

Survival, Resistance, and Healing in Tsitsi Dangarembga Nervous Conditions

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Abstract

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a Zimbabwean novelist who made a mark in the literary space with her debut novel titled *Nervous Conditions* (1988). The novel captures the destructive impacts of colonization on the Africans particularly Zimbabwe, and emphasizes the struggles encountered by female characters that stem from gender oppression in their community. *Nervous Conditions* foregrounds women's survival and resistance as complex, multifaceted processes, and emphasizes that healing, while often incomplete, is crucial in the pursuit of autonomy and self-expression. It demonstrates that the tension between modern and tradition accounts for the negative representation of women and oppression. Focusing on the themes of race, class, and gender through the eyes of Tambu, Dangarembga treats such concerns as education related to gender, the impact of a colonial education on a vulnerable, impressionable young African girl—and how women in colonial Rhodesia suffered a double oppression: from the race-based imperialism of the British and from the patriarchal system of the Shona community. After her elder brother's sudden death, Tambu unapologetically seizes the educational opportunity to do some good for the family, and she is subsequently transfigured from a lowly peasant girl into a student at a prestigious multiracial convent. Her path to emancipated self-discovery is filled with crises, and tribulations, symbolic of the injustices done to women. Tambu survives the trials and traumas, and culmination of her protest occurs when Babamukuru forces upon her own parents a belated Christian wedding, an action that questions her own legitimacy and denying of traditional African customs.

Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is a key postcolonial book on the intersecting oppressions of colonialism, patriarchy, and class in 1960s Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). At its core, the novel is a story of survival, resistance, and the potential of healing for women living on the outskirts of power. The story, via the experiences of its protagonist, Tambudzai, and her cousin, Nyasha, depicts how African women deal with the constraints of tradition, gender expectations, and colonial ideas. The novel's title, adapted from Jean-Paul Sartre's opening to *The Wretched of the Earth*, sets the tone for an examination of the psychological and cultural dis-ease that accompany colonial and patriarchal dominance.

Tsitsi Dangaremba, a Zimbabwean writer and Film maker was domiciled in Mutuko, Southern Rhodesia, presently known as Zimbabwe. She was educated in England and Cambridge University. Here Dangarembga witnessed the bias of racism and isolation and returned to Zimbabwe in 1980. She began her Literary career in playwriting and began reading the works of Afro-American women writers, a complete change from classics that she was engaged in reading. She attained success at a young age of 35

and with the publication of *Nervous Conditions*, her debut work penned in English by a nigger lady and hailed as influential African novels which has impacted the world.

The novel was written after getting inspiration from Virginia Woolf's credo as projected in the essay titled 'A Room of One's Own', where Woolf expresses her philosophy—a woman requires room and space to write:

Virginia Woolf's shrewd observation that a woman needs £500 and a room of her own in order to write is entirely valid. Incidentally, I am moving and hope that, for the first time since *Nervous Conditions*, I shall have a room of my own. I'll try to ignore the bit about £500." (Interview with the Author" (p. 212, *Nervous Conditions*, Ayeibia Clarke Publishing Ltd, 2004).

Tolerating Oppression for Survival

Nervous Conditions, set in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), is a coming-of-age narrative narrated by the main character, Tambudzai. The title of *Nervous Conditions* is based on:

"The condition of native is a nervous condition."

Partially autobiographical, the novel *Nervous Conditions* is a moving story of a young lass, Tambudzai, Tambu. Tambu takes shelter in a destitute Rhodesian farm. The loss of her only brother was a serious blow to Tambu and since she had no choice, she had to survive under her uncle Babamukuru's care. Babamukuru had his education in the West and was able to provide the needs of Tambu. Living with her uncle turned out to be a boon to Tambu since she found the chance to go to school and get familiar with education of the west. Even though Tambu faced the challenges of race, class and sex, yet she was strong-willed and determined to overcome just to complete her education. Thus, the novel deals with many issues of squalor and its effects on Africans in their survival, thus creating varied nervous conditions for the characters in the novel.

Survival in *Nervous Conditions* entails not only physical endurance, but also the psychological and emotional negotiation of oppressive structures. Tambu's journey begins with the death of her brother Nhamo, which ironically leads to her enrolment in formal education—a space previously denied to her due to her gender. Her mother's bitter remark—"This business of womanhood is a heavy burden... How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just leave it, can you?"—underscores the emotional toll that womanhood takes on African women (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16).

Gayatri Spivak refers to the "epistemic violence" perpetrated on subaltern bodies as "epistemic violence," and Tambu's survival is characterized by silent endurance and an internalized desire to transcend her socioeconomic limitations. While she gains access to education, it comes at the expense of familial separation and an increasing alienation from her cultural roots.

The power of Resistance: Speaking Back and Refusing Silence

While Tambu represents the prospect of planned absorption, Nyasha emerges as the novel's most striking example of resistance. Nyasha, who was educated in England before being reintegrated into patriarchal African organizations, challenges both colonial and customary norms. She is highly conscious of her situation as a hybrid person caught between two cultures, and she expresses this conflict: "They've imprisoned us. But I will not be trapped. I am not a good girl. I am not."

Nyasha's eating disorder and subsequent mental collapse serve as both a metaphor and a real representation of resistance. Her bulimia becomes a kind of protest, a physical manifestation of her inability to reconcile the internal inconsistencies forced upon her. Critics such as Rachael Lee (2005) contend that Nyasha's condition is "a direct result."

Tambu's rising self-awareness reveals resistance as well. She begins to doubt the generosity of Babamukuru, her uncle and benefactor, whose repressive rule embodies the internalized logic of colonial discipline. Her reluctance to attend her parents' religious wedding, arranged by Babamukuru, represents her first act of defiance. She states, "I was beginning to suspect that I was not the person I was expected to be," implying a developing political consciousness (Dangarembga, p. 203).

Reclaiming Voice and Identity through Healing

Healing in *Nervous Conditions* is sporadic, fragmented, and primarily symbolic. It is not depicted as a chronological or comprehensive process, but rather as an attempt to restore voice and agency. The novel concludes with Tambu's decision to narrate her own story, a key act of narrative control and healing. The final lines—"I was not sorry when my brother died"—reaffirm the narrator's voice and her refusal partake in the silencing of female sorrow and experiences.

The act of narrative itself is a type of healing. Bell hooks stated that "the act of writing is a process of healing, a way of claiming oneself" (hooks, 1990). Tambu's retrospective narration enables her to make sense of her tragedy and situate herself within larger frameworks of resistance.

Dangarembga's Mode of Writing

In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Tsitsi Dangarembga's handling of language and style is a crucial element in communicating the novel's themes of colonialism, gender, identity, and resistance. Her narrative choices reflect both the cultural context and the psychological conflicts of her protagonist, Tambu. Dangarembga employs reasonably easy and understandable English, allowing the story to keep a conversational and personal tone. The text of the novel is plain, yet it conveys emotional depth and reflection, particularly in Tambu's internal monologues.

the story is told in the n the first person by Tambu, who provides a very personal and subjective lens. Her voice matures throughout the story, reflecting her psychological evolution. The use of language is symbolic and highlights the tension between colonial education and traditional life. Words like "clean," "educated," and "civilized" carry ideological weight. Tambu and other female characters describe themselves and their experiences, reflecting the constraints placed on them. Thus, Language becomes a tool of both repression and rebellion. Dangarembga's feminist critique of colonial and patriarchal oppression is powerfully expressed through her postcolonial style and voice of resistance and Tambu's inner conflict is frequently expressed in fragmented ideas or shifts in tone, revealing her identity dilemma.

Critical Perspectives

Several commentators have analysed *Nervous Conditions* as a feminist and postcolonial book. Elleke Boehmer (2005), for example, calls it "a powerful articulation of the female voice in postcolonial African fiction," pointing out that Dangarembga emphasizes African women's internal worlds without romanticizing their pain. Similarly, Flora Veit-Wild highlights the novel's psychological reality, claiming that "Dangarembga does not merely present resistance as heroic but also explores its consequences, both personal and collective."

Furthermore, by applying Frantz Fanon's framework from *Black Skin, White Masks*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*, we can see Nyasha's madness as a symptom of the fragmented colonial subject. Fanon maintains that colonial people absorb oppression, resulting in psychological turmoil. Nyasha's collapse and Tambu's ambivalent climb both depict the intricate interplay of survival and resistance in a colonized civilization. Pauline Uwakweh expresses the fact that *Nervous Conditions* emphasizes "[Racial and colonial problems are explored] as parallel themes to patriarchal dominance because both are doubtless interrelated forms of dominance over a subordinate social group. Dangarembga has, indeed, demonstrated a keen knowledge

of the problems of her Rhodesian society, and Africa in general. Her vision as a writer stresses that awareness and courage are the blueprint to exploding its contradictions." Thus, *Nervous Conditions* is often regarded as a significant literary contribution to African feminism and postcolonial literature.

Conclusion

Nervous Conditions delves into the resilience, resistance, and healing of African women. Tsitsi Dangarembga depicts survival as a complex bargain with repressive forces, resistance as both political rebellion and personal dissent, and healing as a process of reclaiming voice and story. Dangarembga uses characters like Tambu and Nyasha to attack the interlocking mechanisms of colonialism, sexism, and class, while also giving a fragile vision of self-definition and agency. In doing so, *Nervous Conditions* remains a seminal piece in African feminist and postcolonial literature. The novel provides a detailed assessment of the psychological and physical pain experienced by African women, as well as their battles to rebel and survive within patriarchal and colonial structures, through the experiences of its female protagonists, Tambu and Nyasha.

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