

The Impact of Emerging Oppressive Social Conditions on Women in the 21st Century in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Trilogy

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ABSTRACT

According to Dangarembga's first trilogy, there is an observed trail of social conditions that oppress women besides the emerging social conditions which need to be addressed and unless this oppression of women is studied in its trend, pertinent issues of concern may be left out. This would mean that women will continue to suffer under their oppressors if they aren't given a voice to speak with. This paper aimed at analysing the impact of the oppressive social conditions on women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's first trilogy; *Nervous Conditions* (1988), *The Book of Not* (2006) and *This Mournable Body* (2018). The study employed Postcolonial Feminist Theory on double colonization and the subaltern and New Historicism theories. The study adopted a qualitative research design. The three texts were purposively sampled as they are a trilogy hence better placed to show the influence of the author's ideology on the choice of the feminist aesthetic strategy used in the trilogy. A textual exegesis was conducted from close reading and content analysis as the method of data collection and analysis. Primary texts were subjected to close reading to provide data for analysis. The paper also referred to secondary sources to collect data that supported the arguments. The paper established that the female characters in the trilogy have been impacted in various ways by the oppressive social conditions that they encounter such as segregation, commodification of the female body and trauma, stigma and alienation. The findings of the study may be appropriated for comparative literary studies that would enable the development of the appropriate approaches and theories to women emancipation and creation of an all-inclusive gender system. Additionally, the literary scholars may use this knowledge in working towards developing appropriate feminist theories, approaches and models in analysis of such works.

Keywords: Impact, emerging, oppressive social conditions, 21st Century

Research objective

To analyse the impact of the emerging oppressive social conditions on women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's first trilogy.

Methods

The research developed a content analysis tool which was organized in form of themes that covered the thematic concerns per text. The primary data for the study was collected from a thorough reading and analysis of the primary texts for this study. The primary texts here referred to Tsitsi Dangarembga's Trilogy; *Nervous Conditions* (1988), *The Book of Not* (2006) and *This Mournable Body* (2018). Guided by the objectives of the proposed study, the primary texts were read in an attempt to gather enough data for analysis and interpretation.

Library research involving the reading of secondary texts was undertaken. Texts and scholarly works related to the area of study were consulted. Relevant materials focusing on women marginalization and emancipation were also consulted. Besides, internet research was done to complement information that was gathered from other secondary sources that were identified above.

Data analysis

Thematic and descriptive content analysis methods, combined, were used to analyse the collected data with the guidance of the objectives of the proposed study. Therefore, a comprehensive simultaneous synthesis and interpretation of data gathered from the reading of the primary texts with the secondary sources was undertaken in order to come up with a coherent final study. The data collected was qualitative. The paper used manual content and thematic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Dangarembga's trilogy is set in the precolonial Rhodesia and in the then post-independence Zimbabwe. The experiences of Tambudzai among the six African girls at the Sacred Heart is recognisable to many black children who attended formerly whites-only schools in Southern Africa in first years after apartheid. This trilogy documents the colonial and postcolonial racism as it adapted to a changing political environment in which the liberators became the oppressors. The trilogy's female protagonists have recollections or experiences from their childhood and adulthood; it's as if their hardships last from the moment of their birth till their passing. Throughout their lives, they have faced several challenges, and even when they attempt to or succeed in escaping them, they are still labelled as misfits or their communities refuse to acknowledge their achievements.

Mansanga, (2020), sought to understand the portrayal of educated women in the context of the two texts. According to the text, educated women dream of a better life but end up with a struggling miserable life of poverty, joblessness, homelessness and pennilessness. Therefore, Dangarembga depicts educated women who question the outcome of their education to show that education does not always guarantee women's security. The study further asserted that educated women's effort to progress and empowerment is highly inhibited by disaster. Educated women are therefore portrayed as being segregated on the basis of gender and colour. Consequently, education does not always guarantee women social and economic security. Mansanga's study further contributes to the discussion on the changing social context of women marginalization as portrayed in the trilogy. In a nutshell, women access to education is not an automatic guarantee to freedom from the social oppression that has bedeviled the female gender from time immemorial, since oppression is dynamic and there are still other social oppressive conditions that have emerged.

According to Midzi (2022), feminisation of poverty is a term that was coined by Diana Pearce in 1976 after observing an increased concentration of income poverty among women in America (Peterson, 1987). This term was applied in the analysis of Tsitsi Dangarembga's oeuvre, mainly focusing on the victimhood, cyclical evocations of nervous conditions, survival strategies and agency that Zimbabwean women experienced and are still experiencing. This study examined the complex position that African women face in the light of detrimental effects of colonisation and its impact and legacy as it integrates with traditional patriarchal structures as articulated in Dangarembga's novels. . The study also analysed how the author used the novels to expose issues related to post- colonial conditions, gender inequalities, cultural limitations, female self-definition and struggle for survival. It is against this background that this research found ground to discuss further the impact that the emerging oppressive social conditions have on women ranging from racial discrimination both at work place and at home, objectification of the female body, trauma, stigma and alienation from the political, economic and social arena.

Midzi (2022), further argues that Dangarembga's literary texts selected the destructive impacts of colonialism and colonial education on the black individual. European colonialism introduced a type of education that perpetuated subjugation, underdevelopment and inferiority in Zimbabwe or Africa. Her study paid attention to the impact of patriarchy, culture and colonialism on women subjugation. The current study, in analysing the impact of the oppressive social conditions on women, used the study by Midzi to interrogate the extent to which the women have been subjected to racial discrimination, trauma and stigma, alienation and objectification of the female body. Dangarembga brings out her characters as having been subjected to a lot of oppression both at work place and at home to the point that they end up influenced into being racial, getting traumatized and being turned into pleasurable sexual bodies for men.

Borg, (2021), asserts that the colonial predicament enslaves many Africans who struggle against the confines imposed on them by Western colonialists. They become alienated from what had formerly demarcated their role in society and are even made to perceive themselves as outsiders on their very own land. The effect of colonialism on African women is even worse as their position is further aggravated by patriarchy. Thus, this paper sought to investigate on how the patriarchal situation together with living under the jackboot of colonialism put the African women in a rather precarious state. It also examines Frantz Fanon's ideas about the inherent connection between colonialism and violence, while tracing the harrowing reality of African women's lives in the different fictitious characters portrayed by the contemporary African female writer Tsitsi Dangarembga in her novels *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. This paper explores how this female author depicts the socio-political and economic effects on fictionalized women and how they challenge colonial authority in their moments of agency. Borg adds that Dangarembga deals with the perils of colonialism for the individual while apprehending the potential of the literary narrative to function as a means of challenging pervasive female representations. However, the study focused on only two texts, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body* in the trilogy leaving out the debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*. The current study made a comparative analysis of all the three texts in the first trilogy. The study is limited to the impact of colonialism to the state of women in the society thus assuming all the other oppressive social conditions that equally have impacted heavily on the lives of the women represented by Dangarembga's fictitious characters in the trilogy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Segregation

A woman who is oppressed by both colonialism and patriarchy at the same time is said to be suffering from "double colonization," according to Ritu (2014). As a woman and a colonized subject, the woman must fight against colonial power. Her colonial brother now acts as her oppressor rather as her participant in her oppression.

The burden of womanhood on one side and the poverty of Blackness on the other make it worse these days. Hey, Aiwa! My child, learning to bear your burdens with strength will be beneficial to you. (1988: 16) Dangarembga.

According to Dangarembga, the colonial educational system denied African pupils the same opportunity to receive a high-quality education as white students by enacting racist laws and practices. While the bulk of Black people continued to be oppressed and disenfranchised, the colonial education regulations made sure that white people had access to the best education in well-equipped facilities.

Every year, the sisters left the well-fenced suburb where the school was located and ventured into the surrounding areas. By asking females to take the convent's admission exam, the nuns sent a ray of hope to these remote areas. Out of the hundreds of girls who were tested, two were selected annually. We didn't go over this amount once we got to the school since the nuns were expected to adhere to the quota on difference that the Rhodesian government had imposed. Dangarembga (2006), p. 45.

Tambu and other black girls were token black students, who lived in the less luxurious hostel as compared to the other hostels occupied by the white students. A dormitory that was initially meant for four was now crammed with six African girls. The dorm is even renamed African dormitory as the two races were never allowed to mix. The nuns ensured that the government policies on the racial lines are clearly drawn and followed. The African students are left to survive with the limited facilities as the other white girls enjoyed their luxury.

The dormitory that Ntombi and I occupied together with Irene was situated in the first form block, on St Ignatius, the most junior corridor. In this room, besides Irene and Ntombi and I, lived Anastasia, Benhilda and Patience. (Dangarembga 2006: 50)

Charity necessitated the sharing of cupboards and the placement of individuals close to one another. There were six of us at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, housed in this four-person room on St. Ignatius' corridor, because the dormitories on our corridor were designed to house a regulation of four students, and each room had four built-in units. However, the nuns' compassion for us made them want to educate as many of us as possible. Dangerembga (2006), p. 71.

Every issue in the ablution block was always attributed to the six girls. This alludes to the fact that, given their extremely low family incomes, they are the only group on the campus that has never had access to such amenities. Due to the fact that they have black complexion, the girls are harassed by white staff members and other pupils.

"It is, said Sister Emmanuel furiously, it is the African dormitory." (Dangarembga 2006: 76)

Although I have constantly stated why this must not be the case, I regret to inform you that this is not the first time this has happened. This is one of the reasons you are brought here, although I am aware that the females in the African dorm might not understand why such items shouldn't be placed in toilet bowls. Dangerembga (2006), p. 77.

The African females' intellectual aptitude and prowess are seldom acknowledged. Getting an It was almost impossible for an African student's name on the honour roll. The school's top O-level scores are achieved by Tambu and Ntombi, but they go unnoticed; Tracy Steveson, a white girl, receives the honor. Tambu returns for 'A' level but does not perform well as she had taken a subject combination where Africans could not be tutored. She is advised to be copying notes from one of the white girls attending the lessons at the government school. She furthers her education at the University of Zimbabwe, and later graduates as a teacher.

The study found out that racial discrimination also occurs in workplaces, where white employers and supervisors appear to be ripping off black employees. Tambu secures a position at a white-owned advertising agency. Even though there are no indications of promotions or pay increases, her work is plagiarized and goes unrecognized. Tambu does not rise up to defend her rights because she is too oppressed and terrified of upsetting the white people. She allows what is hers to be taken away. She withdraws and loses hope when she realizes that her opportunities for advancement at the agency are slim or non-existent. Tambu experiences racial discrimination in her Steers et al. as the award meant for her goes to the white official whose name had also replaced Tambu's for the copyright. Although Tambu's copy is considered quiet brilliant to be presented to the customer, she is not allowed to do it just because she is black. The idea from a black woman is accepted but the person producing the idea isn't. Instead, Dick is chosen to present it.

I was not to meet the client. My copy was, but I was not good enough to merit that. And even that, I thought bitterly, like everything else about me was incorrect. My copy was not good enough; under someone else's name, it was. (Dangarembga 2006: 285)

Rat-a-tat-tat, Belinda shot out from the keys, typing in the product name Afro-Shine Hair Care, and the name of the copywriter, Dick Lawson. (Dangarembga 2006: 286)

Therefore, Many young girls and women in Africa choose or are forced to put their education on hold or drop out of school due to family responsibilities or lack of financial support from their families.

One of the dangers of colonialism elucidated in the debut novel, *Nervous Condition*, is the conflicting values which pose questions about the identity of black Africans. All the black people are clubbed into one category and considered as 'other'. It also impacts the way people interact with them. When Tambudzai and her family are greeted by a nun at the Sacred Heart high school, the nun looks at her as some object from the black community by asking, 'which one is this?' This reveals the kind of relationship between the whites and the blacks. The blacks are looked upon as simple objects and thus they are pushed to the periphery by the white colonizer. Tambu becomes indoctrinated to be a racist as a result of her ongoing exposure to discriminatory laws and events. For Tambu, the other female students at the college are "others." Since she had the convenience of using the restrooms at her uncle's house before to enrolling in Sacred Heart Ladies' College,

she disassociates herself from their suffering. While Tambu finds it difficult to maintain a strong relationship with the African girls, they look on triumphantly as they accept the prejudice and bullying from the other students and staff.

What a silly boy! Silently, I pondered. Women who are foolish! The idiots who were unable to utilize a good sewer system! I was confident that there wouldn't have been any bans—not on anyone from any restrooms—if they had simply demonstrated that they understood those tricks! These restrooms would have been standing here in this humiliation if the people I was made to identify with had been more capable. Now, I needed to be here after my uncle had given me the right instruction! Oh, how I hated the other girls in my dorm again! (Dangarembga 2006: 86)

Because the government forbids it, African kids are not allowed to attend government schools; instead, white pupils are given preference. Tambu encountered the most severe form of racial bias in her life when she enrolled in her A-level certificate program in science topics. The children are compelled to attend classes at the government school because her school lacks enough teachers for the combination. However, because Tambu has black skin, she is not given the opportunity. Due of security concerns arising from the ongoing liberation war, the anticipated European teacher fails to show up. The college sister suggested that she find a girl from whom she might take notes. Racial restrictions cause Tambu to perform so poorly that she is only accepted as a D and E student at the University of Zimbabwe.

My class's female students reading science subjects were driven each day in the Umtali Boys High School's school transport to class. This secondary Learning was a government institution, built upon government land, so that my presence there was forbidden. I was instructed by Sister Emmanuel to identify one girl whose notes I was to copy after lessons. Quiet Angela Reid agreed to this unsatisfactory arrangement. (Dangarembga 2006: 185)

The racial segregation at the Young Ladies' Sacred Heart College is so open that the two races operate from different grounds. They cannot come into a physical contact. For an African to have intimate contact with a white person was practically frowned upon. The nuns at the college pushed the racial prejudice against the black students. They ensured that this policies were followed to the later.

And even if she remained stationary, there was agony in not knowing whether she would move from your presence or not, whether you had judged the distance correctly or not, for there was an imperative, broken by Sister Catherine only to reinforce it in all of us: your skin and theirs should not come in contact. (Dangarembga 2006: 61)

The nannies made it clear to the black girls at the school that they were of a different group and they never deserved any better or equal treatment like the white girls. This demoralised their self-esteem and pushed them far away from the system.

As if slapping a hard, crushing item down on annoying crawling objects, they move fluidly, yet when they place a plate or jug in front of Ntombi or me, they whack it down with a jut of the chin and spill. Daganarembga (2006), p. 56

As usual, Ntombi and I were at the table when the maids arrived and slapped the dishes down. When they had a tray of bread or a jug of milk to present to the white females, they did it with a gentle smile. 147 (Dangarembga 2006)

Trauma, Stigma and alienation

Findings of this study show that colonialism plays a big role in oppression of women and girls in the African set up. Zimbabwe as a country was formerly called Rhodesia having been colonized. To set themselves free, liberation wars began as the big brothers and even women were enrolled for either fighting in the war or supplying ammunitions and food. Netsai, Tambu's sister is recruited as a guerrilla. Tambu learns of this when Babamukuru is summoned to the 'morari' for disciplining. Ma'Shingayi had insisted that Tambu must attend.

That is when Netsai accidentally steps on a landmine and her leg is blown off. Tambu sees it hanging on a branch helplessly.

Netsai arched up his leg in the darkness. On page 5, Dangarembga

Then my sister Netsai emerged from the bush where she had been waiting and walked forward. The earth burst beneath the young woman of war as she proceeded to the Big Brother's side, her pistol belt sliding around her hip like a string of beads as she walked with a happy stride. [Dangarembga 2006: 20]

Tambu gets traumatised by the war's developments that she hardly concentrates in class. She fears that the big brothers will come down from the hills and attack the school. The picture of Netsai going hopla hopla cannot leave her mind. Despite being distant from the community, she is still plagued by the events in Morari.

After this morari, when fear paralyzed the heart, everything was different. But since she only had one leg, she came walking backwards over those learning and concentration stones after having a leg blasted off. She was hopping and going hop-hop-hopla. As I sat in class and opened my thoughts to the teacher, I could see her plainly. She was the one. My sister was the one. Would the honor roll live up to expectations? I was unable to focus. The woman stepped aside whenever I concentrated, moaning that I was asking too many questions. Dangarembga (2006), p. 34.

Because of colonialism, the girl cannot leave off the memories of liberation war. She gets into constant fights because of the scene at *morari*.

"Tambu!" Anastasia groaned between clenched teeth, looking at me now in a stricken way. "What are you doing, Tambu!" I looked down to see the other end of the sheet in my hands, which were pulling like a tug-of-war with Miss Plato. (Dangarembga 2006: 68)

Maiguru dreads going back to the village during vacations. Tradition demands that as the senior wife, she must cook and take care of everyone in the homestead. Even though education had taken Maiguru out of the spans of patriarchy and societal oppressions when she travels to England, she remains a victim of oppression because of her faithfulness to her culture. She is traumatised that she never wishes to go back to the village and have to do all that the culture demands from her. Getting educated and employed with a salary does not save her from the trauma and stigma that the various women in Zimbabwe and around the globe have to go through. Christmas holiday and its celebrations, unlike other people who look forward to it, Maiguru dreads its arrival because it will remind her of her responsibilities as dictated by the culture of the land.

Nyasha often questions her father for deviating from the cause of black people. She wants Babamukuru to serve the less educated black Africans. She asserts that it's bad enough when a country gets colonised, but when people do as well, that's the end. This reveals how the father has slowly been alienated from his people, the blacks, because of the higher education schooling and religion that he received from the whites the time he was living in England. Tambudzai's mother is worried that her daughter will catch the 'Englishness' of the white people.

Nervous Conditions is set in the late 1960s and 1970s, Rhodesia, before the country gained its independence from Britain in 1980 and became Zimbabwe. This initial promise, however, is gradually but systematically and structurally eroded by and through the colonial institutions that remain in place. When Tambu attends the European school, Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, in *The Book of Not* (2006), it sets into motion a process of irreversible psychic annihilation culminating in the haunting inner voice in *This Mournable Body*. Tambu's troubled cousin Nyasha, daughter of her revered Babamukuru who is both head of their family and head of the mission school that Tambu is allowed to attend following the death of her brother, is much less hopeful about what it means for Tambu to board at Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart:

It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the

precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others – well really, who cared about the others? (Dangarembga 2006: 182)

Having spent her formative years in England before returning to Rhodesia with her family, Nyasha's sense of belonging to either culture is estranged. Nyasha experiences the contradictions of colonialism from both sides: the constant uprooting and disenchantment that comes with first internalising a British view of Rhodesia before then being asked to unlearn the components of that view her father finds disagreeable. Nyasha is sceptical of what it represents. While at first the opportunity to attend Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart on a full scholarship "represented [...] a sunrise on [Tambu's] horizon" (208), the so called opportunity soon kick starts a process of irreversible psychic annihilation and self-estrangement reflected in the increase of second-person self-address in Tambu's narration.

The frequent switches to you-narration in *The Book of Not* formalises Tambu's mounting estrangement from not only her white European teachers and classmates but also her own family. Tambu's "bifurcated self" is, as Coundouriotis (2020) writes, a product of colonial education and her "nervous conditions" are recognised as the "destabilized psychic and emotional states" of "the colonised subject." Alienated from her own family and by the vitriolic racial divisions inherent in the colonial institution where there is a 5% quota of Black girls (who are forbidden from using the same toilet as the white girls), the forms of self-estrangement reach a devastating extreme in *This Mournable Body*, where the narration is entirely in the second person and Tambu's narrating-I is completely effaced. The narrative form reflects Tambu's loss of *unhu*, the Shona word for a kind of personhood defined by the interconnectivity of the self to others expressed by the common saying:

"I am well, if you are well too," translated from "Tiripo, kana makadini wo!" (Dangarembga 2021 [2006], 80 and 302).

Tambu's estrangement from her family and herself is foreshadowed in her brother Nhamo before he died:

"When Nhamo came home at the end of his first year with Babamukuru, you could see he too was no longer the same person" and though he was taller, healthier and had smoother skin, "[h]e had forgotten how to speak Shona" (Dangarembga 2004 [1988], 52 and 53).

This description posits speech as the first site of estrangement from one's own community – what the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o terms the "cultural bomb". In *This Mournable Body* the failure of Tambu's ability to feel connected to others that began in *The Book of Not* impacts her with a seemingly inexplicable and profound sense of shame (Dangarembga 2020 [2018], 143, 264). The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, [...] and ultimately in themselves. (3)

Language, for the colonised subject in particular, is deeply connected to a culturally informed self and losing that language triggers a loss of this self. For Dangarembga (2022, 14–15 and 111–153), decolonisation must first take place as a discursive event in the imaginary before it can materialise meaningfully in society. But Nhamo had not forgotten Shona. What Tambu witnesses is the tension within him between his cultural identity and the colonial values being taught to him :

But the situation was not entirely hopeless. When a significant issue did arise so that it was necessary to discuss matters in depth, Nhamo's Shona – grammar, vocabulary, accent and all – would miraculously return for the duration of the discussion, only to disappear again mysteriously once the issue was settled. (Dangarembga [1988], 53)

Tambu observes that:

The more time Nhamo spent at Babamukuru's, the more aphasic he became and the more my father was convinced that he was being educated" (Dangarembga 1988: 53).

The school as a colonial institution and what Ngũgĩ calls a “cultural bomb” first annihilates Nhamo’s belief in Shona and soon his environment – his family. He withdraws from his family, sometimes refusing to visit during the school break, and mistreats his sisters. Then, in November 1968, Nhamo suddenly dies while in Babamukuru and Maiguru’s care right before he was expected to return home to see his family during the school break as twofold:

First you took his tongue so that he could not speak to me and now you have taken everything, taken everything for good. [...] You bewitched him and now he is dead. (Dangarembga 1988: 54)

Though Tambu’s parents were eager to send Nhamo to the school in hopes that his education would bring prosperity to their impoverished family, they did not foresee how the tendrils of a colonial education would wedge itself between them. Writing about assimilation from a different context, the Korean-American poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong (2020) describes the suspicious racialising gaze of white Americans as a process reproduced in the assimilated children of immigrants:

I used to see my father the way other Americans saw him: with suspicion. (Dangarembga 1988: 27)

While the immigrant’s experience of internalised racism differs from the kind legitimated by settler colonialism, parsing the effect through ‘suspicion’ offers another way of understanding how Nhamo and Tambu’s colonial education teaches them to first regard their family and culture with suspicion before turning this suspicion inwards to the self. Divisions within the nation and self are also reflected in the family. While Tambu’s sister Netsai is described in *Nervous Conditions* as:

A sweet child, the type that will make a sweet, sad wife” (Dangarembga 1988, 10).

She becomes involved with the resistance forces in *The Book of Not*. This causes Tambu to be regarded as “Other” by her own family because there was the constant strain of not asking and not being told about Netsai’s movements.

If you went to school with white people and sat next to them in class, wouldn’t you end up telling them something? One day the white people would discover my sister’s activities (Dangarembga 2006, 10).

Articulating the internalised suspicions of her family, Tambu addresses herself as you “If you went to school with white people [...], wouldn’t you end up telling them something?” before switching immediately back to the narrating-I (implicit in “my sister’s activities”). But Tambu has also internalised the suspicions from the other side: Tambu is afraid of being discovered by “the white people” and implicated by Netsai’s participation in the guerrilla war and consequently bore “the constant strain of not asking and not being told about Netsai’s movements.” Knowing about Netsai’s activities and whereabouts would not only endanger Netsai, but also threaten Tambu’s already precarious social position in the school and this precarity is a specific product of the coloniality in the history of Zimbabwe.

Second person narration in *The Book of Not* foregrounds the movement towards self-aversion and alienation from others that comes to fruition in *This Mournable Body*, where the deeply lodged hostile utterances of all the voices from her past transmute into “the hyena” that lives inside Tambu’s head:

“Every minute of each twenty-four hours taunts you with what you are reduced to” (Dangarembga 2018, 73).

Tambu is haunted by the disappointment and disillusion of what she thought her life would amount to – after all, the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart was

“The institution that offered the most prestigious education to young women in the country, and [...] the key to my future. No, I could not tolerate the idea of failure” (Dangarembga 2021 [2006], 34).

Spivak borrows the category of ‘the subaltern’ from Antonio Gramsci’s work on class distinctions to describe those who are constructed as inferior or subordinate. Tambu exemplifies Spivak’s assertion that class, race, and gender (“Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways” [90]) can all be mechanisms

of oppression. If, as Spivak argues, “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (2013 [1985], 103), then Dangarembga’s subaltern you-protagonist has little choice but to resort to interior dialogue: You have failed to make anything at all of yourself, yet your mother endures even more bitter circumstances than yours, entombed in your destitute village. How, with all your education, do you come to be more needy than your mother? (Dangarembga 2018, 45).

Despite all the promises of her education, This Mournable Body begins with an impoverished middle-aged Tambu living in a dilapidated youth hostel. She has been unemployed since resigning from an advertising agency where she was paid “miserly wages for copy white men put their names to” (Dangarembga 2018, 178). Tambu’s desire for a Western education creates estranged relationships between herself and her family and dismembers her further from her roots and the empowerment she has hoped for, resulting in the conflicted state of her own mental condition:

“I didn't want to reach the end of those mazes, because there, I knew, I would find myself and I was afraid I would not recognise myself after having taken so many confusing directions” (Dangarembga, 1988:118).

Tambu eventually finds a job as a teacher, though she is not qualified in the field that she is given to teach. She is faced with resistance from her female students who are not interested in the subject that she teaches. Infuriated by their impertinent behaviour, Tambu attacks Esmeralda who suffers a permanent hearing disability. Haunted by this incident, Tambu falls into a nervous breakdown, and she is admitted into a psychiatric centre for treatment. After weeks of treatment, Tambu recovers from this condition and is discharged into the care of Nyasha’s home.

Plasa, (1998), posits that the title of Dangarembga’s novel alludes to the effect of colonisation on the minds of her characters. *Nervous Conditions* is a title that was taken from the introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. It refers to a psychological state of mind. Dangarembga suggests that her people are lacking wholeness. This implies that individuals cannot escape the categorisations that have been drawn up to identify them. Once something has been named, it cannot be erased from consciousness.

For instance when she was at home with her brother Nhamo, going to school and cultivating maize, Tambu feels like a victim of her femininity when she sees Babamukuru hit Nyasha during a father-daughter argument, condemning her to whoredom. Therefore, the situation is the same regardless of one's wealth or lack thereof, or level of literacy. The lives of each of the female protagonists are framed by gender inequality. Tambu and Maiguru are talking about their own circumstances with their respective men when Maiguru says, "Sometimes I feel I'm trapped by that man, just like she is." She goes on: "You know, it's not really him. Not actually the person, I mean. It is present everywhere and in everything. Then, where do you start? Even though you are only one person, it permeates everything. (Page 176 of Dangarembga, 1988)

The findings of the study correlate with a study by Gueye 57 (2017), who argues that Dangarembga utilizes Tambu, her mouthpiece, to portray that girls are being discriminated against in school and that boys are special profiteers at the expense of girls. A prime example of this kind of prejudice is the preferential treatment Nhamo received while attending school. According to Shona culture, the boy's education is given high attention and is seen as extremely important as the girl's education. Because Tambu is a girl, Nhamo says her, the family's meager funds are provided to him for his tuition rather than to her. According to Dangarembga (1988: 21), "You are a girl."

Commodification of the female body

Commodification is the process by which products, services, concepts, and people are devalued to the level of commodities in a capitalist society, according to Mphiko (2016). This assertion agrees with the findings of this study where women and girls are taken as commodities or objects worthy of a male who's continually making choices that he sees right for them. The women end up having no voice, freedom or an individuality of their own.

According to Norman (2006), the girl children are regarded in as far as their manual labour in the home, bride price their in-laws bring when they marry, fecundity and fulfilling the sexual needs their husbands, who are men. Norman insists that the result of this has been these women being denied any chance that will see them engaged elsewhere far from the above roles described for them. No wonder education is reserved only for the boys with reasons girls should concentrate on learning how to keep a home, and cooking for the husband. Because she is a woman, Tambu is not allowed to receive an education. Cultural presumptions that view education as a male domain have an impact on Tambu's father's reluctance to support her further education. It is assumed that Tambu would be happier serving her family and then her spouse at home. Tambu is frequently confined to particular responsibilities in Shona culture, which are intended to prevent her from rising above "domesticity." All this happens while Nhamo, her brother, is admitted in school. He is even taken away from home by Babamukuru so that he can concentrate on his books.

In patriarchal production relations in the household, women's household labour is expropriated by their husbands or cohabitees. The woman may receive maintenance in exchange for her labour. Wives are the producers while husbands are the expropriating class. Maiguru's salary is controlled by Babamukuru. Everything she earns goes to Babamukuru's hands who uses it to maintain his status as the responsible eldest son to his brother and all the extended family. Maiguru is not involved in the process of decision making on how her money salary should be spent by her husband. All the same, she keeps on working, getting paid her salary and handing over to the dictatorial husband.

Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother, and Maiguru, her aunt, are shown in *Nervous Conditions* as giving their life for their spouses, families, and kids but getting nothing in return. The portrayal of Ma'Shingayi is one of a diligent woman attempting to earn a living by cultivating the land. Only four of her children live to the book's conclusion after she has multiple pregnancies. When she was fifteen years old, Tambu was taken by her father, Jeremiah, without a formal wedding ceremony, a problem that would arise fifteen years later. Ma'Shingayi's passive life is a perfect example of what oppressed women are like. She is unable to envision her daughter's existence or identity outside of marriage since she lacks control over her own life. Even with her education, Maiguru was still subject to the expectations of her husband and the males in her community; she was forced to donate the money she made for her family's benefit rather than keep it for herself. While speaking with Tambu, she says:

"If I weren't as productive, your uncle couldn't accomplish half of what he does." (1988, 103) Dangarembga

The idea of being obedient to her husband's family had worn Maiguru out. She went so far as to confront her spouse and say:

"I've had enough of it, Babawa Chido. To put it plainly, I've had enough! You also assume I'm having fun when I remain silent. Accordingly, I am not happy today. In this house, I am no longer happy. 1994: 174–175 Dangarembga.

The study therefore established that women are viewed as commodities or objects for sale from a young age. Only when they reach marriageable age are the girls retained in the household, at which point they are sold to the in-laws in return for the bride price (*lobola*), which is given to the parents and brothers. The bride's family views the bride price as a sign of financial progress. The bride's happiness is not always guaranteed by marriage because her parents are the ones who gain the most from it. Worse, she can even fall prey to kidnapping or forced marriage. The girls are never settled in the homes permanently with a view that their stay is temporal, just upto the marriageable age, where they will have to leave their parent's home and move in with their husbands and in-laws.

The text reveals that Lucia is 'plump'. Despite her pregnancy, Jeremiah wants to have her as a second wife. He is impressed by her agricultural skills, for which he deems her 'useful'. The treatment and perception of women as objects of sexual pleasure in a post-independence society is examined and revealed in the text, *This Mournable Body*. Numerous individuals from various societal segments congregate at the bus and combi stations; as a result, they inherently serve as models for a society and, to a greater degree, a country. As a result, any discussions, activities, or events that may occur within a bus or train station may also serve to

establish the social mores of the respective communities. The acts in the combi are used in the text to illustrate a culture that views women. Many males (fathers) who biologically own women see them as instruments of economic growth, whereas other men (husbands) who marry them see them as sexual objects for sex and reproduction. The men in Lucia's immediate vicinity take advantage of her since she is a woman and single. The men's libidinal and sexual appetites are thought to be satisfied by her. A study conducted by Mugambi & Allan (2010) confirmed that many males still feel that they have a sexual right to women because of their masculinity. Because women are women and men are men, some men believe that women must give in to their sexual cravings. The concept of commodification portrays the woman's body is portrayed as a cultural vessel or object that bears the worries and aspirations of men. The problematic phallocentric portrayal of women in the novel, *This Mournable Body*, aims to reduce women to nothing more than sexual objects for men's gratification. Shine, Tambu's roommate, is a symbolic representation of sexism. Every day of the week, Shine brings a different woman into his room. From one night to the next, the interactions in the room become increasingly intense, as if Shine gauges the volume of his women's noise to establish a benchmark. Dangarembga (2018), p. 61.

From the findings of the study, women are viewed as un-autonomous individuals; who are merely regarded as family property, suitable for household chores and childrearing. Women are merely viewed as family property, suitable for household chores and childrearing. The male partners don't take into account their wants and needs. These findings agree with the study done by Uwakweh (1995), which stipulates that the parental obsession with the marriage and motherhood of girl children reduces them to transactional commodities whose value should not be compromised by what is stereotypically defined as unacceptable conduct. Since they are either utilized to pay for their brothers' tuition or to buy the family any essentials, girl children are not considered permanent members of the family. It is expected of girls as commodities to submit to the decisions made by their parents and the patriarchal value system. Girls must work like slaves on the property and in the fields, and they must faithfully marry anyone their parents are comfortable with.

The body thus becomes an inscription of new gender identities. The socio-cultural and religious contexts in Zimbabwe stifle alternative female gender identification as a woman is physically and verbally abused for unsuitable dressing at Market Square in Harare:

Hands lift Gertrude from the combi's running board. They throw her onto the ground where she sags with shock. [...] Gertrude pulls the pieces of her skirt from the mud and knots it about her body. She puts on the jacket and closes it to cover her breasts.

(Dangarembga 2018:25)

Such oppressive acts imposed on women are incongruent with present-day perceptions of gender relations. The acts of violence and verbal abuse perpetuated by both women and men (the crowd) are meant to inscribe tropes of invisibility and deny women's sense of autonomy (Mavengano 2024).

CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study, it is then concluded that oppressive social conditions have impacted women in the 21st Century by facing segregation, racial discrimination, trauma, stigma and alienation as drawn from the first trilogy.

Men and women are given different levels of independence, according to the study. Women are only allowed to produce in domestic settings, whereas men are free to occupy and control both public and domestic areas. Girls lose out on opportunities for personal growth when they marry young. According to African civilization, a decent woman is one who submits to her husband's wishes. Regardless of the situation, such a woman ought to be accessible for her husband's sexual wants.

According to the survey on masculinity, many men still feel entitled to have sex with women. Some males believe that simply because women are women and men are men, women must give in to their sexual cravings.

The body of a woman is portrayed by commodification as a cultural text that is used to attribute masculine concerns and aspirations.

From the findings in this study, it is also concluded that liberated from home, women have the whole of society in which to be exploited. When patriarchy loses grip in one area it only tightens it in other areas. Speaking on private patriarchy, Walby states that in the household, one individual patriarch or the dominant male dominates and oppresses the subjugated female, women are prevented from taking part in public discourse. Therefore, the labour market experience of women of colour is different from that of white women because of racist structures which disadvantages such women in paid work.

During the climactic moment when Tambu acknowledges her younger self's lack of centre. Tambu emerges after the prize giving ceremony in which she is denied her well-deserved trophy. *The Book of Not* portrays how colonial education alienates the black students from everything including themselves. Tambu's narrative voice does not only speak of racist colonialism, but it also painfully embodies its destructive effects and forces the reader to suffer them with her.

According to Mackinnon (1989), gender theory is a philosophy of sexuality that involves uneven interactions and entanglements between masculinity and femininity. Sexual submissiveness is the definition of femininity, whereas sexual dominance is the definition of masculinity. According to Adichie (2014), gender is prescribed since it indicates how we ought to be rather than accepting who we are. She continues by asking how much happier and more liberated we would be to be who we really are if gender norms didn't exist. The women face suffocating obstacles that hinder their advancement due to the repressive societal environment.

In conclusion, trauma, stigma, alienation, and the commodification of the female body are caused by patriarchy, colonialism, repressive cultural practices, and the male child's sex preference. These factors also cause women to be separated and subjected to discrimination both at home and while working.

From the texts, the Shona woman is oppressed by culture, patriarchy and race hence creating minimal chances for advancing socially. According to Chant (2007), women do suffer marginalisation and subjugation in various cultures where the man is the carer of the family unit. In a patriarchal culture, men define the female just as they define nearly everything else.

Suggestions for further study

Basing on the findings as outlined above, the paper makes the following suggestions for other studies on gender perspectives as follows:

- i. Deconstruction and psychological theories in the study of the trilogy.
- ii. Comparative study approach to the reading of Tsitsi Dangarembga's texts.

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