



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 26, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

Disparaging Gender Stereotypes against Black African Women through Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Thulile Khoza, Malesela Edward Montle, Mphoto Mogoboya

University of Limpopo, Department of Languages: English Studies, School of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty of Humanities

taychiciakhoza@gmail.com, edward.montle@ul.ac.za

Abstract. This study has aimed to disparage the stereotypes against African women by virtue of their gender. Africa has its own cultural and traditional systems, which are practised by diverse tribes in the African continent. These African cultural and traditional systems appear to advocate for men than women and sometimes discriminates against the latter as reflected in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. This qualitative study will use the above-mentioned novel to explore an evocation of women oppression, traditional masculinity and cultural norms in Africa. It has relied on the theory of feminism to unmask the gender stereotypes that African women endure due to patriarchal systems. Furthermore, the study finds that the African cultural and traditional systems were aided by the colonial past to subject women to stereotypical conditions.

Keywords. Culture, Feminism, Gender, Stereotype, Tradition

Introduction

Gender stereotypes are the fundamental fragments of history that date back to the book of Genesis with reference to Adam and Eve. The narrative remains as an ample ground to authenticate women as subordinate by the Church (Wood, 2019). Moreover, Wood (2019) states that male domination came to be a system that is regarded as everlasting and it is hard to replace it because the society has accepted its principles of dictatorship and authority. Patriarchal notions often drive men to resort to brutality against their female partners and to exercise authority on social and religious factors (Sikweyiya, 2020). Treatment of Eating Disorder (2010) states that gender stereotypes have emerged from a cultural belief system regarding the attitudes, behaviour and other characteristics that seem to differentiate the two sexes (male and female).

African cultural and traditional systems are frequently used to vindicate the violation of human rights meditating ingrained social privileges and dangerous standardisation for women (Cenko, 2015). The women tend to be assigned to roles usually associated with the private sphere whereas men's roles are associated with the public sphere (Cook & Cusack, 2010). Eccles (2000) states that gender stereotypes perpetuate the notion that the behaviour of children is transferred from their parents. For instance, parents authenticate the notion that men and boys are more experts in mathematics and science than women and girls. Patriarchy constructed a masculine tradition, which represented a diversity of male-dominated culture, religion, and

society. The masculine tradition authenticated several beliefs such as that a man is entitled to make decisions in the household and roles should be assigned according to gender, and the man is entitled to a woman's body and her body should be available for him at any given time (Sikweyiya & Alangea, 2020). Many African women fall victim to femicide due to patriarchal toxicity in the male-dominated society where men are more privileged than women.

Gender stereotypes linger as an issue of gender-based violence against African women. This has affected black women drastically and made them the victims of physical and emotional abuse. Harish (2017) notes that traditional masculinity does not only oppress women but it also oppresses men who are unable to demonstrate the frustrations and intimidations that they encounter because of patriarchal standards. The gender stereotypes are often found to be the root of sexual abuse, femicide, early or child forced marriage and marital rape.

Theoretical framework

The study relies on the theory of feminism. According to Dorkenoo (1999), Western and African feminisms are dissimilar because they have unrelated intentions. The role of this theory is to inspect whether African women are indeed harmed by gender stereotypes, tradition, and culture. Western feminists postulate that certain African cultural practices such as the removal of women's genitalia strengthen patriarchal systems and perpetuate women oppression (Hosken, 1979). Correspondingly, the theoretical framework of African feminism reveals that the African traditional practice of female genital mutilation implements gender disparity and the discrimination of women and inferiority. This implies that this practice is meant for women only and it serves to, among other things, control women's sexuality.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis because it is an investigation that seeks to answer the questions, why do gender stereotypes against African women still exist? how are male-dominated societies still legitimising their harmful practices on African women? What made African women feel inferior? Moreover, Data was collected from Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition* as well as from journal articles. This study has followed a purposive sampling method to select Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* to investigate gender stereotypes against African women.

Literary Analysis of *Nervous conditions*

Nervous conditions appears to be engrossed in the colonised African clan specifically, the Siguake clan. The novel's setting is Zimbabwe, however, it was named Rhodesia before independence. The novel investigates the subjection of the Siguake clan to colonisation by the western pioneers in miscellaneous ways. During this period, the colonialists did not take into cognisance the African cultural values, traditional customs, beliefs, and practices (Montle, 2021). Westernisation was callous towards the catastrophic consequences it has generated within the Siguake clan. Moreover, the novel scrutinises the power inequality between women and men who are broadly rooted in culture and tradition. The female characters (Tambudzai, Nyasha, Mashingayi, Maiguru and Lucia) make a stand against the practices of male dictatorship in variegated ways but customarily fail. Each of these women attempt to interrogate some of the adjudications that were in favour of male domination, which often escalates to discrimination of women. The women also make an effort to escape from the role of being domesticated and subjugated to male authoritarianism. Even though the novel appears to be the narrative of Tambudzai and her thirst for education and self-reinforcement in the midst of abundant gender discrimination, the novel also includes her cousin Nyasha, who was displaced

and isolated from her own people because her father wanted her to evolve with Westernisation. Consequently, she gets socially discriminated against by her people to an extent that she experiences a nervous condition. Equally important, the novel includes Maiguru, who in Tambu's eyes was a perfect woman and considered her bolder than her very own mother.

Tambudzai's enslavement: gender and class

The protagonist depicts women oppression with regard to gender and class. While Tambudzai got limited by cultural gender roles that declined her the right to education and subjected her to domestication, Nhamo, had the privilege to gain access to education because of his gender as a male child. He attended at the mission where his uncle was the headmaster. This also implies that he did not only gain access to a good education but also had the opportunity to attend school with the ruling class. Although his family's finances declined, his mother made sure that he keeps him in school. His mother had to work extra hard in the market to sell food in order to keep Nhamo in school. This was perpetuated by the ideology that only male children had the capabilities to branch their families out of poverty. While Tambudzai had to be appeased with being groomed as a potential wife, Nhamo had all the opportunities to become more than a potential husband in the future, he was more privileged because of his gender. Although Tambudzai understood that she could not attend school even if she wanted to. The family finances favoured Nhamo. However, Jeremiah assures her that as a female child, there was no need for her to attend school because at school she won't learn how to cultivate the land and grow plantations, and education won't teach her how to feed and cook for her husband.

When Nhamo went back to school, Tambudzai, experienced child labour in order to raise her fees, she ploughed maize meal. Coincidentally to her practice as a vendor, Tambudzai encountered Doris, a western lady who contributed money towards her educational costs. However, when Tambudzai's father Jeremiah heard that the ten pounds were used to pay her daughter's school fees, he was not pleased with the incident. He even proclaimed that it was his currency because Tambudzai is his child (*Nervous Conditions*: 30). He went to attempt to take the money and use it for his own selfish reasons. He disapproved of the fact that his daughter will resume school like Nhamo. This goes to show how much authority men think they have over women and the decisions women make for themselves. It also shows that Jeremiah did not invest and value her daughter's education like he valued and invested financially towards Nhamo's education. He attempted to justify his gender discrimination by using cultural norms and stating that Tambudzai won't stay forever with him and that he will lose everything when Tambudzai gets married (*Nervous Conditions*: 30). However, Nhamo attempted to demotivate Tambudzai. He also attempted to dominate her as a male and kill her spirit by making her inferior for possessing such an ambition, in the process, he made himself feel superior for existing as a male child. Furthermore, he stated that she was very much fortunate that she was able to return to school because females are not permitted to get educated like him (*Nervous Conditions*:49). This is a demonstration of how patriarchy mentally and emotionally oppress women to obliterate their spirit so that they do not achieve their goals. Nhamo made it clear that he was the important one, and that Tambudzai had no right to attend school because of her gender (*Nervous Conditions*:20-21). Nhamo tried to discourage Tambudzai by giving out her maize at church, 'Especially when Nhamo gives us mealies' (*Nervous Conditions*:22). This demonstrated masculine toxicity and set a warning that such a mentality should not be encouraged.

Gender-based violence

Nhamo's view of Tambudzai and his other two younger sisters as slaves demonstrates the amount of disrespect he has for them and the bold power he has over them. When he came back from the mission, he did not like to carry his luggage rather, he left them at the shops, at the bus terminus and ordered Netsai to collect it for him. When Tambudzai attempted to stand up for her sister Netsai, it led to Nhamo resorting to violence (*Nervous Conditions*: 10). However, the act clearly demonstrates that the patriarchs do not expect women to disobey them and that they demand women to comply with their authority. This often leads to gender-based violence when women do not obey men. Gender-based violence is also explored in the novel when we realise that Tete's eldest son was physically beating his wife that his wife landed in a hospital (*Nervous Conditions*: 148). This shows that it is a cultural norm for men to exercise violence on women when they feel that a woman has disobeyed or disrespected them in any way (Montle, 2020). Tsitsi shows how GBV can be perpetuated in the novel. It's explored when Tambudzai attacked Nhamo after she had discovered that he was the one who has been stealing her maize mielies. One of the footballers encouraged Nhamo to resort to violence because culturally it is absolutely disrespectful to attack a man. It is seen as an abomination for a woman to lay a hand on a man but never a disgrace for a man to lay a hand on a woman, rather it is perceived as discipline, 'Just hit. That's what they hear' (*Nervous Conditions*: 23). The emotional strain between Nhamo and Tambudzai was very firm. However, it was not astonishing when Tambudzai displayed no feelings when she discovered that Nhamo has passed on, rather she had alienated herself from her brother because according to Nhamo his life was worthwhile (*Nervous Conditions*: 56). Another form of gender-based violence is explored when Babamukuru gave Tambudzai (15) fifteen lashes because she refused to attend her mother's wedding, (*Nervous Conditions*: 171). According to Babamukuru, Tambudzai had challenged his authority and disobeyed him by not doing what he ordered her to do, thus, calling Tambudzai an immoral being (*Nervous Conditions*: 169). However, to be more transparent Tsitsi demonstrate that Babamukuru objectified Tambudzai by labelling her as an 'evil thing'.

Tambudzai's identity of womanhood would be to mimic Babamukuru's wife, seek (*Nervous Conditions*: 16). Tambudzai liked to compare the roles that her aunt and her mother played as women; however, she favoured the role that her aunt played because according to Tambudzai her aunt was way above her mother (*Nervous Conditions*: 16). She wanted to be more like her aunt even if it meant giving up her mother at the homestead and living with her aunt. According to Tambudzai, her mother was an obstacle (*Nervous Conditions*: 58). Tambudzai's mother had to work hard in the field in order to make a living whereas Maiguru had a job as a teacher, she did not have to go into the fields and work like MaShingayi to eke out a living. Therefore, the definite symbol of woman empowerment formalised by Maiguru as a black woman has impressed Tambudzai to the extent that she wanted to walk in her shoes. She also wanted to be independent and be educated like her aunt, Maiguru.

Nyasha's identity crisis and class

Colonisation caused many problems for many African countries. It affects the economy, agriculture, tradition, and the mentality of the colonised. There were Africans that got colonised physically and psychologically. However, It is evident that adopting western cultural and traditional values has alienated African people from their own cultural and traditional values and communities. Therefore, those that mimicked the cultural values of colonisers were commonly rejected by their own people and colonisation itself. Nyasha demonstrates the psychological effect of a colonised African. When Nyasha and her family came back to Africa, she arrived wearing a little dress that barely covered her thighs. She was obviously self-aware

of her dressing code, as she kept pulling the mini skirt down to avoid it from riding up. This was the first indication of Nyasha's inadequacy in her African traditional values. This demonstrates that she finds the western lifestyle indigenous and imitates everything westernised and fails to understand her African values thus she is not dressed decently. Tambudzai's dissatisfaction with her cousins dressing code was transparent (*Nervous Conditions*:37). Tsitsi demonstrates that Africans have lost their language and identity during colonisation in the novel. Maiguru, states that it is because Nyasha has lost her indigenous language due to the western education that she has acquired in England thus Nyasha is unable to understand or communicate in Shona(*Nervous Conditions*:42). Tambudzai asked Maiguru to talk to Nyasha if she could join the dance, Nyasha's appeared to have declined the invitation (*Nervous Conditions*:43).

Nyasha's expression appeared as if she did not like her African tradition as she did not want to communicate anymore. Tambudzai's parents felt touched, they thought Nyasha was a miserable child. Tambudzai felt that Nyasha has changed from speaking Shona, being bold and ebullient (*Nervous Conditions*:52). Although Nyasha appeared as if she detest her African language and traditional values, she did want to learn the language and the cultural values, but it was very frustrating and the alienation from her social cycle with her relatives made it more difficult for her to acquire the language. Tsitsi demonstrates how Africans who have lost their language yearn to learn it once more because of the alienation they experience, it is explored in the novel when Nyasha observes what her relatives do and how they function, and how they articulate certain phrases (*Nervous Conditions*:52). Nyasha was not only alien to her African culture but also to the African students that she attended the mission with. They perceived Nyasha as a proud person, who lacked morality and values (*Nervous Conditions*:95).

Maiguru's enslavement: gender

Maiguru also suffers from the enslavement installed by the dominant male, her husband, Babamukuru. Maiguru endured hardship in her own home and at her in-laws because of femininity. Tambudzai overlooked her aunt's agony because it was effortless to not recognise it as Maiguru had everything a woman could ever ask for (*Nervous Conditions*: 16). Maiguru was Tambudzai's role model and her respect for Maiguru was transparent. However, Nyasha on the other side did not respect her mother, she talked to her with no respect and showed no remorse when choosing her words, she even assured Tambudzai about her disrespectful behaviour towards her mother as nothing major (*Nervous Conditions*:79). This of course was not normal for Tambudzai as she is a culturally well oriented Shona maiden. Maiguru appeared to understand her role as a wife and as a mother. She attempts by all means to keep her household content. Like when Babamukuru and Nyasha's confrontation at the dining-room was getting out of hand, she was the one that appease her husband so that there would be no conflicts (*Nervous Conditions*:85). When Maiguru was in the company of her in-laws, she had to act accordingly and do as they ordered her to do.

This is to portray that patriarchy is unchallenged according to African tradition and that women must be obedient in the presence of the patriarchs. Maiguru is obliged to obey her husband and comply without questioning her husband. Her opinion is not regarded unless her husband states otherwise. Lucia proved that women are verbally and emotionally oppressed by the patriarchs when she was able to express herself to Babamukuru and legitimise her opinion by stating that Maiguru is enforced to obey him because she is his wife however, on the other hand, are not obliged to follow his instructions because he does not own her (*Nervous Conditions*:174). Maiguru had to work extra hard during her stay at her in-laws. She was on her feet all day. Moreover, she ought to cook and oversee all the culinary operations. As

a woman, she had to take pride in her identity as Babamukuru wife. She had to hide her frustrations that were caused by Babamukuru and the absolute control he had over her life. When Maiguru confronted Babamukuru attempting to express her feelings, their feelings were disregarded. Tsitsi demonstrates how married women are silenced and often disregarded by their husbands in the novel. This is explored when Maiguru state how she is exhausted from the ill-treatment that she has endured (*Nervous Conditions*:174). However, Babamukuru replied passively not paying attention to Maiguru's emotions and how nerve-wracking the ill-treatment was towards her (*Nervous Conditions*:176). When Maiguru confronted Babamukuru she pointed out the fact that she was not happy anymore (*Nervous Conditions*:176). Having said that, you would think that Babamukuru would feel sympathy for his wife and come to a realisation that he has been quite unfair to his wife and attempt to mend what's broken in his household as the head of the house. However, because of his patriarchal status, he could not expose himself to the subjacent arrangement that Maiguru was luring him into. As a man, he had to stand his ground and portray the definition of male domination. This comes with a price, it implies that in the process of displaying his patriarchal status, he must display no emotions towards the woman even if it's his spouse.

Conclusion

This study has examined the patriarchal stereotypes that enslave African women and the consequences of colonisation that led to a psychological subjugation and identity crisis that made most Africans fossilise in an alien culture, as verified in Tsitsi's Novel, *Nervous Conditions*. Tsitsi's *Nervous Conditions* substantiated how patriarchal systems that are deeply embedded in the culture can enslave African women in all aspects of life. Although Tsitsi's novel was penned during the colonial era, the exploitation that the female figures encounter can still be relevant to present the gender discrimination that African women face. African women are still being exploited by patriarchs and they are still experiencing oppression through African culture and tradition.

References

- [1] Cook, R.J & Cusack, S. (2010). *Gender stereotyping: Transnational Legal Perspective*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- [2] Dangarembga, T. (1988). *Nervous Conditions*. Zimbabwe: The Women's Press.
- [3] Dorkenoo, E. (1999). *Combating Female Genital Mutilation: An Agenda for the Next Decade*. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003401>
- [4] Du Plessis, Y. & Barkhuizen, N. (2012). *Career path barriers experienced by women engineers*. Paper presented at the 12th European Academy of Management Conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands. <http://www.optentia.co.za/publications.php>.
- [5] Harish, S. (2017). *Patriarchy doesn't harm women alone*. Mint. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/AedyEELkieg4DZLyCK/Patriarchy-doesnt-harm-women-alone.html>.
- [6] Montle, M.E. (2021). Skin-whitening as a menace to African identity through Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*. *Rainbow: Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Cultural Studies*, 10(2): 51-58.
- [7] Montle, M.E. (2020). Debunking Eurocentric ideals of beauty and stereotypes against African natural hair (styles): An Afrocentric perspective. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 7 (1): 111-127



- [8] Sikweyiya, Y., Addo-Lartey, A.A., Alangea, D.O. (2020). *Patriarchy and gender-inequitable attitudes as drivers of intimate partner violence against women in the central region of Ghana*. BMC Public Health 20, 682 (2020).
- [9] Wood, J.H. (2018). *Gender inequality: The problem of harmful, patriarchal, traditional, and cultural gender practices in the church*. Theological Studies.