). This tension suggests that colonial ideologies are always a matter of flux and agony. Dangarembga demonstrates how colonialism disrupts and distorts mother-child relationships and hinders the female protagonists' healthy identification with the mother. The mother's role is especially important in nurturing and socialising her children. Laurie Vickroy emphasises Jessica Benjamin's point that "the mother must have her own independent identity to be able to give the child the recognition it wants and guide its healthy development" (69). The oppressive system deprives mothers of their own identities and renders them (deeply conflicted between the social demands of motherhood, their own needs, and their children's well-being). The novelist successfully presents how mothers are continually denied their point of view and status as subjects in oppressive, repressive and depressive systems and how their male counterparts' limited scope of action becomes destructive of themselves and their children. She delineates how a mother's role is compromised when mechanisms of oppressive control … limit her options and rights. Tambu illustrates her mother's subjugation: "for most of her life my mother's mind, belonging first to her father and then to her husband, had not been hers to make up" (155).

Quest for Education and Radical Instinct in *Nervous Conditions*

Through a wider lens and with a closer gaze at the importance of place and human actors, Dangarembga situates her protagonist, Tambu, in a Zimbabwean culture where she fights to gain a western education while at risk of forgetting her roots. Tambu, a young girl living in patriarchal Zimbabwe, is eager to obtain an education which would serve as an escape route for a woman living in a society as hers. This gaining of an education comes at a price as Tambu is forced to grow her own mealies, and then sells them to provide school fees for herself.

Pamela Abbort, Claire Wallace and Melisa Tyler argue that radical feminism is "concerned with women's rights rather than gender equality" (qtd in Sibanda 2016). It is not motivated by the quest to minimize differences between women and men, but rather it sustains the belief that there is a female or feminine nature that has been concealed and or distorted throughout history; one that needs to be liberated and revalued. This is termed 'gynocentrism' (Sibanda 2016). To the

radical feminist, it is men who have fundamentally benefited from the subordination of woman. Radical feminists see women as an oppressed group who had to struggle for their own liberation against their oppressors - that is, against men. According to Sibanda (2016), they reject any assistance from members of the opposite sex in their struggle to achieve the rights they desire. Radical feminists also invariably agree that women should organize themselves independent of men. They also argue that women are not equal but morally superior to men. Consequently, some radical feminists wish to see 'patriarchy' being replaced by 'matriarchy' (Chinweizu 150).

According to Vukoicic radical feminism is a theory which rests on the assumption that all social activity is a result of certain restrictions and coercion, and although every social system contains specific forms of interactive constraints, they do not have to cause repression. She avers that,

Under patriarchy, however, interaction and communication are limited in a way that creates and maintains rigidity which is seen as oppression, while patriarchy takes central place where, and why, a fundamental power struggle between the sexes takes place. (Vukoicic 2013)

The above assertion suggests that, much of feminism has been inspired by the desire for something better than the matriarchist paradise. However, radical feminists find it politically expedient to present their demands in the language of liberation from oppression and oppressive laws. But then, Chinweizu believes that it is hard without standing the word "operation" on its head, to fathom how their boredom, an affliction of the leisured and idle rich, can be taken as a product of oppression (118). Still on this, one observes that in *Nervous Conditions* the education of boys take precedence over that of girls, for economic as well as other reasons. Given the custom whereby a woman joined her husband's family after marriage, the better economic investment was to educate a son, since the money he earned would stay in the family. "Have you ever heard," rants Tambu's father when considering sending his daughter to school, "of a woman who remains in her father's house? ... She will meet a young man and I will have lost everything" (30). He dismisses her intellectual aptitude as of little use to him. Undaunted, Tambu resolves to be educated and learns later that her Aunty Maiguru had shown the same resolve: "I ... studied for that (Masters) degree and got it in spite of all of them - your uncle, your grandparents, and the rest of your family" (101). Returning to Zimbabwe with her degree, Maiguru pursues teaching, almost the only profession open to African women outside domestic service.

The African people by mid-century even today in the post covid-19 era were excluded from nearly every possible route to advancement; from the lands beyond the overcrowded, soil depleted reserved areas and from skilled jobs in government, mining, and business (Beach 180). Therefore, girls who attended school in Rhodesia, studied reading, writing, and arithmetic, but the curriculum was largely directed toward training them to become good Christian's wives of African men. They received daily lessons in hygiene and Bible study. At the secondary level, needlework and cookery appeared alongside other subjects. This type of gender conditioning was not limited to Zimbabwe or, for that matter, to African people particularly women. During the

1960s such conditioning occurred outside the continent and found its bearing in countries of the colonized. Similarly, one of the ways capitalism secures adherence to its rule as earlier observed is by teaching separation of people from the natural world and suppressing the emotion that might allow us to feel the absence of our connection to the earth. As a result, many dysfunctional rules internalized during infancy and early childhood is extremely difficult to change. This is why most rules on gender relations have subsisted in Africa. But borrowing from Gore, if the global environmental crisis is rooted in the dysfunctional pattern of our civilization's relationship to the natural world, confronting and fully understanding that pattern, and recognizing its destructive impact on the environment and on us, is the first step towards mourning what we have lost, healing the damage we have done to the earth and to our civilization, and coming to terms with the new story of what it means to be a steward of the earth (237).

As the novel opens, Tambu describes how she gets a chance to pursue her education at the Umtali mission school, where her uncle Babamukuru, the head of the Siguake family, was headmaster and Academic Director. This happened after the death of her brother, Nhamo, who had first joined the uncle and his family to study at the mission. Following his return with his wife and two children from England, Babamukuru visited the homestead and convinced his brother, Jeremiah, to send Nhamo to the mission. Nhamo had been at the top of the class in his first two years of primary school, which excited the uncle very much. At the mission his habits and attitudes towards his nuclear family and their ancestral homestead changed drastically; he would return to his rural home only when he was forced to help with the harvest. When he did come, Nhamo bullied his sisters, Tambu and Netsai. If Netsai did not heed him, Nhamo would take a stick to her. Tambu as a result of the bullying states flatly, "I was not sorry when my brother died," but fears she is too harsh in her judgment of him (1). She ponders whether he was a victim of sexist ideology, which did not consider "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family ... a priority, or even legitimate" (12). Undaunted, Tambu decides to earn the fees herself by growing maize for sale. Her crop is nearly ripe when it begins mysteriously to disappear. When she learns that Nhamo, her brother is the guilty party, she gives him his just desserts: "I sat on top of him, banged his head into the ground, screamed and spat and cursed" (22-3). Mr. Matimba, the local teacher, breaks up the fight, and helps Tambu sell her crop in the city, where - out of pity and indignation at what she thinks of as "child labour" and "slavery" - a white woman contributes ten pounds for Tambu's school fees.

When Tambu takes her qualifying exam for Sacred Heart College, the nuns test her on Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, set across the globe in New England a hundred years earlier, this novel follows four daughters and their prospects for marriages that will lift them out of poverty. The emphasis, endorsed by the colonial test giver ideologists, is on the young woman as prospective wife. Actually, one of the four daughters, Jo, chafes under the limitations placed on women and longs for the freedom enjoyed by men, but this does not keep her marriage too from

being featured in Alcott's novel. Directly or indirectly, *Nervous Conditions* brings the joint sexism of traditional norms (laws) and colonial attitudes as well as practices to the forefront.

Jamil Khader believes that the second part of the novel intertwines Tambu's story with events in the lives of other characters, especially her cousin, Nyasha, her uncle's wife, Maiguru, and her Aunt Lucia (2006). After her brother's death, Tambu moves into her uncle's house near Umtali to attend the protestant mission school for Africans. Tambu describes her relocation in a spiritual vocabulary, describing it as an experience of reincarnation. "Babamukuru was God; therefore, I had arrived in Heaven. I was in danger of becoming an angel, or at the very least a saint, and forgetting how ordinary humans existed from minute to minute and from hand to mouth" (70). Trusting in Babamukuru's wisdom and thirsting for education, Tambu feels her transfer to this new place is the right step in her development. Nyasha is excited to see her cousin. Tambu, on the other hand, frowns on Nyasha's disrespectful attitude to her mother, Maiguru, whom Tambu considers "the embodiment of courtesy and good breeding" (74). When she knows that she will share a room with Nyasha, Tambu expresses mixed feelings.

Disappointly, the horizontal oppression unleashes the nervous conditions of all the characters in the novel. As such, the chain reaction of patriarchal oppression imposes a threat to the mental and physical health of the colonised women. Maiguru and Mainini both give numerous hints of the repressed rage they harbour over their assigned roles through their attempt to hide these feelings." The oppressed women of the novel are frequently characterised by silence. In many instances in the novel, female characters refrain from uttering their opinions. They reluctantly comply with the traditional silence of women unless asked. Especially for the partly Western educated Maiguru, the situation is difficult to endure. Her excessive submissiveness to the patriarchal norms unnerves her extremely. Mainini's attitude of indifference is her reaction to oppression. Tambu also suffers under the oppressive situation and often has a need to say what she thinks.

Justin Edwards outlines Pauline Ada Uwakweh's argumentation that "silence is used as a patriarchal weapon of control" for the reason that "voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic" (55). When the powerful Babamukuru "tries to silence all the women in the family," (56) his daughter, Nyasha, accurately designates her father "a historical artefact" (Edwards 162). The concept of a 'historical artefact' stems from Frantz Fanon (57) and Dangarembga extends this concept to native women. Her heroines demonstrate that not only native men, but also native women are not natural but 'historical artefacts' constructed by the oppressive colonial system. Dangerambga according to Renee Scahatteman, describes the struggles of the young Tambu against the immediate manifestations of "patriarchal law in her life" (59). Mainini's predicament shows her powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of stifling traditional norms and cultural practices, and even Maiguru is denied agency, control and even identity on her own part as a woman. Concerning all these characters, the novel shows how female "self and

sexuality are constructed and controlled by indigenous patriarchal laws and British colonial practices," (Scahatteman 60) and how "patriarchy and colonisation collude to worsen women's predicament" regardless of their academic prowess as Charles Sugnet opines (61). In the end, however, Tambu experiences success in her academics, social relations, and English language skills. But at her new home the atmosphere is less than peaceful. Tambu recounts the first crisis in the relationship between her uncle and Nyasha: Nyasha's parents object to her reading D. H. Lawrence's "indecent" novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which she brings to the dining room. A friendly, loving relationship develops between Tambu and Nyasha, who begins to disillusion Tambu about the power structures of their society and to shake Tambu's naive convictions about right and wrong. Nyasha points out the complexities of Babamukuru and Maiguru's behaviour as well as those events shaping the history of Rhodesia and the world. Tambu feels sorry for Maiguru, who has made sacrifices in her academic career (she has a master's degree) to attend to her duties as a mother and wife, and who has no control over the money she earns from teaching as dictated by the traditional norms.

More so, the novel shows the sharp edges of colonial education offered to native Africans. The patriarchal colonial rule sought to maintain its hegemony by electing African men who received colonial education more their women. These men were catapulted to the colonial elite. This indirect rule facilitated the colonisation of the rest of the indigenous population through their 'traditional' leaders as custodians of the traditional laws (norms). Thus, the colonial education of the African elite "served colonial economic and political needs" (Sugnet 37). Africans' "status as agents of colonial hegemony" offered "privilege, material reward, and apparent security" (Sugnet 38). Colonial education, however, has a double edge. It represents "literary and cultural temptations of Europe" and is a booster of "cultural transgression" (Sugnet 40). By transmitting Western values and belief systems, colonial education extinguishes the traditional values of the natives. It is an intricate tool to achieve the goal of colonial authorities, to colonise the mind of the natives.

Additionally, the intersection of education provided by the mission with the patriarchal elements of the Shona culture increases women's plight in the novel. Though Nyasha has gained a critical apparatus in England with which help she is able to analyse critically the whole traditional and cultural situations, she is incapable of leading a traditional and cultural Shona life because she has also picked up English social expectations that disrupt her acceptance of patriarchal social norms. Her hybrid identity poses her between the antagonistic cultures and renders her an outsider within her native Shona community. Dangarembga delineates how Babamukuru oppresses his well-educated wife, Maiguru, who holds a Master's degree in Philosophy from London and has her own job. Maiguru struggles to cope with the oppressive social situation. She has to give away her entire salary for the sustenance of Babamukuru's relatives and is unable "to stand up to her husband or protect her daughter" (52). Tambu remarks, "… it was a great shame that Maiguru had been deprived of the opportunity to make the most of herself, even if she had

accepted that deprivation" (103). Maiguru's inability to act alone under oppressive circumstances and keep her salary to herself causes her daughter Nyasha to lose respect of her. Maiguru has to fulfil the traditional expectations of an obedient and good wife is spite of her European education. She is at pains to comply with the Shona tradition and fulfil the obligations of a working wife and mother. Caught in her powerless situation, she desperately laments, "I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this house" (175). As the only Western-educated woman of her native community she is not accepted among other married women. Her desperate situation shows how "English education…renders educated women into outsiders in their own communities." (53)

The crisis between Nyasha and her father escalates, reaching a climax after the school Christmas party. On the teenagers' way home from the party, Nyasha lags behind with her brother's friend, Andy Baker, who wants to teach her a new dance. Demanding to know why his daughter is late, Babamukuru spies on her and then questions her about her tardiness, growing infuriated because she talks back to him. When he calls his daughter a "whore" and slaps her, she punches him back, at which point her father threatens to kill her, because there cannot be "two men in this house" (115). Tambu realizes then just how universal gender oppression is:

The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition.... Men took it everywhere with them.... You couldn't ignore the fact that Nyasha 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. (*Nervous Conditions* 115-6)

After this incident, Nyasha grows isolated and detached, retreating into a private world that nobody else can reach. Babamukuru, his family, and Tambu return to the ancestral homestead for the Christmas holiday. All the members of the extended family gather for an annual reunion, during which they held *a dare*, a patriarchal convention about family business. This affords the Siguake patriarchal family the opportunity to discuss the relationship between Lucia, Tambu's maternal aunty, and Takesure, a cousin whom Babamukuru had employed to help with the farm work so that Takesure could earn the money to pay the bride-wealth for his second wife. Takesure, however, has impregnated Lucia, who shrewdly credits the baby to Jeremiah, judging him to be the better man of the two. In fact, she later got involved with him. Indignant at his brother's sinful behaviour, Babamukuru orders Takesure to leave with Lucia, but the two of them have stayed. Initially kept out of the trial-like convention with the other women and children, Lucia rushes in to confront Takesure and his lies, and to make it clear that her interest in staying was to help her sister Mainini out of the misery of her life with Jeremiah. Deciding that all this misfortune is because Jeremiah and Mainini did not have a Christian wedding, he directs them to be remarried "in church before God" (147). One could assert here that *Nervous Conditions* is an

exemplary novel of insidious trauma and frustration induced by patriarchal traditional laws (practices), colonial oppression and gender discrimination. The novel's traumatic conditions move away from the corporeal schema of trauma and expose trauma deriving from psychological damage. The novel explores the traumatised condition of "the native" as a consequence of colonial intervention into the balance of traditional Shona culture in colonial Zimbabwe. Dangarembga's first-person narrator Tambudzai provides a sophisticated view into the coming-of-age consciousness of a teenage narrator struggling to cope and survive in a distorted African patriarchal colonial world. Tambu's complex identity provides the reader with an elaborate analysis of the sources underlying the traumatic nervous conditions of the colonised. This explains why Tambu feels that her uncle is making a mockery out of her parents' union and her own existence. She refuses to take part in the comedy of her parents' church wedding. On the morning of the wedding, her emotions leave her weak and unable to get out of bed. She risks losing everything by refusing to attend the wedding. Later, her uncle punishes her with 15 lashes and orders her to do all the housework for two weeks, during which Lucia and Maiguru give Babamukuru a piece of their own minds about family matters.

Trauma studies as an area of cultural investigation came to prominence in the early-to-mid-1990s. Cathy Caruth is one of the leading figures in trauma studies, and argues that "a textualist approach to trauma can afford us unique access to history. She believes that "the analysis of cultural artefacts that bear witness to traumatic histories, can enable to gain access to extreme events and experiences" that constitute trauma (7). To this end, scholars of trauma studies like Caruth query the Western-biased approach to trauma and investigate the culture-bound deficiencies in trauma research. Caruth declares in its most general definition that trauma describes an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations or other intrusive phenomena (11). The very definition of trauma sets an emphasis on sudden, unexpected catastrophic events and, deriving from "the Greek word meaning wound," trauma has still predominantly a corporeal connotation in Western psychoanalysis (Caruth 15). However, the patriarchal colonial situation in African itself is inherently traumatising and has pathological consequences on the psyche of the colonised. Thus, the definition of trauma has been expanded by the analogy of the corporeal wound to the wound of the mind. The feminist psychotherapist Laura Brown has argued that colonial trauma is an "insidious trauma," by which "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to the bodily well-being at the given moment do violence to the soul and spirit" (qtd in Roger Luckhurst, 4). The novel, *Nervous Conditions* predominantly portray the expanded and revised notion of trauma, as trauma to the soul. Therefore, disposing of her submissive, compliant image, Maiguru explodes by stating that,

When it comes to taking my money so that you can…waste it on ridiculous weddings, that's when they are my relatives too…. 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 (*Nervous Conditions*, 172).

To show Babamukuru that she is serious about what she is saying as a traumatised woman, Maiguru walks out the door. She takes refuge at her brother's house, until Babamukuru brings her home; she is now less submissive and more genuinely happy than before the emotional outburst. The action of the novel advances quickly unveiling the horizontal oppression that unleashes the nervous conditions of all the female characters in a male world in the novel. As such, the chain reaction of patriarchal oppression imposes a threat to the mental, social and physical health of the colonised and subjugated stereotyped African women. Maiguru and Mainini both give numerous hints of the repressed rage they harbour over their assigned roles through their attempt to hide these feelings.

Conclusion

The revival of traditions, culture, customs and the practices derived from them, after the demise of colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid will definitely require us to enter into a dialogue on the character of our ancestors and what is really indigenous. However, the process should take the context into consideration. Some of the cultural practices, norms and customary laws that were necessary then are unnecessary now due to development, international global best practices, gender inclusiveness, equity and equality.

For an ennobling gender consciousness and paradigm in an African critical scholarship on gender and nation building processes, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is germane. She achieves this by depicting and locating girl children and mothers at the center of struggle to transform weakness and vulnerability into strength, while at the same time showing that women's participation and collaboration with patriarchy in their oppression and subordination and marginalization potentially renders the fruition of their emancipatory agenda complicated. This observation is critically important especially in the context of a highly inhibitive Zimbabwean Shona patriarchal society and cultural practices in which women are socialized and induced to acquire those qualities which fit them into a relationship of dependence on men and those qualities being gentleness, passivity, submission, and striving to please men always.

In Africa, especially in the period of decolonization and independence, writers - including feminist writers - write about the liberation of African societies from colonial rule. It is believed then that those feminists ought to pledge their primary allegiance to the nation and its traditions (Khader, 2016). At this point in time, affirming the potency of the African cultures and negating the colonial stereotypes about Africans were more important than posing difficult questions about gender relations. Feminist writers thus found themselves faced with a difficult dilemma; how could they praise African traditions and nationalist groups that made women second-class citizens? Along with other writers, Dangarembga responded through fiction that refused to

condemn colonial exploitation alone for women's miserable lot or to celebrate the national struggle as a step forward in the emancipation of the whole society. But she rather exposed the colonially induced patriarchal exploitation of the African women.

Dangarembga's contributions through her critical works are also vital against the backdrop of identities of women that have been socially constructed in a much less positive way, "as those who are permanently vulnerable and neurotically lacking the impetus to struggle and triumph," (Muhwati e tal 2010). At the core of women's oppression and marginalization subordination and domination, Dangarembga uses her protagonist to open our eyes as readers to the importance of human actors and land in the preservation of African traditions as she secures freedom for the modern African women. The bodies for her protagonists and other characters alike prove that our Africanness does not die when we leave the place from where we originate. Tambu undergoes an out of body experience as a means of finding and recognizing her place within her garden of refuge and garden of domesticity. There is an emancipation of the body through which a mental breakdown (trauma) takes place for her and other females.

Again, the author directly implicates patriarchy as she indicts colonialism in connection with related specific cultural, religious and historical practices peculiar to the Zimbabwean Shona society. Like other African feminist writers, Dangarembga's work reads as a literary attack against male power structures subtly erected by colonialism that have confiscated and misused power for the sole glory of patriarchy. She indicts the Shona patriarchal society for being "male-centered and male oriented by ostracizing women from the circles of power management," (Damlegue 2015). In placing women and the girl child at the center of her focus and negotiating their subject position in Zimbabwean and African milieu specifically, Dangarembga's conceptual and epistemological thrust enjoins the vision of other Zimbabwean English fiction writers.

Nervous Conditions, however, is not a conventional post-colonial novel; the novel is better seen as a radical revisionist feminism bildungsroman. Although, it shows how colonial education pulled African children away from their roots and cultures, it also depicts how local patriarchal society worked hand-in-hand with colonialism to repress Shona women. In other words, the novel refuses to celebrate native culture as long as it subordinates or sanctions the colonial subordination of women.

Finally, single educated young ladies and single mothers like Tambu, Nyasa, Maiguru and Mainini respectively whose actions and beliefs are immersed in the radical feminists' consciousness are held up as ideal for emulation by women fighting in the various trenches for gender equality with men. While conceding the importance of women's right to education and as people deserving right to question male sexism and oppression, radical feminism rather than Africana Womanism is preferred as a conceivable alternative for the Africana woman in her collective struggle with the entire community as it enhances future possibilities for the dignity of Africana womanbeing and the humanity of all.

Therefore, *Nervous Conditions* seems to suggest that the liberation of Zimbabwean women and indeed African women in general cannot happen without education and language, which are often used to define culture and identity. And so, characterization in the narrative through women's voices tell more about their victimization, at least in terms of schooling and equal cultural treatment. Thus, Tambu the narrator/protagonist represents her culture as being connected to the nation. Meanwhile, a culture cannot exist without the nation's support as culture can be perceived as a lived experience of the ordinary.

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