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Identity, Subjectivity and Experience in Tsitsi Dangaremba's trilogy: *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body*

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Abstract

Carrying the burden of being a girl and a woman in Southern Rhodesia, Tsitsi Dangaremba, in three different novels – *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body* - depicts the life of the main female character from the time she's a girl, till she becomes a mature woman. The three novels demonstrate the turbulent and tortuous path towards self-development and emancipation in a society suffused with patriarchal domination, colonialism and post colonialism.

The radical content of the voice of Tambudzai, the protagonist and narrator, represents an innovative way of advocating the social change of the women in Zimbabwe and metonymically, Africa.

Gayatri Spivak claims that any system, any discourse, inevitably excludes something. The aim of this paper is to 'hear the whisper, [or even the silence], of what cannot be said' (Spivak, 2001, p.2196) through the life of this girl/woman, to trace aspects of her identity, subjectivity and experience in the colonial/post-colonial, Southern Rhodesia, today Zimbabwe.

patriarchy; colonialism; woman; Zimbabwe; oppression

Nervous Conditions

Nervous Conditions takes its title from Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* which reads, 'The status of "native" is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonised people with their consent'.

The novel takes place in civil war-ravaged Rhodesia during the 1960s and '70s, in an impoverished village and at a mission school near the border town of Umtali, now Mutare. It recounts Tambu's determination to get an education and to escape the poverty she was born into. Rhodesia's Education Act of 1930, making education compulsory for European children, meant that a minority white child, was guaranteed free schooling from the age of 6 through 15. There was no such provision for Rhodesia's majority black families. Those who put a premium on education were forced to pay for it, and typically boys, not girls, were the beneficiaries.

The first sentence in the novel reads: 'I was not sorry when my brother died' (Dangarembga, 2004, p.1), it is supposed then that this reply has been written by a woman. There is something strange, unusual in Tambu's reaction towards her brother's death. The narrator adds, 'Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. [...] therefore, I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts that led to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account' (Dangarembga, 2004, p.1)

Tambu's childhood and early adolescence, defeats the confinement and poverty of village life with the help of her uncle, Babamukuru, who offers her a place at the mission school he runs, after her brother's death. Tambu cannot understand that her father is reluctant to allow his daughter to be educated formally. He replies, 'can you cook books and feed them to your husband?' (Dangarembga, 2004, p.16).

Tambu is not persuaded, she starts to sell maize that she grows in the fields at the market, in order to pay the fees that her father refuses to do. She is thankful to Western education and her evolution from a peasant girl to a sophisticated one but struggles to integrate the lifestyle of the village with a growing sense of the unfair position as a black woman. This awareness is driven by all the women characters that appear in the story: her mother, Mainini, simple and fatalistic; her uncle's wife, Maiguru, an educated woman; her mother's sister, Mai, her one-legged sister, Lucia, who follows her own way; and her cousin Nyasha, Babamukuru's daughter, whose experiences in England have alienated her vision.

These characters may enable the reader to understand their anger and engage to it - the trope of the angry black woman. Dangarembga is mastering their anger in order to allow the reader to understand why this particular group of human beings suffer under the weight of so much anger. Expressing anger is not just an assertion of their right to have it, but it is also a way to speaking

back to that power because anger and power often go together. Those who are deemed to be powerless are also deemed to be unable to express anger.

The Book of Not

The second part of the trilogy, *The Book of Not* (2006), covers Tambu's late adolescence at a convent school, where she's part of the five per cent quota of black girls. At the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, the prize for best O-level results goes to a white girl, though Tambu's marks are better. Tambu herself should have been brutalised by the experience of racism from the white education she receives there, however, the reader only hears her silence. Then independence comes and everything looks brighter. Opportunities are opening up so the protagonist is sure she is going to have the most wonderful life; independence begins to turn sour and she ends up working in an advertising agency which is run by white people. It turns out that her command of English is better than the people she works for, eventually, they plagiarize her copies. She simply cannot stand all the unfairness she is going through. She is not earning much money due to the discrepancy in wages, first of all, on the basis of gender and then, on the basis of race. She actually resigns in a fit of anger and she finds herself jobless in middle age in an economy that is shrinking.

There is a disjunction between her circumscribed life at the convent, at work and the violence in the country at large. During the war of independence Tambu is busy translating passages from Latin, while her younger, Mai, sister loses a leg when a bomb explodes at a guerrilla meeting. The whole country is in a state of post traumatic stress disorder following decades of conflict and terrible experiences in the war of independence. The Rhodesian newspapers Tambu comes across inform the appalling situation of the Zimbabwean population: 'A person was a nanny, a cook, a boy gardener, boy messenger, boy driver, a member of the African community, until this nanny, cook or boy became a terrorist. Then the person achieved a name' (Dangarembga, 2006, pp.24). Tambu is yearning to make a better name for herself but that means impressing her teachers and bosses and mimicking the style of the whites. She dreads being seen in her homestead, with her peasant mother and one-legged sister.

Her fierce competitiveness and pursuit of material success aren't pleasant for her. But how else can she avoid remaining one of the wretched of the earth? How else can she 'step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease?' (Dangarembga, 2006, pp. 35). In Tambu's battle to overcome 'the poverty of blackness on the one hand, and the weight of womanhood on the other' (Dangarembga 2006: pp.58), the reader is firmly on her side.

Both *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* are narrated in the first person. The world

through her 'I'.

This Mournable Body

The title of this latest novel alludes to Teju Cole's essay 'Unmournable Bodies', written in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris in 2015, which contrasts mournable Western deaths with unmourned deaths in the Third World.

Now, in the final instalment in the trilogy, Tambu is middle-aged and writes in an appropriately distanced second person. Dangarembga sets herself the challenge of writing about how alienated people become when life stories lose hope in a country where effort is no longer followed by reward.

Tambu is living in a young woman's hostel in Harare, where her age exceeds the rules for permitted lodgers. Suffering from a severe bout of depression and struggling to find employment and accommodation, her life has taken a downwards turn since her youthful educational achievements. She has quit a job at an advertising agency and is running through her savings in the hostel, feeling unentitled to nourishment or respect. "You feel you are creeping up over the edge of a precipice and that this cliff beckons you; worse [...] that there is no way to stop that fall because you are the precipice." (Dangarembga, 2018, p.16)

The second half of the story exclusively focuses on Tambu's employment at a young eco-tourism start-up called Green Jacaranda, founded by her classmate and former boss, Tracey Stevenson. The job comes with liberating advantages – a better wage, a rent-free apartment, driving lessons, travel and the opportunity for creative control over projects. The level of freedom and financial comfort that Tambu begins to experience through these benefits conflicts with her reservations about the company's practice – the history of discrimination she has experienced in her career as a black woman, and her tenuous relationship with her family. The latter becomes the focal point of the novel's climax, after Green Jacaranda launches a village programme that will bring tourists to Tambu's family homestead.

Dangarembga's critique draws parallels with Tambu's earlier experiences of the education system, with eco-tourism presented through institutions run by white Zimbabweans, highly influenced by Europe and, similar to her scholarship, hanging on the hopes of delivering economic redistribution. However, not only do we see Green Jacaranda falling short on its promises to Tambu's village, it also becomes clear that its virtuous purpose is primarily used to appeal to European tourists at the expense of exploiting the local community.

The climactic scene of the novel follows the tourists' arrival at the village, bringing the Europeans, Tracey, her boss, Tambu and her family's village all together in the homestead where the series first began. It draws attention to the vast political change over the landscape

and people since the beginning of *Nervous Conditions* and the tired structures of racism and exploitation that still persist.

Conclusion

The three novels are about women trying to imagine and work their way out of a narrative that has already been decided for them. They are inspiring, not in spite of Tambu's hopeless situation but because through it all, she never loses sight of herself while, at the same time, never underestimating the brutal reality of her predicament. In this regard, the end of the trilogy marks a story of triumph, not despair - a celebration of the act in resistance.

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