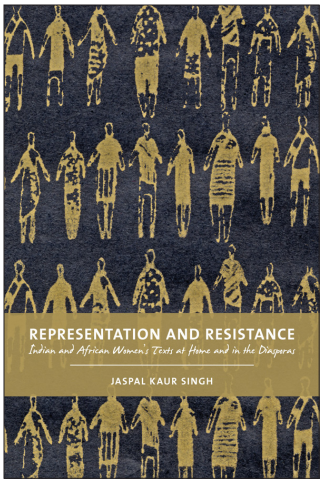

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: INDIAN AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORAS

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Maddening Inscriptions and Contradictory Subjectivities in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

How do postcolonial female authors represent patriarchal control of women and the regulatory power of ideology which become transparent in moments of contention between discourses of tradition and modernity? How do they represent traditionalists and their use of the modern/tradition, world/home, public/private binaries to retain control of the family institution? Westernization of the woman's body is seen as a threat to national identity, based as it on the artificial binary of indigenous/Western, tradition/modern, good/evil dualities, as if to be truly an African woman is to remain "essentially" African, therefore "pure," and if not, then the female body is seen as diseased or contaminated.

I will discuss Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*[1] in order to demonstrate how such women who resist the artificial binaries of good/evil and traditional/modern create a space for other women to re-articulate identity in newly emergent and constructed spaces. Postcolonial women writers are trying to recast female subjectivity and agency by allowing women to name the structure of oppressions in order to resist certain patriarchal oppressions within postcolonial frameworks. They try to show

alternate spaces within global capitalism where identities can be refashioned for selfhood and empowerment, where women work toward social change and expansion, and where multiple identities can be incorporated into old ones, not simply by disrupting or dismantling pre-existing social structures but by altering and expanding them. For in reality, this is the only possibility there is, to recast and recreate within liminal social and economic spaces, rather than trying to dismantle or destroy pre-existing structural spaces, for destroying (even if it is possible) without renewing (as can be seen by the ongoing destruction of Zimbabwe's economy) is ultimately limiting and possibly self-destructive and maddening.

Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, set in colonial Zimbabwe, known then as Rhodesia, examines issues of race, class, and gender oppressions in the postcolonial context and shows how these oppressions are played out on the site of women's bodies. Dangarembga, born in colonial Rhodesia in 1959 and spending her early childhood in England where her parents acquired Masters' degrees, received her schooling in Britain. The story, situated in colonial Rhodesia on the eve of its independence, critiques the (post)colonial patriarchal constructs which are the outcomes of European colonialism.

Nervous Conditions is a title that comes out of Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which explains that "[t]he colonial condition is a nervous condition" (20), as the subject, formed by the discourses of colonialism and nationalism, is pulled in oppositional directions by these two ideologies and is in danger of becoming split. According to Flora Veit-Wild, "*Nervous Conditions* insinuates that the process of mental colonisation is a gendered process and that women in particular react with nervous, psychosomatic symptoms" (141).

Dangarembga examines the aftermath of imperialism where women's bodies were seen as impure or diseased within patriarchal ideology due to their Westernization. However, women writers rewrite women's bodies as sites of resistance to the disabling colonialist and nationalist discourses and institutions. Unlike *So Long a Letter, Nervous Conditions* points to a community of women fighting to decolonize themselves against both colonial and patriarchal institutional oppression.

Tambu, the narrator, tells us that the story "is about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion – Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful" (1). Even though Nyasha

may have suffered due to her inability to change her circumstances, her resistance proves to be enabling for women, such as Tambu, who learn to question and resist certain patriarchal and colonial oppressions in other, less painful ways.

Nervous Conditions, narrated in the first person by Tambu, unfolds the tale of her struggle in the impoverished homestead to her eventual "escape" from it through education and "expansion." The narrative voice of Tambu, a peasant from a rural setting, starts the story with "I am not sorry my brother died" (1), foreshadowing gender battles and connecting her move to the urban setting of her uncle's mission with the death of her brother. She is happy to have escaped the poverty and oppression of the rural homestead, where she was denied education until her brother's death, hoping to be transformed in the urban setting of the mission. She moves in with her uncle Babamukuru, aunt Maiguru, and cousins Nyasha and Chido, in their beautiful and well-furnished mission home to attend the missionary school. The novel examines the oppressive social systems transformed in the aftermath of the brutal encounter with colonialism.

In the beginning, Tambu sees her educated aunt as having escaped class and patriarchal oppressions through education:

> My mother said being black was a burden because it made you poor, but Babamukuru was not poor. My mother said being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband. But I did not think this was true. Maiguru was well looked after by Babamukuru, in a big house on the mission which I had not seen but which I have heard rumours concerning its vastness and elegance. Maiguru was driven about in a car, looked well-kept and fresh, clean all the time. She was altogether a different kind of woman from my mother. I decided it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood. (16)

Tambu believes that education has transformed Maiguru, giving her freedom and material comfort, and releasing her from gender responsibilities.

Tambu's brother, Nhamo, sent to be educated at the mission so that he, like Babamukuru, would eventually take care of the family, unfortunately dies of a mysterious sickness. It is only after his death that Tambu is allowed to be educated and rejoices in no longer having to work hard at the homestead cultivating crops. She thinks that "at Babamukuru's I would have the leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body" (59).

At Babamukuru's, Tambu is slowly acculturated and interpellated into the capitalist world economy and its "liberated" spaces. To Tambu, who sees the poverty and dirt of her homestead as backward, "the absence of dirt (at the mission) was proof of the other-worldly nature of [her new] home" (71); too, the excessive amount of food provided at the mission attests to ideas of modernity and development as opposed to the backwardness of the impoverished homestead. She sees the plants at Babamukuru's house and describes them as the ones she had seen in her English textbook, in the yard of "Ben and Betty's uncle in town," and finds them "liberating, the first of many [liberating things] that followed from [her] transition to the mission" (64). She exults in the idea "of planting things for merrier reasons than the chore of keeping breath in the body" (64) and rejoices in the liberating possibilities of education, seeing her mother as one "so thoroughly beaten and without self-respect" (124) due to "being female and poor and uneducated and black" (89). At this point, Tambu is unable to separate economic deprevation from gender and racial identity constructions.

However, Dangarembga does not provide us with a single-dimensional picture of the "Third World" woman; she provides us with representations of women of different classes, generations, and socioeconomic standings. Yet, as Tambu aptly claims, "The way all the conflicts came back to the question of femaleness" demonstrates the complicity of elite native patriarchy with colonialism in wishing to keep women in domestic roles where private spaces are still undervalued and underprivileged.

The patriarchal order is supported by the colonial enterprise in the pre- and post-capitalist neocolonial economies. Babamukuru, Nhamo, and Chido are products of colonial capitalism and education and are, in fact, complicit with colonialism in upholding what is considered by colonialists as traditional patriarchal institutions. At whatever cost, they will help in keeping the colonial enterprise alive, particularly if it means

food on the table; they inadverdently become agents of colonial and neocolonial power structures. For example, when Babamukuru returns from England, he is greeted enthusiastically as the saviour of the family, while Maiguru, who is equally educated, is ignored. While Babamukuru's status rises when he returns with a Western education, women's roles (even those of educated women) are still defined by their relationships to the males, respected only as wives and mothers, which in and of itself is acceptable, but when only the earning members are respected, the status of women within the family becomes problematic.

According to Veit-Wild, "Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel cannot (yet) offer a political perspective of resistance" (144). However, I disagree. By providing us with a context of patriarchal practices under colonial and neocolonial contexts, Dangarembga helps us to recognize that the power structures in (post)colonial societies are a mixture of complicity and confrontation that produce a "nervous" condition in the split postcolonial subject. Tambu's cousin, Nyasha, who had lived in England and had an English education, suffers from this nervous condition, and being aware of the oppressive systems of Westernization at work, informs Tambu,

> It's not England any more and I ought to adjust. But when you've seen different things you want to be sure you're adjusting to the right thing. You can't go on all the time being whatever necessary. You've got to have some convictions.… But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that's the end for you. You're trapped. They control everything you do. (117)

There is no space left for resistance for the conflicted subject. Tambu narrates the incident that occurs when Nyasha was reading D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Babamukuru removes the objectionable book depicting female sexuality from the room where Nyasha kept it and refuses to give it back to her. Upset at such a treatment from her father, who states that "a good child" does not behave in such a manner, she refuses to eat and eventually becomes anorexic (83). According to Veit-Wild, "Nyasha, who had never had to suffer from insufficient food, reacts with the refusal to eat, and thus keeps her body 'clean'" (143). Veit-Wild claims that as Nyasha "has been exposed much more than her cousin to the European world,

and has in various ways imbibed high doses of 'Englishness,' she is the one who suffers most from the predicament of the in-between, of living in a state of liminality. She is, one might argue, a mimic woman" (Veit-Wild 143); however, unlike her father, who mimics "unquestionably," "Nyasha's body expresses what the suffering person can no longer express with words" (Veit-Wild 142). Her father prevents her from becoming aware of her sexuality, therefore possibly preventing her sexual awakening. Nyasha represents the nervous and contaminated female body that has been produced in the oppositional discourses of colonialism and native patriarchy. The violence of the colonizers transforms itself to the violence of the colonized. Nyasha's problematic relationship to both discourses and the violence on her body is manifested in her illness as she suffers from a mental breakdown taking the form of anorexia leading to delusions. Nyasha's mental breakdown is a rejection of both Westernization and indigenous patriarchal practices, and the breakdown involves Nyasha's rejection of food. She denies the body that is inscribed by oppressive discourses, the body where her sexuality is repressed (therefore, pure). The text highlights the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy, and we see Nyasha's condition as symptomatic of the split subject who is trying to resist both the constructs of native and female.

Nyasha rejects her food and withdraws into another space again when she is physically punished for coming back late from a co-ed dance with white boys, wearing mini skirts, and behaving, in her father's words, like a "whore" (114). She has to remain pure so that she can retain her value in the marriage market, since the only roles available to women – Western-educated or not – are traditional ones. Their very existence appears to depend upon having a male for economic and social reasons.

Under colonial and global capitalism, women are becoming more subordinated than before, often losing their old and meaningful roles in the new socioeconomic schemes within the production processes. Thus, women's oppression and exploitation can be situated within the process of decolonization. According to Frantz Fanon, "When a colonialist country … proclaims to the nationalist leaders, 'If you wish for independence, take it, and go back to the Middle Ages,' the newly independent people tend to acquiesce and to accept the challenge.… In plain words, the colonial powers say, 'Since you want Independence, take it and starve'" (97). In a starving nation, economic imbalance and horizontal hostilities between and even among the different genders and sexualities are not surprising.

Yet, modernity and education are supposed to address all concerns and wipe out all oppressions. When she first arrives from the impoverished homestead, Tambu believes Maiguru "lived in the best possible circumstances, in the best possible worlds" (142), and she can't understand why her aunt could possibly suffer as Nyasha claims. Education is supposed to bring liberty, freedom, and happiness. Toward that end, when Tambu is getting ready to go to the convent, wondering if education will "lighten" the burden of her family, Nyasha, with her usual insight, comments: "There'll always be brothers and mealies and mothers too tired to clean latrines. Whether you go to the convent or not" (200), indicating, quite correctly, that poverty and gender disparity will not disappear with education and Westernization.

Lucia, the only woman on the homestead who resists patriarchal control of her sexuality for reproductive reasons and who remains unmarried, declares that she doesn't know how to obey a man because she is not married (153). When she starts having a sexual relationship with Takesure, she does so out of choice because "her body has appetites of which she was not ashamed" (171). Babamukuru, who is a Western-educated man, respects her individuality and sexual control, applauding her for being "like a man herself" (171). It is not older women like Lucia who must be controlled; it is young women like Nyasha who have to be kept pure for the modern marriage market; if she can't marry well, she might lose her social and economic standing; therefore, it is with Nyasha that Babamukuru's patriarchal control takes extreme forms.

Babamukuru himself has given up Shona traditions in favour of more Westernized and Christian ways. When Takesure sees Lucia's control of her body and her sexuality, he declares that "she is vicious and unnatural. She is uncontrollable" (146), hoping to find ways to outsmart her. It is then that Jeremiah, Tambu's father and Babamukuru's brother, reminds Babamukuru that there are problems everywhere in the family: "Nyasha is impossible these days, and Maiguru too" (146). He then recounts misfortunes in the family, where violence by the male against women is considered the outcome of forgetting traditional ceremonies of "cleansing," for if they had done so, they "could have got rid of this evil" (146). Here of course they are touching on the subject of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a custom that is no longer practised in Babamukuru's house. While this taboo topic is brought up here by Dangarembga to show the brutality of the practice, women in rural areas and in the poorer sections of society await this

ceremony to be initiated into womanhood, and thereby become part of the social fabric of the adults, partaking in the privileges. Thus, FGM becomes a marker of womanhood; what matters is how that practice is utilized by the patriarchal community to provide access to social spaces, and how women use it to empower themselves, even if that empowerment is painful and limited. Women have been using painfully brutal means (for example, breast implants, botox, high-heels, liposuction, motherhood, to name just a few) to acquire privileges and power within hegemonic social spaces. Upper-class and Western-educated people can change social practices with hardly any economic consequences, but for the poorer section of society, punishments from the gods for what they perceive as not observing traditional practices manifesting in a poor harvest or famine become pressing issues, for both men and women. Otherwise, how else will they deal with persistent hunger and poverty in an unequal world?

In this text, however, even though female sexuality is seen as evil by traditional males, Nyasha realizes that it is also due to colonial intervention and Westernization that they all suffer oppression. Whereas Veit-Wild argues that Nyasha doesn't have words to express the extent of her oppression (143) and therefore suffers from anorexia, I suggest that her awareness of the global dimension of capitalist ideology is not to be negated. Nyasha sees oppression in terms of a patriarchy transformed by colonial intervention, seeing men, too, as powerless to resist colonial and capitalist oppression: "Do you see what they've done? They've taken us away, Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other" (201). She continues, "We're groveling … for a job … for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him.… I'm not a good girl. I'm evil … I won't grovel. I won't die" (200). Nyasha sees oppression for both men and women in its complex global power relationship. She acknowledges the "nervous condition" of the trapped colonized who becomes a "hybrid": "I am not one of them but I'm not one of you" (201). She is neither a good native nor a good girl; she is merely alienated and fragmented. Yet this fragmented subject is capable of visualizing hierarchical oppression in a globalized world.

Nyasha also realizes that mere education is not going to transform economic and cultural oppression for most women. For an educated woman, Maiguru's condition does not change much, and she does not have much control in raising her children. She does try to resist by leaving her home in anger for five days, but nothing really changes when she returns,

and Nyasha understands that Maiguru is trying to resist something more powerful than just Babamukuru. She cries: "It's not really him, you know. I mean not really the person. It's everything, its everywhere. So where do you break out to? You're just one person and its everywhere. So where do you break out to? … I don't know" (174). Tambu also realizes through education she has become like Nyasha, but the realization does not seem to offer liberation. Also, Nyasha's resistance to systems of oppression does not seem to bring her release; in fact, Tambu thinks that "Nyasha and Chido and Nhamo [have] all succumbed" to the "Englishness" (203). It is this that is so dangerous and insidious.

However, it is through Nyasha's resistance as well as the resistances of the other women that Tambu learns that education is not what is going to finally liberate her. Nyasha writes in her letter to Tambu, "You are very essential to me in bridging some of the gaps in my life" (196); Tambu also realizes that the bridge that connects her to other women and their resistance will lead to her empowerment. When Nyasha has a nervous breakdown and lies drugged in the hospital, Tambu realizes her interconnectedness with Nyasha. She writes, "Nyasha's progress is still in the balance, and so, as a result, [is] mine" (202). Through the community of women, and through their interconnections, Tambu can create an empowering subjecthood. She no longer valorizes Western education, Westernization, and individualism as the epitome of liberation and happiness. At the end of her narration, as she is headed to the Sacred Heart School, she makes this profound statement: "Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represents 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" (204).

Even before this realization, Tambu had resisted; she had done so through an "illness" when she had refused to go to her parents' Christian wedding at the insistence of Babamukuru, rejecting the idea that they were living in sin. She also was resisting and refusing to play the good native and good daughter, and the site of conflict for control is also her body, as she has an out-of-body experience. Thus, Nyasha's mental breakdown and Tambu's "illness" or madness are representations of the violence inflicted upon (post)colonial women, while at the same time, they suggest possibilities for change. Consequently, Tambu's progression to a changing consciousness, although "a long and painful one," was a process that led

to her "expansion" (204). Therefore, this text complicates notions of patriarchal domination by situating them within the matrix of colonialism and neocolonialism within a globalized world where gender, class, and racial oppression intersect within an impoverished nation, such as Zimbabwe.