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Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Pauline Ada Uwakweh

When *Nervous Conditions* was published in 1988, it added to the growing corpus of women's writing in Zimbabwe. Despite the obstacles hindering women writers in this strongly patriarchal society, Dangarembga's voice is not a lone one, as was revealed at a workshop on "Women and Books" held in Harare in 1985.¹ Of the many problems facing women writers that were presented at this workshop, the most significant were charges of male arrogance and prejudice toward women's writings, sexism in the publishing field, and lack of educational opportunities for majority of Zimbabwean women. This fact, arising partly from the traditional social structure which places the female as a "second-class" being, illustrates a significant factor in the silencing of the female voice. Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women's social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or "muted" female structure.²

It is not surprising that in Zimbabwe, as in other parts of Africa, patriarchal subordination of the female is reflected in the male domination of the literary arena, a situation that has always questioned the realism of female characterization in male fiction. In recent times, however, this imbalance is being redressed by the educational opportunities open to women and the outpouring of female voices in the literary sphere in many parts of Africa.

The basic argument of this paper is that the self-referential nature of the autobiographical mode adopted by Dangarembga as a literary strategy marks her attainment of voice in the Zimbabwean male-dominated literary arena. Voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action. Dangarembga illustrates this point in the status of Tambudzai as narrator or "implied author" of *Nervous Conditions*. The narrator occupies an interpretive position, a perspective that is necessary for our appreciation of the new insights she acquires about her experience as female in a patriarchal and colonial society.

In a survey of short fiction from Zimbabwe, Dieter Riemenschneider comments on the prevalence of male domination and underlines its literary implication. He notes a recurring tendency in male fiction to emphasize traditional or conventional images of the African woman as wife and mother or to make rebellious females suffer the tragic fate of the non-conformist. Riemenschneider argues that

these writers “seem to content themselves with an appeal to their readers’ voyeuristic inclinations rather than to their genuine interest in the predicament of the African woman” (403). It is obvious, therefore, that the shortcomings of the male literary tradition in depicting women’s lives realistically strongly call for a new female voice on the literary scene. The female voice promises a fresh insight on women’s reality and experiences that are generally inaccessible to the male tradition. Significantly, it debunks the patriarchal social structure and demystifies the idealized traditional images of the African woman. In her essay on women’s writing in Zimbabwe, Flora Veit-Wild acknowledges some important features in the modest literary endeavors of Zimbabwean women:

...the writings closely reflect reality; in a very immediate and direct way women react to the social situation around them. As yet, it is not a very elaborate or sophisticated literature in terms of style, innovation or technique. But it shows a great awareness of the contradictions and problems the new Zimbabwe society has to face and solve. (177)

Interestingly, these contradictions and the response of Zimbabwean women to their social realities are succinctly articulated by Caroline Rooney in an essay titled “*Mothers of the Revolution: Zimbabwean Women in the Aftermath of War.*” In her critique of Irene Staunton’s *Mothers of the Revolution*, a collection of interviews that present factual accounts of Zimbabwean women’s experiences in the war of Independence, Rooney makes some cogent observations. These center around the inherent social problems that negate women’s enjoyment of a better status in post-war Zimbabwe. She observes that despite women’s participation in national struggle, the Zimbabwean male attitude to their women remains unchanged in the post-war years.

In the pre-War years it can be said that the women worked hard, were overlooked, their labour not valued, and so on. Now the post-War situation for some women would seem to be regressively the same—women continuing to support, provide for their families (including unemployed husbands and sons), and work hard without acknowledgement. (60)

She further points out that women in post-war Zimbabwe do express a greater need “for recognition and legitimation of their value” and a need for a “re-evaluation of the roles of the mothers in economic and social terms” (60). Rooney, however, warns against the dangers of entrenching in the social fabric the idealized traditional image of the “hardworking, all-enduring, self-sacrificing woman” paraded by patriarchal Zimbabwean society and accepted by women themselves as the epitome of womanhood:

Such images may be used against the women, as myths to justify doing nothing for them.... In the wrong hands, such myths may be useful, may be mis-used. (60)

Despite the enormous social problems facing them, it is noteworthy that in very recent times, Zimbabwean women are voicing their hardships through organized or individual protests against various forms of male dominance, especially “spouse-beating.” According to a radio documentary program on “Spouse-Beating” in Zimbabwe,³ half of all women in this country are frequently beaten by husbands and lovers. Whereas custom approves of spouse-beating as a corrective measure, and the law-enforcement excuses it, Zimbabwean women are just beginning to realize

that it is an illegal practice. The Musasa Project, one of various “legal clinics” springing up in Zimbabwe is designed to help women get legal assistance to protect themselves from domestic violence. By using several avenues such as seminars, workshops, and “role-playing,” the Project educates the women and law enforcement agents on domestic violence. It has unquestionably given Zimbabwean women a sense of power and direction.

Against this social background, Dangarembga engages the problems facing her female characters. By mirroring their lives, she exposes the contradictions in their search for independence. Her primary agenda in *Nervous Conditions* is to expose the mechanism of male domination in Zimbabwean society. She thus explores the patterns of female subordination arising from patriarchy and its inter-relationship with the experience of colonization. Dangarembga also questions the exploitative nature of imperialism, the value of Western education, and warns against the danger of cultural alienation that it poses to the African. This dialectical tension in the novel projects the socio-political dimensions of the novel.

From varying feminist viewpoints, the term “patriarchy” has defied precise definition. This imprecision has nonetheless become useful to creative writers. Feminist critic Paulina Palmer points out that the varied meanings of the term give authors

scope and opportunity to create complex, multifaceted representations of male dominance. Inspiring a plethora of inventive strategies and designs, they enable writers to convey to the reader an impression of both the ubiquity and the intricacy of systems of male power. It is, in fact, as a vehicle for the depiction of the workings of male power that concepts of patriarchy and patriarchal relations are most effective. There can be few women who at some time or other in their lives, have not experienced the frightening sense of being trapped in a conspiracy of male domination either in the workplace or the private domain of the home. (69)

Whereas radical feminists emphasize the tensions between male dominance and female rebellion, traditional socialist feminists emphasize the dialectics of gender, class, and race. Also commenting on the theoretical debates around patriarchy, Deniz Kandiyoti explains that its usage reveals the specific conditions of development of contemporary feminism. She states:

While radical feminists have encouraged a very liberal usage, to apply to virtually any form or instance of male domination, socialist feminists have mainly restricted themselves to analyzing the relationships between patriarchy and class under capitalism. (274)

It does seem, however, that the basic feature of patriarchy is male power over the female. In many African societies, for example, the patriarchal system defines the inheritance rights of males to children, property, and wife.

To a striking extent, Dangarembga creatively illustrates the presence of these patriarchal features. Her representations of male dominance in the lives of women emphasize its complexity. Her radical cum socialist feminist approach to material are evident in the portrayal of male power and its structures of dominance, gender stratification, female challenges or resistance to marginalization, and the dynamics of race and class relations. The narrator, Tambu, achieves voice through narration, an act that gives her liberation from her patriarchal-imposed silence and offers hope in the resilience and success of female challenge.

The narrator sets the mood by categorizing the female characters involved in her tale:

...[M]y story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasa's rebellion—Nyasa, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful. (1)

Though Dangarembga's narrative strategy appears to personalize the account, *Nervous Conditions* is nonetheless representative of the experiences of many African women who have suffered the double oppression of patriarchy and colonization.⁴ The presence of these dual factors in the novel accounts for the interplay between indigenous forms of female oppression and the economic/cultural forces of colonial oppression. Dangarembga seems to suggest that patriarchy, as is expressed in all forms of male domination of the female, heightened by the contradictions of colonial experience, creates the nervous state or psychological condition which afflicts the female characters in varying degrees of intensity. As a metaphor, "nervous conditions" appropriately expresses the double predicament of the woman in African societies.

Dangarembga's approach to the task of debunking patriarchy is couched in Tambudzai's story of the four women closely related to her and in their various responses to male power. She explores not only the sources of the "silence" surrounding the women, but also their muted challenges to the dual burden. Considering her narrative strategy, Dangarembga has, in Rachel DuPlessis's terms, "written beyond the ending" by the sheer liberation of voice and the self-conscious awareness that Tambudzai gains, not within the text (her story), but outside of it. Freeing herself from patriarchal control and the danger of cultural alienation, Tambudzai achieves the superior status of the interpreter.

DuPlessis defines her concept of "writing beyond the ending" thus:

Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These tactics, among them reparenting, woman-to-woman, and brother-to-sister bonds, and forms of the communal protagonist, take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction. Writing beyond the ending, "not repeating your words and following your methods but...finding new words and creating new methods," produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feelings that are culturally mandated, internally policed hegemonically poised. (5)

Its core lies essentially in what she delineates as the deconstruction of established literary styles and conventional roles assigned to women in fiction prior to the twentieth century. By analyzing and comparing selected fictional works written by European women to earlier fiction, DuPlessis concludes that their narrative strategies challenge the established ideologies and styles of writing about the female. She identifies the resolution of plot action as an ideologically-sensitive site for this challenge. Their strategies contradict the typical ending of the classic novel which asserts "...that choice is over and that the growth of character or the capacity for defining action has ceased" (178). Thus, European women writers respond to cultural conventions by making alternative statements about gender and by offering

choices that are different from the typical endings of female characters in marriage or death.

Though DuPlessis's examination is limited to the fiction of twentieth-century European women, similar challenges to established male styles of female portrayal can be found in the fiction of African women writers. Dangarembga's narrative strategy is, therefore, viewed from this critical standpoint. There is a need to explore this literary challenge in other female writings in African literature as well. Considering the dominant attitude of the African male toward his female counterpart, Dangarembga's literary strategy demystifies the patriarchal social structure and underlines the dangers of stifling female growth and individuality.

There are two levels of domination in *Nervous Conditions*. These are the economic and cultural domination by imperial forces and the domination of the African female by the male. Tambu's mother adequately describes the consequences of colonial economic exploitation as "the poverty of Blackness," a condition that directly or indirectly makes the indigene a victim. Colonial domination in Tambu's world manifests itself in all aspects of social life, such as defining the age at which African children should start school, maintaining a racist agenda against the indigenes in educational institutions like Sacred Heart, and using the selective nature of its educational system to limit the educated indigenous population. Colonialism thus maintains the "poverty of blackness" by allowing a few indigenes the opportunity of education. Note that Babamukuru's educational status enables him to emerge as the ultimate patriarch.

Colonial cultural domination is also evident in the fatal attraction of "the Englishness" in the lives of the people. This problem is emphasized in Nhamo's behavior and death, in Nyasa's "anorexia," and in the pathological fear of Tambu's mother about losing her daughter to the foreign mania. It is significant that Dangarembga explores the dangers of both forms of domination simultaneously to show, perhaps, that even the African male is not free. All the characters suffer, in a variety of ways and to a certain degree, the triple levels of entrapment that the narrator identifies: the entrapment of poverty, the weight of womanhood, and "the Englishness" that Tambu's mother cautions against. As a veritable source of nervous conditions, it also becomes a leitmotif for the dangers of colonialism.

Male domination in Tambu's story is a common denominator among the female characters. It produces distinct results in their lives: in some, assertion, and in others, passiveness and acquiescence to the status quo. This point is affirmed by the narrator's categories: the "escaped" females, the "entrapped" females, and the rebellious females. In these categories are Tambu and Lucia; Tambu's mother and Maiguru; and Nyasa, respectively. The narrator makes these distinctions because she has the insights as an adult to assess and make judgements about her past experiences. She categorizes herself as an escapee because as a female, she succeeded in breaking out of the socially-imposed silence of her earlier life. Through her story, the writer exposes patriarchy and the ramifications of female subordination.

Babamukuru is the symbol of the patriarch in the lives of the women and his extended family. Since he is the educated member of Tambu's family on whom it depends for financial assistance, his power over the family members is unquestionable. He presides over family meetings, runs the lives of its members, and makes decisions about the welfare of Nhamo, Tambu, Lucia, Nyasa, Maiguru (his wife), etc. His brother (Tambu's father) can neither respond to nor question his decisions,

even when Babamukuru, with patriarchal insensitivity, imposes a Western marriage on him as a solution to a cultural problem. The insidiousness of Babamukuru's position is captured in the narrator's statement:

My vagueness and my reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position. It had happened insidiously.... (164)

It is ironical that behind his benevolence and seemingly liberal attitude, Babamukuru has fixed expectations of feminine conduct and decorum that include an unquestioning acceptance of life. He also enforces the traditional male preference over the female. Tambu remarks on his expectations of the female:

I was not concerned that freedom fighters were referred to as terrorists, did not demand proof of God's existence nor did I think that the missionaries, along with all the other Whites in Rhodesia, ought to have stayed at home. As a result of these things that I did not think or do, Babamukuru thought I was the sort of young woman a daughter ought to be and lost no opportunity to impress this point of view upon Nyasa. (155)

In the shadow of this benefactor who offers her a chance to an education (only after her brother's death), so that she can help "the family before she goes into her husband's home" (56), Tambu stands the danger of being perpetually stifled as an individual.

Tambu's childhood awareness of the subordinate status of the female in her family is illustrated in her relationship with Nhamo, her brother. She remarks that, in her family, the needs and sensibilities of the women were not considered a priority, nor were they even considered legitimate. Therefore, the major source of conflict between the two siblings is Tambu's loss of opportunity to start early schooling because her brother, the male child, is given priority consideration. Coupled with Nhamo's obnoxious display of male authority and power, these become a source of conflict between them. Tambu's determination to overcome her marginal status shows in her earlier attempts to cultivate a maize field in order to raise money for her primary education. Symbolically, it is also an attempt to define herself in a male world. Tambu is not sad when her brother dies. His death becomes instead her opportunity to regain lost grounds in her educational career. Ironically, after "inheriting" Nhamo's position at Babamukuru's mission house, she loses her earlier determination and independence of mind in the shadow of her uncle's benevolence and power.

Tambu's mother and Babamukuru's wife, Maiguru, are the "entrapped" females, victims of what Tambu's mother refers to as the "weight of womanhood." She explains this burden to Tambu:

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 decided (sic) today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. ...[Y]ou have to start learning them early.... The earlier the better so that it is easy later on.... (16)

Though she seethes with an inner rage at her social condition, her fatalistic acceptance of the female condition and status places her in the category of the

trapped. Again, Maiguru's education does not give her the leverage to independence as Babamukuru's wife. While conforming in her role as the good, happy wife, but nonetheless angry at her dependent status, she passively accepts her husband's control of her financial resources to maintain his extended family. However, she later negotiates her position within patriarchy by temporarily walking out of her marriage and then arrives at a compromise that allows her a measure of independence from her husband. Despite this, she is trapped in her inability to seek equal partnership in marriage. She neither attempts to transcend her status nor stands up to her daughter's quest for individuality. Both mothers, therefore, seem to act more as agents in their subordination. They would prefer that their daughters bear their fate as the all-sacrificing, voiceless female rather than be assertive and rebellious.

All the female characters suffer from a psychological nervous condition arising from their peculiar circumstance. Tambu's fear of angering her benefactor stifles her into silence. Her mother's fear of "the Englishness" transforms her into a pathological case. There is also the far-minded Nyasa whose anorexia Dangarembga uses as a symbol of rebellion against male domination. Her refusal to be anybody's "underdog" and her physical act of striking back at her father for condemning her as a whore presents the greatest symbolic challenge to male authority. She is the iconoclast and demystifier of patriarchal power. Though exposed to Western culture at an early age, she attempts to find a meeting point between two different cultures that would give the female a leverage from the burden of womanhood. Since her perception of female independence is at variance with Babamukuru's notion of traditional femininity, it is not surprising that the conflict between father and daughter explodes at a physical level. Striking out further against traditional restrictions around her, she uses anorexia—loss of the wish to eat—as a weapon to challenge the authority of her father.

Dangarembga may perhaps be the first African (woman) writer to explore the theme of anorexia in African fiction. A few feminist scholars, such as Sheila MacLeod, Kim Chernin, and Hilde Bruch, have studied the phenomenon of anorexia and its implications for European women. Whereas MacLeod and Chernin see it basically as a woman's protest over her lack of power (an idea that is strongly suggested in *Nervous Conditions*), Bruch furthers the analysis by exploring the psychological rift between body and mind.⁵ Palmer's assessment of their views indicates that this female self-destructive syndrome arises from the oppressive facets of feminine identity—her entrapment in the binary system of nature/body. The result is a psychological breakdown. The female anorexic is engaged in an unconscious protest at "being identified solely or primarily with the flesh—and all the attributes of second-class citizenship which such an identification implies" (28).

Originally, anorexia among European women is a debilitating method of attaining "the image of extreme slenderness promoted by the fashion industry and media." On the contrary, in some African communities (such as the Efik, Ibibio, and Igbo ethnic groups of Southern Nigeria), the concept behind the traditional "fattening-room" practice contrasts with this destructive method of attaining beauty. Though obsolete in modern times, this cultural practice of female seclusion was used to groom adolescent girls psychologically and physically into robust marriageable maidens. It was a *rite du passage* to womanhood that emphasized the importance of nurturing and nourishment to female well-being and beauty. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga uses anorexia to define her rebellious character's cultural dilemma. Nyasa is not so much involved in losing weight as in resisting

authority. Having imbibed Western culture to a certain level during her parents' residence in Britain, she later experiences the typical conflict of a culture clash. Nyasa goes through the experiences of frustration and the powerlessness of being female. She regrets her unappreciated questioning mind and, what is more, the lack of strong female solidarity against male power. The culmination of her dilemma is the physical and mental breakdown which incapacitates her, a grim picture with a rather frightening but symbolic import for the reader. Redemption apparently lies in Tambu's growing awareness and attainment of voice. If one sees Nyasa simply as a victim of cultural alienation, then her rebellion seems to have been an unsuccessful one, as the narrator points out at the beginning of her story. As an iconoclast, she presents the greatest challenge to patriarchy. A better perception of Nyasa is that of a victim caught between two worlds in which she strives to find the best model of existence for the female. Her nervous condition leads to both physical and psychological degeneration because she lacks the necessary nourishment to sustain her growth in society. In Nyasa's plight, therefore, Dangarembga seems to project this social implication: that the female quest for awareness, and resistance to traditional female subordination, cannot be sustained if it lacks the necessary support base, such as the communal bonding of females against a common dominant power. Tambu does not extend support to Nyasa even at her most critical period of ill-health. The relationship between Nyasa and her mother, Maiguru, lacks a firm base. Even among the other females, relationships are rather tenuous. Thus, Nyasa fights a lone and isolated battle in her quest for self-definition.

Another definitive act of rebellion against male authority is that made by Lucia. Her "escape" from male control and her attainment of independence and financial security lie in her pragmatism. She identifies the line of weakness in the patriarchy and utilizes it to achieve her goals. While complimenting Babamukuru's power and benevolence, she manipulates him to get a job at the mission school. Again, in her relationship with a male friend, Takesure, she gives him an illusory sense of power while retaining control of her individuality and sexuality. She does not hesitate to shed that power from him, physically, during a family meeting in which Takesure accuses her before the patriarchy of "walking the night." Significantly, all the women in the family are excluded from this meeting in which decisions about their lives are being made. Lucia transcends the obstacles in her path, her illiteracy and stigma as a "loose woman," to become an educated woman. By helping her pathologically sick sister (Tambu's mother) toward recovery, and in her effort to achieve independence, Lucia demonstrates a firm understanding of the necessity for female-bonding and self-help. Her actions contrast sharply with those of Maiguru who, despite her education lacks a sense of female solidarity.

In view of these assertive acts initiated by Lucia and Nyasa, one is left wondering how, and where lies the narrator's escape from the infectious nervous conditions. Tambudzai retains her fear of Babamukuru till the end and does not in any way seem to appreciate the import of Nyasa's resistance. Furthermore, caught up in the pursuit and attraction of Western education, she also faces the possibilities of another form of domination. It is my opinion that her escape lies not within the story of her childhood but outside of it, in her developing awareness of the ramifications of domination:

I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. *Although I was not aware of it then* no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here... this story is how it all began. (203-04; emphasis added)

Tambu comes to a point where she begins to affirm the truth in her mother's warning about the threat of "the Englishness." Her escape lies in this awareness and in her status as narrator. She finds liberation in the act of voicing "my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men..." (204). In making Tambu transcend the limits prescribed by society for the female, Dangarembga makes "alternative statements about gender and its institutions." She demonstrates in her narrative strategy that for the fictional female, choice should be fluid, and that defining actions do not cease within the text. This projects a positive hope for all women.

By treating patriarchal relations within the African family unit, a unit that basically includes the extended family, Dangarembga credibly represents the African kinship structure. Her work could rightly be seen as a microcosm of patriarchal dynamics in Africa as a whole. Racial and colonial problems are explored as parallel themes to patriarchal dominance because both are doubtless inter-related forms of dominance over a subordinate social group. Dangarembga has, indeed, demonstrated a keen knowledge of the problems of her society in particular, and Africa in general. Her vision as a writer stresses that awareness and courage are the blueprint to exploding its contradictions.

NOTES

1. See Veit-Wild 171. Veit-Wild observes in this article that the discussions of the Harare Conference centered mostly on the difficulties facing women writers and less on issues of style and theme.
2. See Shirley Ardener 20-21. She refers to Edwin Ardener's "Belief and the Problem of Women" as a source for the concept of "Muting" between dominant and subordinate social structures.
3. This documentary program on "Spouse-Beating" in Zimbabwe and the role of The Musasa Project was reported by Daniel Zwerdling on WVXU, Cincinnati National Public Radio, 3 October 1993. The Musasa Project, a Counselling and Research Project on Violence against Women in Zimbabwe, was established in 1988. For more information on its goals and activities, see *Musasa News*.
4. The controversy surrounding the primary source of oppression on African women seems to be a continuous one among critics and scholars. See for example Lloyd Brown's introduction to *Women Writers in Black Africa* (6).
5. Palmer identifies with the views expressed by MacLeod, Chernin, and Bruch (see Palmer 28). She observes that feminist theorists no longer interpret anorexia as "the female subjects' efforts to conform to the image of extreme slenderness promoted by the fashion industry and media."

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