

Behavioural Psychology Of African Women: A Study Of The Psychological Reactions Of The African Women In Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

Dr. Suresh Frederick¹, J.X.Herbert²

¹Associate Professor and UG Head, Department of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17.,
sfheber@gmail.com

²PhD Research Scholar, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17
herbert.xavier7@gmail.com and Gayathri, K.R. Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17

Abstract

This paper is a critique on Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel Nervous Conditions using Frustration-aggression-hypothesis theory. The novel Nervous Conditions divulges about the growth of two Zimbabwean girls Tambu and Nyasha who were inspired by English cultures that colonised their country and their culture earlier. Tambu and Nyasha having similar likeness to follow the western culture as a solution to their sociological problems follow different paths to achieve it. Their ambitious path is troubled by many obstacles laid out by their social and cultural systems that affect them psychologically in the process. The experiences of the girls having differences in approaching life and their ambition undergo psychological pressures that frustrate their mind. The output of the frustration and the reaction of their psyche is analysed from the lens of behavioural psychology. This paper analyses the sociological factors and barriers of women while pursuing their purpose in life and also their mental health which gets affected to those who could not fulfil them.

Key words: psychology, depression, aggression, gender inequality, racial discrimination.

Introduction

Nervous Conditions is a semi-autobiographical novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga. This novel deals with the psychological issues of women in African society. Tambu, the protagonist of the novel is the author Tsitsi Dangarembga herself presented in the novel. The character of Tambu reflects the author's mind and also the collective mentality of humans in the modern world who have the purpose of life. Tsitsi Dangarembga has also exposed the psychological problems faced by women through the account of two women characters in her novel. The novel narrates the ambitious paths of two women Tambu and Nyasha. Both of them have different socio, economic status that determine their course of life. Yet the lives of these women characters reveal the

psychological struggle undergone by black women for their liberation in a modern society. This paper analyses the sociological factors and barriers of women while pursuing their purpose in life and also their mental health which gets affected to those who could not fulfil them.

Review of Literature:

The article titled "The formation of a hybrid identity in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions" written by Peiman Amanolahi Baharvand and Bahman Zarrinjooee delve on the western imperialism that plundered the economy of Zimbabwe and the cultural hegemony of the whites that caused the crisis of identity in that country. The article also investigates the problem of double oppression faced by women; the problem of male

dominance in their domestic life and the problem of racial discrimination in the social level. In the research article titled “Patriarchal Constraints in Tsitsi Dangaremba’s *Nervous Conditions* and R K Narayan’s *The Guide*”, Sivasakthi P and Vijayalakshmi S have analysed the customs followed in the colonised countries of Europe that are insensitive to the women of their society. The article has also done a parallel study on the women in African society and Indian society from the novels *Nervous Conditions* and *The Guide*. Analysis of both the novels reveal issues of women that are overlooked in the modern society. Gloria Eme Worugji and Eton Dien Simon in their article “Apartheid, Patriarchal Domination and the Female Search for Self in Tsitsi Dangaremba’s *Nervous Conditions*” has a feminist approach in critiquing the regimes that neglect rights of women. This paper also finds the relationship between apartheid and patriarchal domination in the affairs of women in Zimbabwe. By doing so it finds suitable measures to liberate women from the bottlenecks of patriarchy.

Nervous Conditions is the second novel written by Tsitsi Dangaremba. It is a semi-autobiographical novel dealing with Tsitsi Dangaremba’s life experiences in the post-colonised, patriarchal society of Zimbabwe. Tsitsi Dangaremba is one of the few African women writers from Zimbabwe to articulate the struggles of African women for identity and liberty from the domination of European culture. *Nervous Conditions* is narrated by the central character Tambu, who describes her experience and view of life in a bigoted society. Tambu’s life experiences in *Nervous Conditions* represent the experience of women and young girls of the black community whose lives were under the control of their traditional system and the dominance of both patriarchy and colonisation. The tone of the narrator expresses the oppression of the women both inside and outside of their home, and their resistance to their daily chores as a beginning

reaction to the male dominance inside their home.

Nervous Conditions is set in the 1980s which was the time of freedom for Zimbabwe from the British conquest. Though the land of Zimbabwe became free from the colonisation of the British, their mind remained colonised by the linguistic, cultural influences of the English people. The novel *Nervous Conditions* focuses on the struggles of women in their own society and the oppression they had been through for a long time.

Even though the taboos and the cultural values have been slowly fading away by the forces of western culture. The male dominance in Zimbabwe clearly shows the dispute of women in African society. Men in African society never allowed women to speak out their thoughts, they were controlled by the tradition that women should not speak in front of men. This situation continues not only in Africa but also as a tradition in other countries. Even educated men in African society behave in a similar way to the women in their house. Men rejected the respectful status of women through education. Tambu strives to rise up from these issues of African women by getting educated in an English convent. The determination of Tambu to liberate herself through education was initially rejected by her family. But after the death of Tambu’s brother Nhamo, Tambu was given space to achieve her desire. “I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling” (NC 1). The very first sentence of the novel expresses the feeling that she had for her brother. Tambu’s father accepts her request for education after the death of Nhamo. Tambu’s family allowed her to fulfill her desire as she was the only living heir left in the family. This scenario looks perplexing because the girl who was forbidden to be educated is now sent to study as she is the only hope or future of the family. This perplexing situation in *Nervous condition* is relevant to the words of Mary Wollstonecraft “I

do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in the society” (Wollstonecraft 36).

After this introduction to the beginning of Tambu and her ambitious endeavour, the novel introduces another female character named Nyasha. Nyasha is also ambitious like her cousin Tambu. Nyasha is also culturally influenced by the British like Tambu. This research focuses on the character growth of these two individuals (Tambu and Nyasha), which in the verbatim of literature is called as “Bildungsroman”. Tsitsi Dangarembga the author of this novel used this form to enhance her work to be more vivid and meaningful. Bildungsroman is a genre which deals with the psychological and moral growth of the major characters from childhood to adulthood. The two Zimbabwean girls Tambu and Nyasha from the shona tradition have equal goals in their lives, to which they both approach in a different way. Tambu finds escape from her patriarchal system of inequality through education and Nyasha grows a rebellious attitude to face the patriarchy of her society. Nyasha’s approach makes her psychologically sick that she could not retrieve her desire that she dreamt of.

Even though the women were from the same society with similar ambitious journeys they had different ways of reacting to the stereotypes they faced. Nyasha and Tambu in the same age view life from different perspectives. For instance, Tambudzai approaches her life from a realistic standpoint. Tambu faces the sufferings of being a black woman born in a low-class family that struggles for their daily needs. Tambu is not egotistic because she seeks education as the means to liberate herself and uplift her family’s economic status. Yet this desire is not understood by her father who controls and congestions it at the beginning. “Can you cook books and feed them to your husband at home with your mother? Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.” (NC 15). Tambu’s father’s disagreement to her desires reflect the mindset of a male in a patriarchal

society dominating the women in his household.

Though Tambu was not allowed to be educated by her family because of its economic and social condition, she patiently waited for her parents to reconsider her vision. So, she grows vegetables like her father said with the hope that her life will change one day. After getting acceptance from her family, Tambu was sent to be educated in the mission school with the help of her uncle Babamukuru. Before sending Tambu to school Tambu’s mother fears that she might lose her daughter by the “Englishness” that killed her son, yet the family is convinced to send their daughter to school. This is where Tambu meets her cousin Nyasha, the daughter of Babamukuru. Tambu’s uncle Babamukuru has not only been supportive for Tambu’s education he has also been the guardian to Tambu’s family by supporting their financial needs.

Babamukuru’s daughter Nyasha’s attitude is totally contradictory to her father’s view of society and life. Nyasha’s education and her visit to England makes her very modern and heavily attracted to the Western life, especially to the life of Western women who live their life as they desire. Nyasha’s wish to live uncontrollably like the English women makes her style and behave like an English woman. Later this misled path of Nyasha leads to her failure. According to Nyasha, she applies new rules and habits for herself while living in Zimbabwe, which she finds to be controlled by cultural taboos.

The parallel thought of the major female characters Tambu and Nyasha is their quest to liberate by moving out of their society. The desires of these two women characters replicating English behaviour and lifestyle can be viewed as their struggling to free themselves from a male dominated society. The relationship between Nyasha and Tambu begins strangely when Nyasha visits Homestead during Christmas and other festivals.

Babamukuru's children are unaware of their traditional language "Shona". And Tambu on the other hand doesn't know English when she was in Homestead as a thirteen-year-old girl. But after that Tambu slowly tried to speak in English. "I racked my brains for odd English words that I could slip into my sentence to help her understand what I was saying, but it was no use" (NC 51). Sooner, she has no other way to express her feelings but only with the help of English. Nyasha who is well educated by the western schools ponders to follow their lifestyle in her society. This does not suit the African community in which she resides. According to Babamukuru an African girl should respect and obey her elders as well as the cultural and traditional values that she belongs to. Nyasha finds this convention to be a behaviour of submissiveness therefore she rejects not only to follow her traditional values but also to respect the elders in her family. This behavior of Nyasha is her reaction to the situation that she is forced to live.

Nyasha's attitude influenced by the western culture starts to grow wild and rude to the people in her family and in her society. Her mannerisms imitate western style of gestures, more noticeably while she greets her friends and family. This imitation of other people is only a mirroring of their images, which would break at any time. Generally, people are driven by the artificial attractions around them. Which is like falling as a bait to the evil hands. This enticement is not suitable for the real world for those who want to change the thinking of the society, and if they mirror or follow those irrelevant attractions in an irrelevant society they are to be considered as the misfits of their world/society. Likewise, anyone who tries to mirror and hide their real identity will face similar consequences and troubles. Because the psychology of the mass is inequitable with a single individual. So the replicating individual will be alienated for her difference with his/her society. This psychology of Nyasha becomes an issue that leads to failures in her future. Nyasha's pretension tries to cover her born

identity. The girl from the African race plunges to become a white woman. The trauma of Nyasha to become a white woman by imitating the western behaviour effects in hating her own identity. This is evidently shown in the novel when Nyasha is cruel to the people from her community. "It's not England anymore and I ought to adjust. But when you've seen different things you want to be sure you're adjusting to the right thing" (NC 119). Her callous behaviour of the traditional values makes people look down upon her. Relatives of Babamukuru do not respect Nyasha or her father for this behaviour. This invigorates Nyasha's hatred towards her society and deteriorates the moral values that she has learnt from her tradition.

Nyasha's fascination with western culture can also be seen as a response to the westerners who have colonised and disrespected her land and her ancestors. The racial discrimination is a major and ongoing issue faced by the black community in the whole world. Even after generations of changes in the black community, these people are looked down as the children of slaves. Nyasha is a victim of this unchanging situation faced by the black community. The rejection of equality for the blacks affected Nyasha's mind at her early teenage; the age of a child maturing into an adult. Nyasha's mind finds western culture as a solution to the liberation of her crisis. But it misfires Nyasha's life and the people around her when her hybrid cultural behaviour is followed in a land where everyone is bound with their natural customs.

Nyasha's approach to discrimination alienates herself from her society, everyone who is close to her fail to connect with her emotions. Also, they were not able to understand Nyasha's ambitious path of liberation from inequality. This becomes one of the reasons that let her moral, spiritual virtues diminish. The individuality of Nyasha makes her lonesome and frustrated because everyone who is inapprehensive with Nyasha becomes a

blockage of her ambition. "Two separate beings, in different circumstances, face to face in freedom and seeking justification of their existence through one another, will always live in an adventure full of risk and promise" (Beauvoir 248). Nyasha's behavior corresponds to the attitude of risk and promise from Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* but it gets altered in a negative direction when it is directed too much by Western culture.

According to Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis, "frustration is the blocking of ongoing goal-directed behaviour leads to the arousal of a drive whose basic objective is to harm some person or object" (SP 192). This hypothesis shows that preventing someone from their goal will lead to them to react in an abnormal way. There are two kinds of people who fall under this depression. Some hurt themselves or the people around them for not getting what they wanted and others would adjust and change their mind into a positive way to achieve their goal like Tambu, who turns all her depressed situations into stepping stones to reach her goal. Nyasha falls in the first category, her mind grasping all her frustrating situation as a remark of her behavior and so she reacts aggressively. The more Nyasha burst out of her stress it created a way to the higher level of frustration that destroys her totally. For instance, Nyasha's uncontrollable behaviour on Christmas Eve. Nyasha's replication of the western culture goes beyond the limitations of her society. "It was a time of school term to celebrate that there was 'raving' Christmas party in the Beit Hall" (NC 111) to which Nyasha dressed up so modern that made another look at her very attractive. In the Hall, all the African people made fun of Nyasha's attire but not Tambu because she maintained her limit with the social gathering, also because she knew the appropriateness of an African in a public place. Nyasha, dressed up differently to her school, had returned home very late at night. Her dad Babamukuru, infuriated by her daughter's appearance, shouts at her. He blames her that no good daughter will go dancing with

the boys and have fun at the hill late at night. These words of anger from Babamukuru were apprehended by Nyasha as the rules that restrict the women in her society. So Nyasha responds with aggression: "You want me to admit I'm guilty, don't you. All right then I was doing, whatever you're talking about. There I've confessed" (NC 115).

Babamukuru's anger can be justified from a sociological perspective because being a respectable person in his society he has led his family in an upright way. Babamukuru is not an old-fashioned person but he fears the western fashion and lifestyle of Nyasha is too modern and bizarre to his society, therefore his family would lose respect in his society by the manner his daughter dresses and behaves. Nyasha responds to this sociological problem that she is unmindful of the social comments on her and her family: "You've taught me how I should behave. I don't worry about what people think so there's no need for you too" (NC 116). The reckless and careless life style of Nyasha was feared by her parents that it might destruct her. So Babamukuru goes on controlling his daughter's behaviour, this fearful protection of a father turns out to be a chauvinistic male character to Nyasha when he prevents her. Nyasha views her father like every male in her society who is authoritative to the women in his family. Nyasha tells Tambu about her independent night out on Christmas night which brought many problems in her home. Nyasha tells that she wants to live the independent life that all women in her society lack and long for. "You can't go on all the time being whatever's necessary. You've got to have some conviction and I'm convinced I don't want to be anyone's underdog. It's not right for anyone to be that. But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that's the end of you" (NC 119). In particular, Nyasha points out that her mother is one of the underdogs controlled by her patriarchal society. Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's One* lays out a similar point that "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the

magic and delicious powers of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 35). The patriarchal society in *Nervous Conditions* portrays women as subservient counterparts of men serving them, and calls out women as characterless, whores when they break off their chains of dominance and control. Nyasha shares this feeling to Tambu cold heartily, “Look at me now. I was comfortable in England but now I’m a whore with dirty habits” (NC 119).

All these issues of Nyasha were believed to be overcome by relocating to a society that is favourable to her sense of fashion and knowledge. Unfortunately, Nyasha was not selected to be sent to Rhodesia by the nuns of the mission school. Nyasha’s rebellious attitude toward her society and the male that controlled diverted her attention from the real route to freedom. The reaction of Nyasha to the sufferings of the fellow women in her society went in the path of anger and self-destruction. The western style of behaving, dressing, smoking were the replies of Nyasha to the barriers of women. Whereas Tambu the protagonist of *Nervous Conditions* channelized the issues she faced in her society. Tambu remained focused on her goal to a better life like her uncle Babamakuru only through education. She sought education as the solution to the poverty of her family.

Unlike Nyasha Tambu realises that the lack of disrespect from her society is given by the financial situation of an individual or a family not on the skin colour of a person. It is the poverty of her family situation that made her life restless. When Tambu moves to her uncle's family in mission, she feels less worried that her poverty is no longer affecting her. Tambu develops her knowledge during her days in the mission school. Thus, she achieves her desire of getting education in one of the best education institutes in Zimbabwe. In Africa, the opportunity for education reaches few people, so Tambu feels very blessed to get the opportunity for education from the white

convent. Tambu fits perfectly in every place she gets in and gets along with everyone she meets. The only problem or obstacle she has in the mission school is her blackness in the foreign school. This misapprehension was created so that there was some sort of some sort of kinesis and fairness in the system. People like Tambu were swept up in that misapprehension and had to find her own painful way out of it.

Conclusion

Thus, the nervous conditions of everyone in Africa, especially the state of women in the family are well displayed through the sufferings of Nyasha and the protagonist Tambu who moved one step ahead in search of freedom of her own identity. It is Tsitsi Dangarembga’s effort that has given her great success of publishing the novel *Nervous Conditions* that gave voice to the voiceless in the Zimbabwean community. Through the words of Dangarembga the readers can understand the marginalized lives of black women. Even though Tambu’s mother’s words disturbed her to banish her thoughts, Tambu never lost focus on the path to reach her freedom. This enabled her to question everything that appeared wrong to her. Thus, Tambu representing the women from black community gets a new beginning in her life in the modern world where she sees everything in a clear way.

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