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UNSEX ME HERE: GENDER ROLES AND FEMALE ACTIVISM IN TSITSI DANGAREMGBA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS.*

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Abstract

The older generation of female African writers has been content with merely presenting the plight of women in patriarchal or phallocentric societies; presenting women characters who meekly reconcile themselves to the traditional burden of womanhood. The younger generation of female writers, however, is dissatisfied with characterization that portrays women as willing and docile sacrificial lambs on the altar of patriarchal values. This essay examines how Tsitsi Dangaremgba's characterization in *Nervous Conditions* contrasts an old generation of docile housewives with a couple of adolescent girls who are determined to subvert the gender roles and stereotypes of the female sex. Dangaremgba's dominant technique of contrast, while highlighting the theme of patriarchal authority and repression, forcefully illustrates the different viewpoints and attitudes of these two generations of African women as well as the tensions that prevail between them.

Introduction

The terms 'sex' and 'gender' have commonly been used interchangeably, but recent scholarship has emphasized the fundamental difference between them. Amy M. Blackstone has noted that one of the earliest scholars to distinguish between the concepts of 'sex' and 'gender' was Ann Oakley who, in *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), argued that while sex is the biological division of beings into males and females, gender constitutes the character traits, values, statuses, and norms that are attributed to, and expected of, a particular sex. According to Blackstone, "because humans create the concept of gender socially, gender is referred to as a social construction. The social construction of gender is evidenced by the fact that individuals, groups, and societies ascribe particular traits, statuses, or values to individuals purely because

of their sex" (335). Thus, while sex is naturally and biologically determined, gender is socially and culturally conditioned. What Blackstone means by the "social construction" of gender is what social scientists refer to as the process of socialization. Archana V. Singh, arguing that this process of socialization begins from birth, further opines that "parents play an important part in the process of gender awareness. Right from infancy, boys and girls are taught gender specific behaviour. Girls are taught to be obedient, submissive, tolerant and generous. Whereas boys are taught to be aggressive, demanding, adventurous and outspoken" (28). In discussing the progress of education over the ages, Frank Muir also observes this process of socialization among primitive societies. He writes that:

> Education to primitive man was a family matter: the conversion of a child at puberty into an adult. For a boy usually it entailed being knocked about a bit and having snippets cut off his body to demonstrate what a harsh world it was, and being taught the customs and killing skills which the tribe had accumulated. For the girl it meant being led off and taught to distinguish between edible and non-edible herbs, how to brew beer, bind wounds and generally make themselves useful to men (65).

The result of this process of socialization is often the entrenchment of gender role, which is the pattern of activities, behaviours, and attitudes that the society expects of an individual by reason of their sex; in other words, gender role is the gendering of sex into masculinities and femininities, irrespective of the innate qualities and proclivities of the individual. Isabella Crespi's argument buttresses this fact clearly when she writes that: "socialization is the process through which the child becomes an individual respecting his or her environment laws, norms and customs. . . . Gender socialization is . . . how children of different sexes are socialized into their gender roles and taught what it means to be male or female" (2).

The social construction of sex into the masculine and feminine genders is generally regarded as a strategy of patriarchy aimed at permanently subordinating the female sex to male authority by foisting on womanhood an inferior role, a negative self-image, and a subaltern status. The family institution, being the primary agent of gender socialization, propagates and consolidates gender role in order to perpetuate patriarchy or male dominance in the society. The boys are socialized from the beginning to assume different and superior roles in the family and society; they are expected to assume leadership roles; their autonomy, agency, and independence are encouraged, while the girls are taught the values of dependency, docility, and subservience. While boys are trained to achieve self-fulfillment, girls are taught the values of self-abnegation, sacrifice, sufferance, tolerance, quietude and submission.

Feminism and Gender Roles

Feminist scholars have strongly argued that the traditional sexist prescription and proscription of attributes and roles is ultimately unjust, unnatural and oppressive. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman. . . . It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (25). Green and Khan, arguing that "the inequality of the sexes is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct and therefore a proper subject of study for any humanistic discipline" (1), have justified the thrust and impetus of feminism as a struggle "to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them, and as such seeks not only to interpret, but to change the world" (2). Carol MacMillan has similarly summarized the stance of feminist scholarship thus:

> The thrust of feminist argument has . . . for the most part, rested on the belief that since (apart from reproduction) there are not important differences between the sexes, nothing can justify a segregation of their roles. Any differences which may exist are said to be foisted culturally by forcing women to concentrate their activities exclusively in the domestic sphere. This in

> turn leads to the development of supposedly feminine traits such as self-sacrifice and passivity, which has the added consequence of inhibiting the development in women of their potential as rational intellectual and creative beings (ix).

Arcana V. Singh also holds the view that a woman is not born with the attributes of passivity, docility and submissiveness, but is conditioned or socialized to assimilate them, and this is what feminism has been up against. She writes that:

> Feminists questioned the superiority and hegemonic control of males over females. Patriarchal norms were regarded to be unjust and oppressive by them. They also believed that these generalized roles have been perpetuated and continued over prolonged periods because they suited the dominant males. . . . Centuries of social conditioning has [sic] typecast the woman into certain gender specific roles (29).

Similarly, Amy M. Blackstone has argued that "A sociological perspective toward gender roles suggests that masculine and feminine roles are not necessarily connected to males' and females' biological traits. . . . Related to the sociological perspective, a feminist perspective on gender roles might assert that because gender roles are learned, they can also be unlearned, and that new and different roles can be created" (336). Blackstone further points out the need for an alternative, egalitarian system: "Political movements such as the feminist movement continue to work, to deconstruct gender stereotypes and offer alternative visions of gender roles that emphasize equality between women and men" (337).

Increasingly frustrated by the male-defined and restricted roles of women in the society, feminism seeks to redefine the place of women in the family and in the society at large. No longer will woman be condemned by patriarchal norms to organize her life solely around the needs and expectations of fathers and husbands, she will now forge her

self-identity based on her own personal aspirations and inclinations; no longer will her role be defined solely around reproduction and domesticity, she will now deploy her talents in economic production and public life. In short, feminism is asking for a more egalitarian re-structuring of the traditional male-female relations that will give women more forceful and gender-free roles in the society.

Female African writers have naturally joined cause with feminism in its fight against sexism and patriarchal oppression, prominent among whom are Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and recently Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Tsitsi Dangaremgba. Odoi, Rafapa and E. K. Klu have thus cited Tuzyline Jita Allen's commendation of the efforts of African female writers in the following words: "Women writers in Africa feel as deeply as their male counterparts the need to repair Africa's fractured image following colonialism. But they also intend to interrogate cultural prerogatives that circumscribed women's lives. In short, they interpret gender in the pivotal project of African cultural recovery" (152). One of such women is Tsitsi Dangaremgba of Zimbabwe, with whose debut novel this study is concerned. Set in a peasant village in the colonial Rhodesia of late 1960's and early 1970's, Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions* delineates and exposes the conflict of values that exists between two generations of women in a typical African family in the throes of colonialism. There is, on one hand, the older generation of women: dutiful wives and caring mothers who accept, uphold and reinforce the traditional values of patriarchy—docility, dependency, submissiveness and subservience to male authority; and on the other hand their daughters, educated and exposed to alternative and progressive values; they represent the generation of young females who reject the dominant ethos and the limited roles that patriarchy has defined and assigned to them on the basis of their sex. Their quest for the liberal values of self-expression and self-identity is the thematic thrust of *Nervous Conditions*.

Reinforcing Patriarchy: Mainini and Maiguru.

Tambudzai, the child-narrator of this quasi-autobiography, intimates us from the very beginning that her story is essentially about the entrapment, escape and rebellion of the womenfolk; she says the narrative is "about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion" (1). Those who

find themselves irremediably entrapped within the cast-iron patriarchal structure are the narrator's own mother, Mainini, and Maiguru, her uncle's wife. These women willingly accept and dutifully carry out their traditional roles of ideal women, caring mothers, docile and submissive wives: their characterization is therefore marked by long-suffering, submissiveness, reticence, dependency and chastity. Those who eventually escape from patriarchal limitations through their own subversive willfulness are the narrator herself, Sisi Tambudzai, and her aunt Lucia. The narrator's cousin of the same age, Nyasha, is also a self-willed and brazen violator of patriarchal authority. This younger generation of women resists and rejects patriarchal authority and its values of restraint and submissiveness. They choose rather to assert their selves against the established social and cultural order; they will rather define their self-identity in terms that are different from what society and tradition expect of the female sex.

Tambu's parents had begun early to socialize their children into the roles that tradition has assigned to them on the basis of their sexes. The eldest child, Nhamo, being male, is being prepared and groomed for his role as patriarchal family head and leader. Not only is he excused from certain domestic chores and duties, he is also the one for whose education the whole family must make sacrifices while his junior and no less intelligent and ambitious sister is compelled to stay at home because the family cannot afford the school fees. Their determined mother sells boiled eggs and vegetables to make sure Nhamo goes to school. As a prospective patriarch, Nhamo begins to assume the airs of authority and power: he expects his sisters—Tambu and Netsai—to do all the chores while he idles away; he insists on them fetching his luggage from the bus terminal although he could have carried it himself; and he takes delight in whipping them, especially the little Netsai, for the slightest infraction. Nhamo believes that education is his right as a boy, and advises his sister against bothering about getting herself educated: "Why do you bother? Don't you know I am the one who has to go to school?" (20). When their respectable uncle Babamukuru offers to take Nhamo with him to the Umtali Station to continue school, he justifies their uncle's choice of him on grounds of his maleness. When Tambu asks to know why she cannot go to school he shrugs: "It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl" (21). He feels he is just the right person to be taken away to school by Babamukuru, their patronizing uncle; it could

not have been Tambu, not because she is not intelligent, but because she is a girl: "Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? . . . With me it's different. I was meant to be educated" (49).

As for eight-year old Tambu, her parents, pleading non-availability of funds, expect her to stay at home and learn the domestic duties befitting a prospective housewife. Tambu is later to recount the agony of her predicament: "Yes, I did understand why I could not go back to school, but I loved going to school and I was good at it. . . . My father thought I should not mind. . . . 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables' " (15). Tambu's mother, too, cannot understand her daughter's perverse passion for education. With the benefit of about sixteen years of marriage experience, she can thus afford to solemnize to Tambu about the duties of womanhood that inevitably await her:

> This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. . . . How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. . . . What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burden with strength (16).

This is obviously the homely advice of a woman who has successfully fulfilled her gender role and stereotype of ideal womanhood in a patriarchal society. Given to marriage at the age of sixteen, she has borne the burden of marriage with tragic acceptance and resignation. As far as she is concerned, there is no alternative identity and experience for womanhood, and her daughter is condemned by her femaleness to fit into the gender role that tradition has defined for her. So when the wilful Tambu asks for seed so that she can grow her own maize in her own farm in order to go back to school, her mother readily obliges her, but for a different reason: she believes that Tambu will fail in her

educational ambitions and thus learn from that experience that formal education is not her destiny, nor any woman's destiny for that matter. Thus she reasons with her husband: "She is asking for seed. That we can give her. Let her try. Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done" (17).

All this verifies what Isabella Crespi has said about the family being a "gendered relationship" in patriarchal societies. Families, Crespi argues, have "different educational demands for their sons and daughters" because they tend to "promote the autonomy of the males and dependency of the females," desirous that "the boy should realize himself even if against familial ties, while the girl had to accept and to conserve them" (3).

Maiguru is another woman who has apparently happily endorsed and acquiesced to the constraints of patriarchy. She is the wife of Babamukuri, Tambu's uncle. She and her husband have had the opportunity of studying overseas on scholarship. She holds Bachelors and Masters Degrees from South Africa and England respectively. Unlike Tambu's mother and other women in the community, she is therefore well-educated and exposed to more libertarian and progressive values. Tambu looks up to her as a role model, an example of a liberated woman whose femaleness has not condemned her to poverty and who is not burdened or crushed by what Tambu's mother has called the "business of womanhood":

> 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 driven about in a car, looked well-kempt 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).

However, when Tambu eventually goes to live with the Babamukurus, she learns to her disappointment that Maiguru, like her own mother, is a victim of her femaleness; that Maiguru too has

submitted totally to the whims and caprices of patriarchal authority, fulfilling the traditional domestic role of submissive and docile housewife. She is consistently fawning on her husband, who hardly appreciates his wife's loving care and attentions. She indulges her daughter Nyasha, and dutifully caters for the family relations of her husband. Although Maiguru is working as a teacher, she does not receive her salary, having surrendered it all to her husband who manages her income as he sees fit, especially to boost his image as patronizing patriarch. Yet, Tambu had taken Maiguru, her uncle's wife, as her role model in the mistaken belief that being educated, she was a liberated woman. Tambu's disappointment is therefore understandable when she learns that Maiguru, like her uneducated mother in the village, is also a victim of the sacrifice and self-effacement that patriarchy demands of womanhood: "I felt sorry for Maiguru because she could not use the money she earned for her own purposes and had been prevented by marriage from doing the things she wanted to do" (103).

Maiguru and Tambu's mother, Mainini, represent the entrapment of womanhood within a role-defining patriarchal system. Their lives and livelihood are a function of their husband's humour, their roles in the society are determined by their sex, notwithstanding their status and class. It is their willingness to endure and tolerate patriarchal limitations on their sex, their self-effacement and helpless dependency that their daughters find irritating and repugnant. Tambu will not accept her mother's gospel of sufferance as the inescapable fate of femaleness, with all the poverty and squalor that it entails. Nyasha, Maiguru's daughter, disdains her mother for her weak-mindedness, self-effacement and subservience to her father's peremptory authority, against which she herself will have to revolt.

Resisting Patriarchal Limitations: Tambu, Nyasha, and Lucia.

In the characters of Tambu and Nyasha we see a pair of young rebels. Different in outlook and temperament from their mothers, these embattled cousins are not only repulsed by the patriarchal order that limits the womenfolk from self-realization, but also unsympathetic to their mothers who have willingly succumbed to the blight of that order. From a very early age, Tambu displays "unruly" conduct that is traditionally regarded as unbecoming of the female sex. She resents her brother Nhamo's unwillingness to carry his own luggage from the bus

terminus to their home. Coming home for holidays, Nhamo, in a typical demonstration of male authority and superiority, would ask his sisters to carry his luggage for him from the bus terminus, although he could have carried it himself, as Tambu recalls: "Knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do things for him, I hated fetching my brother's luggage. Because I was almost as big as he was and when I was angry could push a log from the fire into his face, he did not bully me too much" (10). She has sympathy for her junior sister Netsai, who never minds carrying out Nhamo's orders. Even at that tender age of eight, Tambu can see that Netsai is the type of young girl that will fit properly into the traditional role of her sex: "She was a sweet child, the type that will make a sweet, sad wife" (10). We must note here Tambu's ability to discern the characteristics of power and authority that maleness appropriates to itself, and the sweetness and meekness that are expected of the female sex.

Compelled by her parents' poverty and apathy towards women education, Tambu drops out of school; but she refuses to surrender to the constraints of her circumstances and sex. She is determined to go back to school despite the arguments of her parents about the needlessness of female education. Her father in particular cannot understand his daughter's passion for education; he urges her to stay at home and learn the gentle art of housewifery: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15). Her mother advises her to forget about education and start learning the business of womanhood and its attendant sacrifices. Both parents are expressing the traditional patriarchal views of ideal womanhood. For both parents, there is no alternative identity for a girl child; to aspire for a life beyond the domestic circle is heresy and perversity beyond their comprehension. But Tambu is determined to assert her *self* against the bastions of patriarchy; she has educational dreams to realize and a self-identity to forge. She cannot succumb to her mother's idea of womanhood; she must be a different kind of woman—educated, liberated, rich and clean. If she is to make sacrifices, they will be the type that will help her towards her self-definition and self-realization. Her parents are both startled and amazed when she tells them that she wants to clear her own farm, grow maize, and earn her school

fees. For an eight-year old girl, it is a resolution that points to an independent and tenacious mind.

Nhamo's act of stealing his sister's maize when it was ripe is seen by Tambu as part of the patriarchal conspiracy to further frustrate and truncate her educational ambitions, especially when she recalls Nhamo's insistence that girls do not have to go to school. Her ferocious attack on his brother attests to her "unwomanly" conduct, as watching pupils report to Mr. Matimba their teacher, blaming Tambu: "She charged. We saw it. She just charged for no reason at all" (23). However, when she explains her actions to Mr. Matimba, he appreciates her predicament and passion for education, offers to help her sell her maize, get the school fees, and return to school.

Babamukuru's preference of Nhamo over Tambu as the person to take with him to his mission school, and Nhamo's justification of their uncle's choice on grounds of his maleness, further contribute to reinforce Tambu's resentment of manhood and its surrogates. This explains the fact that she feels no sympathy for her brother when he eventually dies. It is also worthy of note that at Nhamo's death Babamukuru expresses the same chauvinistic sentiments when he laments the fact that his brother Jeremiah has no other male child for him to educate: "It is unfortunate . . . that there is no male child to take this duty, to take the job of raising the family from hunger and need, Jeremiah" (56). Although Tambu is finally taken away to be educated by her uncle at the Mission, she cannot help feeling that this favour was only necessitated by the absence of another male child in the family: "I was only here because my brother had died' (65). Nevertheless, she still feels that it is a step away from the humdrum existence of the village and all its patriarchal restrictions, and a move towards the self-fulfillment that she desperately dreams of. As she leaves for the Mission with her uncle, Tambu anticipates further self-realization and emancipation from the shackles of poverty. She hopes to create a different identity for herself, to be able to perform different roles from the ones traditionally expected of her sex: "At Babamukuru's I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead" (58-59).

What Tambu has failed to anticipate, however, is the fact that she will have to contend with another kind of predicament—the suffocating authoritarianism of Babamukuru, the patriarch- figure, and the tense,

conflict-ridden atmosphere of his opulent home. As the head of the home, Babamukuru is an enlightened despot of sorts; he expects and demands from the womenfolk nothing less than total self-effacement and submission to his authority. His daughter Nyasha and his niece Tambu (both of them fourteen years of age by this time) are expected to conduct themselves according to the highest code of decency and morality befitting girls from a cultured middle- class family. The irrepressible wide-reading Nyasha is sternly rebuked for reading D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover* because it dwells on sexual relationships, and therefore an indecent book for a young girl. Nyasha is often compelled to eat against her will; she is reprimanded for dressing gorgeously and thus, in Babamukuru's view, compromising her integrity. Her father calls her a whore and beats her up for walking alone with a boy. Sue Thomas has argued that "Babamukuru's place in the Shona patriarchy and his sense of masculine divinity render him, in particular, an upholder of traditional Shona ideas about feminine decency, submissiveness and respect. Nyasha's open defiance of his myths of femininity threatens his masculine authority" (30).

Babamukuru uses his status as a patriarch and his relative affluence to blackmail Nyasha and Tambu into submission. When, for instance, Nyasha declines from eating as a protest against the infringement of her liberties, her father threatens to withdraw his paternal duties from her: "She must eat her food, all of it. She is always doing this, challenging me. I am her father. If she doesn't want to do what I say, I shall stop providing for her—fees, clothes, food, everything" (193). When Tambu refuses to attend the wedding ceremony organized by Babamukuru for Tambu's parents, her uncle warns her that: "If you do not go the wedding, you are saying you no longer want to live here. I am the head of the house. Anyone who defies my authority is an evil thing in this house, bent on destroying what I have made" (169). He threatens to stop buying her clothes, to stop paying her school fees, and even to send her back to the village.

It is against this sort of patriarchal repression that Nyasha and Tambu seek to assert and define themselves. But they need the courage and the voice to challenge that authority that threatens to make them victims of their femaleness. As Tambu puts it, it is a question of "self versus surrender" (119), and Nyasha is determined to resist, challenge, and rebel against undue patriarchal authority that seeks to suppress her

individuality and liberty, as she explains to Tambu: "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. You're trapped. They control everything you do" (119).

Nyasha's determination not to be "anyone's underdog" and not to be "trapped" emboldens her to express her mind without fear and to stand up to her dictatorial father when everyone else is intimidated by his bullying. On occasions she even fights him back. Tambu recalls that Nyasha's "irrepressible self . . . taxed Babamukuru's nerves badly" because Nyasha would not be silenced or contained:

> He preferred peace and quiet, but when he tried to make Nyasha peaceful and quiet they always ended up in a rough and noisy quarrel. Nyasha did not mind these rows because, she said, they cleared the air and allowed her and her father to understand each other better, since without the confrontation and the hurling at each other of deep-felt grievances, they would never communicate at all. The evidence of the healing effect of these fights, she believed, was that Babamukuru did not beat her anymore (156-157).

Nyasha's inclination to self-expression and defiance takes the form of omnivorous reading and a habit of cigarette smoking in the privacy of her room. She also delights in reading D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* a novel her father proscribes because he says it is sexually suggestive. Against her father's ideas of decency and modesty, Nyasha decides to wear a mini-skirt to the Christmas party organized by the school. In fact, she turns out so gorgeously dressed up that "Babamukuru did not recognize her. . . . When finally he was convinced, he disapproved. He wanted to know where his daughter thought she was going dressed up in such an ungodly manner" (111). The unrepentant Nyasha worsens matters when she returns late from the party attended by a white boy with whom she had been dancing at the party. The quarrel between father and daughter leads to Nyasha being called a

whore, to her being beaten by her father, and to Nyasha striking her father back. Nyasha is physically worsted in this confrontation, but she retaliates by withdrawing from social company and declining from eating her food.

In Nyasha's resistance and rebellion against patriarchal control, she adopts the strategies of bulimia and anorexia nervosa to signal her desire to assert control over her personal life and body. Since one way in which her father exercises control and authority over his daughter is by feeding her, Nyasha on her part has come up with a non-verbal but effective method of undermining and rejecting that parental control, which is her refusal to eat; and when forced to eat against her will (as is often the case), she forces herself to vomit the food soon after. This first happens when her father confiscates her copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* and then when she returns late for supper because she had been busy studying in school. In this case, her father accuses her of having been dallying again with the boys, and insists that she eat her food even when she says she is not hungry: "You will eat that food. . . . Your mother and I are not killing ourselves working just for you to waste your time playing with boys and come back and turn up your nose at what we offer. Sit and eat that food. I am telling you. Eat it" (192). Nyasha eats the food and then goes to the bathroom to throw it up by bulimic purging, a symbolic act of rejection and defiance.

Nyasha also asserts control over her body by disciplining it, either by starvation or by forcing herself to study fourteen hours every day. The result of this self-discipline is that she grows frightfully thin, weak, and eventually suffers a nervous breakdown. Supriya Nair has observed this concerning Nyasha:

> Every instance of bulimic purging comes after a verbal argument with her father, who forces her to eat in order to asset his control. Nyasha's violent purging in the privacy of her bathroom is also indicative of the indigestibility of patriarchal order and discipline, which she nevertheless internalizes in her anorexic condition, the exercise of her will reduces to disciplining and punishing her body (137).

In the same vein, Jamil Khader, identifying anorexia nervosa as a condition in which "its victims are trapped like they are not in control of their destiny", argues that Nyasha is an instance of the female victim "asserting the right to control her own body . . . struggling to exercise control over her own life in a society that demands conformity to ways that she literally cannot stomach" (304).

Nyasha contributes significantly to raising Tambu's consciousness to the large issues of life and to the meaning of femaleness in a traditionally patriarchal society, as Tambu herself admits:

> Consciously I thought my direction was clear. I was being educated. When I had been educated, I would find a job and settle down to it, carrying on in the time that was available before I was married into a new home, Babamukuru's great work of developing the family. Issues were well defined for me at that time: these were the goals and this was how we would reach them. . . . But Nyasha's energy, at times stormy and turbulent, at times confidently serene, but always reaching, reaching a little further than I had even thought of reaching, was beginning to indicate that there were other directions to be taken, other struggles to engage in besides the consuming desire to emancipate myself and my family (153-154).

Learning from Nyasha's example of fearless self-expression, Tambu begins to overcome the diffidence she has acquired in her uncle's home. She becomes confident enough to eventually tell her uncle that she does not want to attend her parents' belated wedding, thus incurring her uncle's rage and overturning the image he had hitherto had of her as "an example of filial virtue" (171). The fifteen lashes she is given for this offence of defiance are, for her, "the price of my newly acquired identity" (171).

Lucia is another woman who would not fit into the gender roles and expectations of her traditional society. Young and beautiful, she is yet unmarried, has no children, sleeps with any man that catches her fancy, and speaks her mind to anyone on any issue. We are told that "her body had appetites of which she was not ashamed" and that "she did not

make excuses for herself" (155). She is generally considered "unnatural" for reasons of her supposed barrenness, her wild nature, and unmarried status: "And then they clapped their hands in horror and shook their heads. 'But look at that Lucia! Ha! There is nothing of a woman there. She sleeps with anybody and everybody, but she hasn't borne a single child yet. She's been bewitched. More likely, she's a witch herself" (128). For someone with strong reservations about the menfolk, Lucia believes that marriage is just another patriarchal institution designed to keep women aground while the men loaf around as they please. Judging from her senior sister Mainini's experience, Lucia has concluded that marriage offers nothing but bondage and misery to the women who succumb to it. She is an independent and liberated woman who thinks she can get along all by herself without the encumbrances of would-be husbands like Takesure who is asking for her hand in marriage: "As for Takesure, I don't know what he thinks he can do for me. I can do better for myself" (147).

In a society that prescribes and expects docility, reserve, timidity and chastity as cherished values for an ideal woman, Lucia is defiant, abrasive, outspoken and sexually permissive. Although she is cohabiting with Takesure in Jeremiah's house, Lucia does not mind sleeping with her brother-in-law. Her sexual freedom violates the cultural norms of chastity and restraint. The narrator had informed us earlier that Lucia exploits her beauty and body to her own material advantage, and that she dallies with "men who did not want to settle down with her but who were very rich" (129). When the menfolk of the family sit in council to discuss family matters, the women and children are, as a matter of course, not allowed or expected to be present or to express their views. But Lucia breaks protocol when it is obvious that her love affair with Takesure is the issue before the men; she walks in and confronts the men, especially the man Takesure whom she says has been maligning her. Tambu tells us that:

> It was no use telling Lucia not to go into the house, so we did not even try. We just watched her as she strode in there, her right eye glittering as it caught the yellow paraffin flame, glittering dangerously at Takesure, who wisely shrank back into his corner of the sofa. 'Fool!' snorted Lucia, looming over him, arms akimbo. 'Fool!'

> And she whirled to face Babamukuru, so that now her left eye glittered. 'Look at him, Babamukuru! Look at him trying to hide because now I am here. . . . If you have an issue with me,' Lucia advised him, 'stand up and let us sort it out plainly.' In two strides she was beside him and, securing an ear between each finger and thumb, she dragged him to his feet (146).

Lucia is also to confront the imperious Babamukuru in his own house after he has punished Tambu for refusing to attend her parents' sham wedding. She tells him bluntly that Tambu should not have been so severely punished, after all, Babamukuru did not even ask the girl why she refused to attend the wedding, and concludes by reminding him that she is not married, and therefore not restrained by marital ethos from speaking her mind: "Well, Babamukuru . . . maybe when you marry a woman, she is obliged to obey you. But some of us aren't married, so we don't know how to do it. That is why I have been able to tell you frankly what is in my heart" (174). Lucia's parting remarks to Babamukuru significantly conflate the patriarchal institution of marriage with voicelessness, an attribute which Lucia cannot contain. Pauline Uwakweh has noted that "voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action" (76). This is an assertion that best qualifies the character of Lucia, especially as it also confirms Elisa S. Thiago's observation that "speaking her mind out is Lucia's proposal of yet another mode of resistance to oppression" (177).

Her characterization corroborates what Omolola A. Ladele has said concerning "the interconnections between identity, embodiment, sexuality and oppression" (25) when he argues that "while female African bodies and sexuality are often sites for the contestation, articulation and negotiation of power, male bodies are politically, socially, and culturally authorized by their ascendant position as the defining powers", and that African female writers are accordingly producing counter-narratives "that challenge and destabilize social and sexual stereotypes especially about women" (26). In conclusion, Ladele suggests that it is precisely in the context of "prescribed gender roles and functions" that Tsitsi Dangaremgba's characters should be interpreted: "Tambu and Aunt Lucia are both deviants: they reject the fatal atavism

of their foremothers and defy the cultural structures and ideologies which privilege maleness and proscribe women's lives to minimalist spaces" (32-33).

Odoi, Rafapa and E. K. Klu have similarly commented that the characterization of Lucia "evaporates both the stereotypes associated with female infidelity and barrenness" (153). They defend Lucia's promiscuity by arguing that prostitution becomes defensive and subversive when it "challenges the conditions that give rise to and reproduce the oppression of women" (154), and, citing Wiley, they point out that "the development of the female post-colonial subject centred around her body which is subject to the disciplines of tradition and technologies of modernity", and then concluded that "Lucia resists such a subjection to tradition and modernity" (154).

Conclusion

Tsitsi Dangaremgba has used a set of female characters to amplify the evils of a patriarchal society, where the institution of marriage has forged phallocentric values of domination instead of partnership and cooperation between husbands and wives, and where the male child is privileged over the girl child. By contrasting the older with the younger generations of women, she demonstrates the strain and tension in familial relationships. The younger women not only resent their mothers for their voicelessness and submissiveness, but also reject and rebel against the limitations and expectations of patriarchy. Where Mainini and Maiguru keep silence or merely grumble, Tambu and Nyasha raise their voices to express views and opinions that are contrary to patriarchal authority. Tambu's determination to be educated against the odds of patriarchal limitations eventually earns her a new and different identity and self-image; Nyasha's exuberant spirit asserts itself against her father's iron-clad conservatism, choosing self-annihilation over parental restrictions. Lucia's lustfulness and brazen worldliness, like Nyasha's rebellion, signal the young generation's desire to break free of moribund sexist ethos and to embrace more egalitarian and libertarian attitudes.

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