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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS* AND *THE BOOK OF NOT*

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Abstract

This paper explores the social construction of gender associated with the formation of new identities in independent Zimbabwe. Women's representation leaves few successful role models for navigating workable identities for the characters as mothers, wives, and autonomous individuals. The focus is on factors that inspire black women's countering patriarchy and how these factors contribute to the formation of hybrid identities among the younger generation of women. The analysis traces the harrowing reality of African women's lives in the different fictitious characters portrayed by the contemporary African female writer Tsitsi Dangarembga in her narratives *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. Thus, the study shows how this female author depicts the socio-political and economic effects on female characters and how they challenge colonial authority through the lens of postcolonial feminism.

Key words: feminism, gender, hybridity, identity, patriarchy, postcolonial.

Résumé

Cet article vise à examiner la construction sociale du genre en relation avec la formation de nouvelles identités au Zimbabwé indépendant. La représentation des femmes laisse peu de modèles de rôle réussis pour orienter des identités viables pour les personnages en tant que mères, épouses et personnes autonomes. L'accent est mis sur des facteurs qui inspirent les femmes noires à lutter contre le patriarcat et comment ces facteurs contribuent à la formation d'identités hybrides au sein de la jeune génération de femmes. L'analyse retrace la réalité poignante de la vie des femmes dans les différents personnages fictifs que l'écrivaine africaine contemporaine, Tsitsi Dangarembga, dépeint dans ses récits Nervous Conditions et The Book of Not. Par conséquent, l'étude montre comment cette auteure décrit les effets socio-politiques et économiques sur les personnages féminins et comment elles défient l'autorité coloniale à travers le prisme du féminisme colonial.

Mots-clés: *féminisme, genre, hybridité, identité, patriarcat, postcolonial.*

Introduction

In the depiction of African women in literary texts, the questions of gender surface in such a way that they not be seen as mere appendages to men or perpetual victims of society's customs and traditions. A case in point is the feminist writing in African literature which looks

at the classical role of African women in Shona[1] society to get a true picture of her identity. Shona traditional culture and Western education intersect at the concept of patriarchal privilege narrated in *Nervous Conditions* (1989) and *The Book of Not* (2006) by the Zimbabwean female writer, Tsitsi Dangarembga. Through her narratives, she focuses on gender's social construction in postcolonial context. Both texts offer a comprehensive attempt to explain the operations of patriarchy as a "universal and trans-historical category of male dominance" (Barrett, M., 1980, p.12).

The social construction of gender stipulates that gender roles are an achieved status in a social environment, which categorise people and therefore motivate social behaviours. As a social construct, gender is considered as an achieved status by feminist theory in postcolonial literature. Postcolonial feminist criticism examines how women are represented in postcolonial literature, and challenges assumptions which are made about gender oppression and/or subordinated roles of women in post-independent Zimbabwe. Thus, as a postcolonial feminist, Dangarembga is concerned with identifying and revealing the specific effects Western culture has on her female characters. And more specifically, how does the author starkly portray the effects of patriarchal subjugation of women in her narratives?

The discussion of *Nervous Conditions* will primarily focus on the dual female protagonists and how Dangarembga's narrative uses the characters of Tambu and Nyasha to highlight the complexity in, and potential of, the African female subject. The girls struggle to understand, create, and accept their identities and the forces that shape their views. In contrast to the narrative voice in *Nervous Conditions*, which is more reflective and removed, the tone in *The Book of Not* is one of self-centred bitterness. African women are depicted as individuals who no longer know their identity or power as women. In addition to studying the representation of patriarchy and indigenous views of Western culture, I will argue that Western education comes to be seen as a symbol of liberation, as well as of captivity.

I- Representation of patriarchy and indigenous views of western culture

For the purpose of this subtitle, I appropriate the idea of patriarchy as a form of covert, systematic domination over women. The materialistic base on which social relations between

[1] Shona traditional culture, was noted for its excellent ironwork, good pottery, and expert musicianship. The religion is centred on Mwari [God]. The Shona propitiate ancestral and other spirits to ensure good health, rain, and success in enterprise.

men and women are cemented is the patriarchal system. Men have control over women's labour, women's power and economic dependency. This enables men to have dominance over women. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga makes the breach in the shell of patriarchy with her radical feminist perspective by portraying her female characters struggling to gain their space and making their way throughout their daily ordeals. The point of departure of radical feminism has been captured in the slogan, 'The personal is political' (Hartmann, H.I., 1997, p.63). Radical feminists see patriarchy as the political imperative for structural domination over women. The pervasiveness of male domination is reflected in the labour force and career market. Men maintain their control over women by excluding them from some labour and career markets. They do this by occupying positions of power in the labour force, which enable them to dominate in decision-making processes. Hence controlling the labour force gives them power over woman. Kate Millet portrays this type of control as follows:

> Our society … is patriarchal. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that military, industry, technology, universities, science, political offices, finances, in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of police, is entirely in male hands (Millet, K., 1970, p.25)

Although men differ, especially along racial and class lines, the patriarchal system nonetheless unites them in their dominance over women, by reducing the latter to economic dependency. Heidi I. Hartmann corroborates this dependency by noting that the social relations amongst men have a social base, which promotes interdependence and solidarity amongst men and enables them to dominate over women (Hartmann, H.I., 1997, p.101). Unlike women's liberationists, radicals believe that male power is at the root of the social construction of gender (Gamble, S., 1998, p.282).

While internal fissures within postcolonialism and the intersections of specific postcolonial histories have generated a rethinking of postcolonial theorising, it is the interventions of feminism that have done more to complicate postcolonial notions like resistance, identity, subjectivity and difference. What, after all, is the meaning of postcolonial resistance in the face of other oppressions and power relations in post-independence societies? What does resistance mean in post-independent colony where black women occupied subalternised positions, and even as victims in patriarchal structures? It is such feminist questions that have widened parameters and made postcolonialism inseparable from feminism (Chew, S. and Richards D., pp.120-212).

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In line with Chew Shirley and David Richards, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* interrogates what it means to become a woman generally and in the postcolonial context. The *dare* scene in the middle of the narrative illustrates the women's situations. While the members of the patriarchy are having a meeting about Lucia, the women are in the domestic space of the kitchen complaining about the injustice of the situation. Maiguru is singled out for an opinion but is more or less provoked for Tambu's mother, Mainini, in order to point out that Maiguru is not one of them. Tambu starts to see the ways in which education could be burdensome. Naming male power "patriarchy" and recognising its roots as widespread in society and culture were major achievements of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. In this connection, Amos Valerie and Parmar Pratibha assert that patriarchy is not only about gender oppression, but about power. The system which manifests and exercises this power, is typically referred to as "patriarchy" (Amos V. and Parmar P., 1984, p.7). As for Dana Berkowitz, the term arbitrary here is used to denote the source of power as being derived from status as feminist theory describes it. The particular model of patriarchy prescribed, does not make any distinction of stratification or power originating from competence or prestige. Gender at large, especially gender roles, contributes greatly as a prolific and potent avenue by which manipulations of social perceptions and expression manifest reality. Specifically, a reality in which women are typically oppressed by men within a social structure that establishes roles for women, which are of explicitly lesser capacity for accruing and exercising arbitrary power (Berkowitz, D. et al, 2010, p.135).

Due to patriarchal considerations in Dangarembga's fictional works, women are classified as the other gender. Together, women try to surmount their common male enemy. Tambu's development proceeds against the wishes of the males in her immediate social environment. The main characters in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambudzai and Nyasha, are brought up in two separate environments, as opposed to the elder generation consisting of their mothers, Ma'Shingayi and Maiguru. The female characters in the novel have been casualties of injustice both by the patriarchal culture and colonialism which have forced them to deal with a form of double-oppression. This leaves them feeling disoriented and abandoned by the male figures in their families. In addition, Tambudzai's and Nyasha's respective fathers, Jeremiah and Babamukuru, are the patriarchs of their families. Their patriarchal authority leads them to treat Tambudzai and Nyasha in a different way compared to their brothers, Nhamo and Chido. Tambu remembers the stories she was told, how Babamukuru came to be educated that "[the]

suffering was not minimised but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way" (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.19). Nyasha's running battles with her father, which escalate over the course of the novel, demonstrate the problems of trying to maintain traditional gender roles once Western education has taken hold. For Babamukuru, his ability to maintain his traditional role as head of the patriarchy is both affirmed by education and challenged by it. As a result, Nyasha's education enables her to challenge his authority, albeit with violent results.

From the beginning of the story in *Nervous Conditions*, Nyasha's alienation and rebellion are perceived as a contestation forged upon her body. Her rebellion against Babamukuru's authority is made by attempting to voice her opinions with the result that she will be freed from his grip, which is something that he resents and criticizes her for. This can be noticed in the following quotation where Babamukuru speaks upon the matter: "Our Nyasha... Is she the type to bring us a son-in-law? No, she is not the type. And even if she did, it would be a question of feeding the cattle – the man would soon be wanting them back" (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.133). In this case, Nyasha is being branded as an outcast due to her refusal to live by the Shona culture and its norms, hence, being perceived as an unacceptable woman who Shona men do not favour. What is more, Babamukuru sees himself as the 'bread winner' of the family and Maiguru as the preparer of food. Their lifestyle makes their children able to be educated, yet the knowledge that they apprehend, Nyasha in particular, does little to make them docile or submissive. After the exchange at the dinner table Nyasha sneaks off to smoke a cigarette, an obvious rebellion taking place on the body. Nyasha becomes progressively more obsessed with maintaining control over her body, using it as the site of her rebellion against Babamukuru. All the same, Aegerter Lindsay Pentolfe cogently argues that Nyasha "quickly succumbs to the 'nervous conditions' her friendship with Tambudzai had deferred" (Aegerter, L.P., 1996, p.237). As far as Tambu is concerned, the failure to kneel in such occasions will be tantamount to disrespect in terms of her cultural norms. This was not the only instance where Nyasha's disapproval of such obeisance came to the fore. Tambu's observation of the acute cultural alienation experienced by her cousin, Nyasha, taught her that, for the African, education comes with a price. Determined to resist the insidious process of mental colonisation, Tambu is nevertheless aware that in order to escape the fate of her mother and aunt, it is a risk she must be prepared to contemplate. I argue that Tambu's increasing alienation from her rural beginnings stems from her search for the autonomy she has been denied by her father's family. While Tambu develops an increasingly self-consciousness of her individuality, she finds herself

moving beyond the point where her brother, Nhamo, became distanced from his family and culture. Nhamo's fairly uncritical rendition neglects the house's female inhabitants and their overall mental and physical health. Narrowed by his gender privileges and class aspirations, Nhamo's perspective overlooks or cannot articulate fully and empathically how the women respond to the internal strictures posed by the kingdom's resident dictator and the house's structural defects. In amending Nhamo's presentation, which she also pities, Tambu, as one who has encountered the house from both outside and inside, re-reads the structure from the position of a participant-observer or a narrator whom critic Pauline Ada Uwakweh calls "interpreter". This interpreter position offers Tambu a discursive angle that enhances our understanding of the fresh insights she attains on her and her fellow women's victimization under the interlocking systems of patriarchy and colonization (Uwakwe, P.A., 1995, 75). Nhamo's attitude and patriarchal authority towards Tambu, and her endeavours to succeed as a woman, make their relationship even more agonising. Thus, Tambu's attempt to escape patriarchy turns out to be a miscalculation of her own, where her intellectual development causes a fragmentation of her identity and leaves her feeling divided within herself. Therefore, I could argue that the relationship that Tambu has with her cousin Nyasha plays an important role in the process of her self-development. Aegerter Lindsay Pentolfe implies that this is mainly because of Nyasha's ability to bring awareness about patriarchal and colonial issues in their community. They substantially put that Tambu "slowly but surely learns from Nyasha's postcolonial and feminist perspectives to hold onto her African identity, even as she revises it" (Aegerter, L.P., 1996, p.234). In this logic, Ania Loomba critiques the terminology of 'postcolonial' by arguing the fact that 'post' implicitly implies the aftermath of colonization; she poses the question, "when exactly then, does the 'postcolonial' begin?" (Loomba, A., 1998, p.21). In response to Loomba, Cheris Kramarae and Spender Dale argue that postcolonial started with "the imposition of western patriarchal values", suggesting that "westernization have compounded patriarchal restrictions in non-western cultures, often resulting in a more narrowly constructed "domestic" sphere being reconstituted as women's place" (Kramarae, C. and Dale S., 2000, p.458). Although such an approach was already common among radical feminists, ideas of women's liberation as an escape from and destruction of patriarchal power are [now] displaced by notions of an ongoing struggle in a mobile context where patriarchal power is contested. Radical feminists see the parallels between recently decolonised nations and the state of women within patriarchy taking perspective of a socially marginalised subgroup

in their relationship to the dominant culture. In this way, feminism and postcolonialism can be seen as having a similar goal in giving a voice to those that were voiceless in the traditional dominant social order.

Although Nyasha does not approve of the patriarchal dynamics and practices of her native Shona culture she yearns to embrace her African heritage once again. At best, Nyasha's relationship to Shona culture has been formalised into an almost anthropological interest in traditional crafts like basket making. She has, however, been stripped of the tools with which to be African. Hyphenated by her Anglo-African experience, she thinks of herself as a "hybrid" (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.78). The hybridity that Nyasha encounters when having to choose between Babamukuru's and her own opinions is what makes her realise the effect of being in a different culture. Nyasha's relationship with her father, Babamukuru, is badly affected by the hybridity that she experiences, where their differences in opinions drive them further apart from each other. Nyasha reflects upon this matter and tries to explain her nervous condition of her feeling of homelessness to Tambudzai. She argues that, to avoid the cultural hybridity that she is experiencing, "[her] parents ought to have packed [them] off home" (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.79). As opposed to Tambudzai, Nyasha is, due to her upbringing in England, affected by her cultural setting from an early point in her life. Her attempt to combine both of her cultures into one mixture leads to the development of her hybridity. The hybridity that Nyasha is experiencing is acknowledged several times throughout the novel and is one of the significant traits of her character. She has produced a new combined culture consisting of both the English and Shona culture, leaving her with a feeling of alienation and dysfunctionality in both settings: "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you" (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p, 205). She does not belong with the English, but at the same time she does not belong with the African people. Nyasha's position being in-between the two cultures remolds her into a "third culture kid", which David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken describe as "a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture... Then builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any" (Pollock, D.C and Van Reken R.E., 2001, p.19). Unwilling to name the source Nyasha's "nervous condition", Clare Counihan describes it as a consequence of "being black, being a woman, being enmeshed in a colonial system" (Counihan, C., 2007, p.175). Nyasha is not able to have a taste of freedom because of the patriarchy that dwells upon her family. She tries to escape from her predicament by indulging herself in books and trying to gain knowledge about the history of Africa and the

English missionaries' purpose by reading literature written from both perspectives. Nyasha's intellectual level leads her to struggling and expounding her hybridity which ends up controlling her state of mind. Nyasha's level of education places her in constant and sometimes violent conflict with her father who reacts to her assertiveness by striving to remove her agency. Nyasha was raised in England and exposed to changing value systems which gave women greater civil liberties and this complicates her adjustments back into Rhodesian society with its pervasive and dominant structure of patriarchy. In the face of social change advanced by Nyasha through her subjective grabbing of the freedom to choose, Babamukuru's state is not only that of disappointment. He is gradually losing control over everything, with this pointing to a gradual breakdown of the negative patriarchy. In like manner, Babamukuru never assumes that Tambu whom he is *civilizing* would defy his commandment that she attend her parents' forced remarriage; she too does and accepts her punishment as payment for her selfhood and voice (Dangarembga, T., 1989, pp.167-169). Worse still, Lucia, Tambu's aunt, whom Deepika Bahri calls "an unmanageable free spirit" (Bahri, D., 1994, p.9), transgresses the Sigauke family patriarchy (Bahri, D., 1994, pp.142-145). Given the patriarchal structure she has been exposed to, Tambu finds Lucia difficult to place because she threatens the orthodox way of doing things: Lucia's brazen spirit and assertive manner contrast with the timidity and diffidence displayed by the other females at the homestead. Explicitly, Susan Z. Andrade asserts that "For 'traditional' and 'modern' women alike, their role as housewife dominates the narrative horizon" (Andrade, S.Z., 1990, p.39). For the men in *Nervous Conditions*, their place at the head of the patriarchal pecking order is directly due to their ability to subjugate the women around them. But Lucia is an exception to this social order:

> Lucia, the only unmarried adult woman beside the servant, Anna, is free precisely because she is not responsible to a husband and, as a childless woman [up to that point], is not hampered by the burdens of motherhood. These facts, normally considered severe limitations in the African context, enable her to have a sex life based primarily on pleasure, and she is the only woman who does (Andrade, S.Z., 1990, p. 39).

She [Lucia] evades set roles and expectations as far as possible within the context of the homestead. As a result, she is a target of resentment and mistrust from the women around her, and a figure of consternation to the men. But Lucia's role is a complex one, for it involves both open resistance and strategic complicity, something which Nyasha and Tambu struggle to understand. Lucia's shining moment is during the *dare* scene when the patriarchy is assessing

the situation she finds herself in when she goes to live at the homestead and is impregnated by Takesure, a distant relative of her father. Yet, later in the novel, Babamukuru gets Lucia a job and at the news of it, she drops to her knees in praise of him and Maiguru chimes in, "That is why they say education is life, she cried. Aren't we all benefiting from Babamukuru's education?" (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.161). However, Lucia's success demonstrates that resistance to a monolithic patriarchy must involve compromise, or even complicity, at times. I argue that, taken together, the narratives of Tambu and Nyasha represent both complementary and contradictory aspects of African women's experience and psychology the period of pre-independent Zimbabwe. How can the old ways of being, seeing and doing, which Sigauke family inherited, meet and interact constructively and positively with the realities of the new order? Are these realities in line with or divergent from the African women's growing and irreversible refusal to be subalternised in marginal and marginalising Zimbabwe in the grip of the continuing intrusion of Western culture?

II- Western Education: A Symbol of Liberation and Captivity

Education is a status symbol, as well as a tool. Yet, it affects the characters of Babamukuru and Nyasha in very different ways. Babamukuru's education does not challenge his dominant position in the family structure, indicating that the kind of mission education he has received is, to some extent, also grounded in patriarchy. Nyasha's education is seen by the reader as key to her identifying her oppression. Nyasha's level of education places her in constant and sometimes violent conflict with her father who reacts to her assertiveness by striving to remove her agency. This demonstrates the ambivalent nature of the Western education scheme in its effects on the subjects of colonialism. The twin effects of colonial power and male domination playing out on women are emphasised in the ways Tambu and Nyasha each deal with the world around them. Tambu, who sees herself as part of a larger project to uplift her family, is more accepting of each form of domination. Nyasha, on the other hand, rejects the supposed 'sustenance' of such ways of thinking. The power and domination of Babamukuru's education plays out on men as well. Robert Muponde offers an interesting reading on Babamukuru's education and subsequent upliftment project for the family, particularly that the 'scholarship' Babamukuru provides is not without strings attached:

> The gift Babamukuru provides is a colonizing one as it takes over and objectifies the lives of the powerless, and exploits its resources … in the name of modernity and

> progress. The colonizing gift induces all the debilitating symptoms of nervousness associated with the colonial condition (Muponde, R., 2011, p.391).

Muponde contends that it is a "technique of social control as well as self-capitalization", which effectively "unmans Jeremiah by usurping and thwarting any suggestion of initiative he might have had to rescue his family from poverty, and reduces him to a fawning, uncreative, hero-worshipping, spineless and indolent dependant" (Muponde, R., 2011, p.396). In the light of the above, I could argue that changes in women's position result from development efforts that perpetuate their subordination by responding to their practical and material needs, rather than their strategic empowerment. Literacy and education can raise women's consciousness and working outside the home exposes women to the world and empowers them to challenge the traditional order. Therefore, a distinction should be made between the condition of women and their position: "*Condition* refers to their material state, and *position* refers to their social and economic location in society relative to men" (Kramarae, C. and Dale S., 2000, p.322).

While the issues discussed above operate to disadvantage black women under the terms *condition* and *position*, I examine how Dangarembga depicts her female characters striving to maintain or to recapture their cultural identity. The concatenation of Tambu's condition and position in *Nervous Conditions* reveals her identity, which has much to do with perseverance and female solidarity. She defines herself against her home culture and Western ideals. An education awarded to her uncle not because of his particular sharpness, as his brother would put it, but perhaps because of his perseverance. For Tambu, the questions mount and the answers are unsatisfactory. What are the reasons a woman should not be educated; Tambu's aunt is an example of an educated women who does not merely serve up books for her husband to eat for supper. Tambu refuses to be denied and subsequently grows and sells mealies to pay her school fees (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.17). In *The Book Not*, by contrast, the pillar of female solidarity is absent, Tambu has deserted her home identity, and she finds that perseverance is not always ultimately successful. There are various reasons for this. I would argue that Tambu's key misstep is a classically Fanonian one as she internalises her oppression and becomes complicit with it in ways she does not at first realise. Thus, Tambu as "The colonial subject is always 'overdetermined from without'" (Fanon, F., 1986, Foreword, xiii), loses her agency and her desire to succeed places her at ever greater removes from her culture.

Through the opening paragraph of *The Book Not*, Dangarembga expounds an older Tambu witnessing the summoning of her uncle Babamukuru to a tribunal at the village

homestead. She is older and more cautious, and her alienation from her mother is apparent even in the first pages: "Oh, you *wekuchirungu*! Do you still like *matumbu*, Tambudzai! Can you white people eat *mufushwa* with peanut butter" (Dangarembga, T., 2006, p.7). A glance at the glossary that appends the novel imlpies that "wekuchirungu" means "People from European places". The idea that Tambu's distance from the homestead and life at the European-dominated school would have left her unable to eat her culture's staple dishes resonates with the discussion of food and eating as bearers of cultural identity in the sense that "Tambu's identity as a black woman is effectively erased by her mother who refers to her as an aloof white person" (Hlongwane, G., 2009, p.457). In this way, identity formation is also closely linked to the story of the nation. Thus, the reader could consider what it means to have an identity of one's own, which is strongly influenced by the setting of the 1970's liberation struggle or the second Chimurenga[2]. This takes place at a different point in history from where *Nervous Conditions* leaves off.

The Book of Not hints briefly at the changing times with a passing reference to Ian Smith's Universal Declaration of Independence. But in the narrative, the political situation in Southern Rhodesia has become serious enough that it forms a constant presence. The battles between the white minority in charge of the country and the Black rebels fighting to liberate it form a backdrop to the first part of the novel, and Tambu's position leaves her confused as to which side she ought to be taking in the conflict. Racial hierarchies and personal indignities of the colonial era receded, but left in their wake more prominent class distinctions and the failure of the promise of the liberation struggle to bring freedom equally to men and women. Participating in these [radical] freedom struggles awakened the spirit of rebellion and resistance in progressive females and led them towards contemporary women's liberation. In this regard, I discuss how the promise of freedom is undermined by a reality that continues to frustrate Tambu's desire for advancement. Tambu in fact alludes early in the novel and at other times to this problem of manifold assault on and impairment of woman space, a disruption of women's freedom and ability to own, control and enjoy even the very marginal spaces to which they have been relegated, undeservedly.

The Book of Not unfolds a marked shift in the roles of women, which is directly related to the historical conditions of the time. Tambu's sister becomes a Freedom Fighter, and the existence of women who take up arms presents a new category for Tambu beyond those who

[2] *Chimurenga* is a word in the Shona language. The Ndebele equivalent, though not as widely used since the majority of Zimbabweans are Shona speaking, is Umvukela, roughly meaning "revolutionary struggle" or uprising.

submit and those who resist. She no longer questions the agents of her oppression but takes her anger out on those with even less agency than her. She is not angry when her white classmate, Bougainvillea, coldly and condescendingly doles out some chocolate milk for Ntombi, her African classmate, but is cross with Ntombi for embarrassing herself and "begging" in the first place (Dangarembga, T., 2006, p.43). For Tambu, her sister becomes unfamiliar to her, while the agent of her oppression, symbolised in Sister Catherine, a teacher at Sacred Heart, becomes a welcoming model for her to follow. Tambu's admission to Sacred Heart allows Dangaremgba to extend the motif of space and spatial congestion and to continue to denounce women's relegation to and their occupation of limited and restrictive spaces under patriarchy and colonisation. This reverie emphasises Tambu's state of denial where her identity is concerned: she is motivated to identify with the seemingly benevolent Sister Catherine, rather than her own sister. What is disturbing about this alignment is an instance in class where Tambu is daydreaming and unwittingly grabs the Sister's hand as she is coming back to reality. Sister Catherine recoils and Tambu accepts unquestioningly the disgust that the educator feels by her skin contact (Dangarembga, T., 2006, p.31). While at the convent school Tambu distances herself from her Shona roots by refusing to speak her home language with the few other girls there who share that culture. The trend of cultural westernisation of Africa has become very pervasive and prevalent, such that Western civilisation has taken precedence over African values and culture and the latter is regarded as inferior to the former. Tambu is in the process of being indoctrinated with the ideologies of the white convent school she is attending, as a matter of fact. The missionaries, as Gugu Hlongwane argues, are "concerned more with the creation of a puppet-like black middle class and not at all with the 'others', as Nyasha astutely observes" (Hlongwane, G., 2009, p.452). As a result, I presumably claim that the Western missionaries' most important goal in Africa was to civilise and enlighten the natives in line with their religious beliefs and ethical principles. As for Robert Muponde, he offers an interesting reading on Babamukuru's education and subsequent upliftment project for the family, particularly that the 'scholarship' Babamukuru provides is not without strings attached:

> The gift Babamukuru provides is a colonizing one as it takes over and objectifies the lives of the powerless, and exploits its resources (the children of the poor and powerless Jeremiah) in the name of modernity and progress. The colonizing gift induces all the debilitating symptoms of nervousness associated with the colonial condition (Muponde, R., 2011, p.391)

While Tambu is inclined to think of education as nourishment for the starving African self, her mother diagnoses it as an affliction, a curse that has taken Babamukuru and Nyasha, and will get Tambu too if she is not careful (Dangarembga, T., 1989, p.207). Tambu is better educated because the new/Western-type education she acquires in her journeys from the mission school through the convent is complemented, extended, and hence strengthened by the informal/older and undeniably complex schooling she has received already from the homestead and by knowing the fascinating women and men in her family. For most of the colonial period, education was in the hands of the Christian missions, who sought not only to convert Africans but also to inculcate Western values. Christianity challenged traditional belief systems and promoted the diffusion of new ideas and modes of life; in particular, it sought to impose monogamy and the nuclear family as the norm.

Therefore, the informal education Tambu was receiving from Nyasha and the inspiration of Maiguru's achievements are lacking in *The Book of Not*. In fact, Tambu has no role models and no friends. The only reoccurring figure is her mother against whom she is determined to define herself. Nyasha, herself, is heavily medicated and prone to zoning out and plays a significantly smaller role. Even Maiguru, who stands up to Babamukuru in *Nervous Conditions*, is back to baby talk and fussing in the second novel. Mainini, Tambu's mother, thus becomes the focal point of everything Tambu is trying not to be. The relationship shows signs of strain in the first novel but it is peppered with some level of empathy and understanding of circumstances. Hlongwane contends that the characterisation of Tambu's relationship with her parents is actually a commentary on the education she was receiving, noting that "the shame and embarrassment with which Tambu regards members of her family illustrates the fact that her education is fundamentally racist" (Hlongwane, G., 2009, p.451). Mainini, enraged by Tambu's education, sets in motion the chain of events that lead to Babamukuru's branding as a sell-out at the *morari* but more importantly, this gesture endangers Tambu for her complicity in her white education (Hlongwane, G., 2009, p.457).

Seeing how education has materially improved the lives of Maiguru and Nyasha and even the effect it has on Lucia, she finds herself becoming increasingly judgemental of her mother whose lack of education has ensured that she remains oppressed. This is because "illiteracy and lack of training virtually ensure servitude for a woman in postcolonial times. The squalid conditions under which Tambu's mother lives testify to this" (Andrade, S.Z., 1990, p.38). Her mother's despondency and wretchedness inspire Tambu to be more successful in her

educational pursuits, so that she can become a successful educated woman like Maiguru, rather than a failure like her mother. Maiguru has the same level of education as Babamukuru and is the most educated woman in Tambu's inner-circle. But her education is not credited with her contributions to the family and the reader is not made aware of any additional achievements outside the domestic sphere (Andrade, S.Z., 1990, p.38).

As the novel progresses, Tambu comes to realise that education is not always the key to liberation. When she expresses her desire to better her mother by having her learn to read, it is not an altruistic urge, but a selfish one. This is because -the ostensible desire of "educating her mother is her gesture of 'incorporating' her, but only as a copy of herself, not as her own, 'native', person" (Mustafa, F., 2009, p.397). If she can improve her mother, she can improve herself. Yet she seems to essentially fall short of all of the hopes, dreams, and glory she thought that education was going to bring her. Because she is not allowed to sit in on the science classes held at the boys' school, she does quite poorly in her tests. This is likely to be the tipping point where Tambu's development begins its downward spiral. Shortly thereafter her uncle makes it know that she is "a great disappointment" (Dangarembga, T., 2006, p.186). Undoubtedly, Tambu is too idealistic in her academic pursuits; yet, she is motivated primarily by the belief that with enough will power and hard work, education would pay dividends. Tambu's intellect does not handicap her unduly, rather it only further serves to emphasise the idea the education is not the key to happiness.

Conclusion

Tsitsi Dangarembga appears to be wrestling with unfixing black women's identity and their social construction in post-independent Zimbabwe. Through *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, I have discussed social construction, referring to the general behavioural patterns of Sigauke family's culture shaped by African beliefs and values. Dangarembga's female characters experience nervous conditions brought about by gender discrimination, social class and the cultural norms, which relegate them to inferior positions within a patriarchal space.

The realisation that patriarchy is universal and, hence, something women cannot escape leaves them disoriented in themselves and in their identities. Their ideological perspectives have changed due to their cultural hybridity, along with the patriarchal settings that they have denounced as opposed to Westernisation. In other words, the formation and inducement of

Tambu's and Nyasha's hybrid identities are a result of their fight against patriarchy which generates their shattered Shona and English identities.

Dangarembga's postcolonial feminist narratives encapsulate the future for the post-colonial African woman. From the systemic bias against black women, my study suggests gender has to be given a new definition other than what it was before. Based on how gender is defined, the current society needs to re-define it in assigning women new status and breaking gender roles.

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