



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.4., 2017 (Oct-Dec)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

GENDER CONSTRUCT IN *NERVOUS CONDITIONS* BY TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

P. LINCY

Assistant Professor,
Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore



ABSTRACT

“Gender Construct in *Nervous Conditions*” briefs about the concept of gender studies and its application in the novel. Genderlect Theory by Deborah Tannen is used to analyse the concept of gender inequality experienced by the protagonist, Tambudzai. It recounts her struggles, problems and experience in various places.

Keywords: Gender studies- Genderlect Theory- the concept of gender inequality- experience of the protagonist.

Gender studies emerged in late 1960s and it developed during the period of Second Wave of Feminism. Before 1970s, gender was largely ignored by all. Men were focused mainly and all the aspects relating to men were supported socially. In pre-1970s women were invisible and they were given the roles of traditional wives and mothers within families. Issues concerning gender such as discrimination, inequalities were not recognised by the society. Later a number of disciplines grew with the perspective of Second Wave Feminism and gender started to gain its attention from all humanities. Women sociologists started to voice out the problems faced by women and to explain them in detail.

Women studies developed at the late 1960s in the US and from the mid to late 1970s in the UK. It was found that women studies not only was challenging the boundaries of women in society, but started to inaugurate new areas of study and brought out the difference in the social and cultural experience of women. In 1980s there developed a body of knowledge and theorising around men as men. Men’s studies were recognised in 1990s but did not gain much attention. Gender studies have also controlled feministic knowledge and have reconstituted it. Gender studies do not see feministic politics as a motivating factor but gives comparable importance to masculinity studies.

Gender studies have gained certain features and the key strength of gender studies is that the multi and interdisciplinary factor and it has a profound impact on the contemporary theories. More texts were published and increasing knowledge and theories about gender has been focused. Gender issues continue to be the mainstream disciplines among students. Gender studies have been very vibrant and it has produced a vast knowledge for the academics. It questions the society and makes them to think. In Gender Studies it is significant, that both men and women are not quarantined but they have a recognition pertaining to their social roles and positions. For a woman certain factors impact their life like caste, class, religious identity and sexual identity to name a few. Gender Studies tries to examine how the world is the gendered.

Tsitsi Dangarembga a novelist and playwright was born in 1959 in Mutoko, a town in Rhodesia now called Zimbabwe. She spent her childhood days in England where she received her elementary education. At the age of six, she returned to Rhodesia and completed her elementary education in a missionary school in

Mutare. She also re-learned her native Shona language as she was discriminated because of her education and lifestyle. In 1988, at the age of twenty five, she published her first novel, *Nervous Conditions*. Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing commented that, "This is the novel we have all been waiting for... it will become a classic" (Thien).

The first novel written by Tsitsi Dangarembga is *Nervous Conditions* where the title is taken from the Introduction by Jean Paul Sartre to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. *Nervous Conditions* (1998) is a bildungsroman novel which follows the growth of the protagonist. It explores the theme of gender inequality and how education is affected because of the colonial rule. Women in the nation are doubly browbeaten by the British and by the male chauvinistic people in the Shona community.

This particular novel is partially an autobiographical novel set during the late 1960s in Rhodesia. It narrates the story of a small girl, Tambudzai who is forced to stop her education for the sake of her brother's education. After the death of her brother, Nhamo she goes on to live with her uncle, Babamukuru and is educated in the Mission School. She faces many difficulties in the new environment. Later, she gets adapted to the situation and is ranked first in the class. Nyasha, her cousin also plays an important role in the novel. She has experienced and followed the western culture as she stayed there for a long time from childhood. When their family return to Rhodesia it was difficult for Nyasha to get adapted to their Shona culture. She is seen as the odd one out in the Shona community, she suffers between the traditional norms and modernity in which she was raised. Many problems arise because of the influence of western culture. In the concluding chapters of the novel, Nyasha undergoes certain diseases as she was not given the freedom of living on her own and she was forced to follow the Shona culture.

The division of labour is done among the family members wherein certain tasks and responsibilities are shared in order to maintain the family. In the traditional domestic division of labour men play a primary responsibility like labouring and working outside in the fields. Women have the task of managing and maintaining the house she lives. When comparing both the cases men is paid for his work but women is unpaid but sacrifices a lot. There are certain people who have voiced out equality in their labour work also. In *Nervous Conditions*, Jeremiah, Nhamo do the field work even Ma'Shingayi and Tambu will help them along with their household works. In one situation, Ma'Shingayi doing the field work and household work, had to sell vegetables and fruits in the bus terminus when they fell on the poverty line and had to stop their children's education. Even Tambu did the field work to save money for her education,

By the time the sun rose I was in my field, in the first days hoeing and clearing; then digging holes thirty inches apart, with a single swing of the hoe, as we had been taught in our garden periods at school; then dropping the seeds into them, two or three at a time, and covering them with one or two sweeps of my foot; then waiting for the weeds to grow and cultivating again. At about ten o' clock, which I judged by the height and heat of sun, I would go to the family fields to work with my mother, sometimes my father and, in the afternoons after school, my brother. (*Nervous Conditions* 20)

The author Tsitsi Dangarembga has brought before the readers a patriarchal society in the novel *Nervous Conditions*, through five characters Tambu, Ma'Shingayi, Maiguru, Lucia and Nyasha. The women live in a patriarchal society always subjugated to men without freedom to act on their own. Tambu, a small village girl is imposed with lots of restrictions to lead her life. Being a small girl with great passion for education is being controlled by the culture and traditional norms. She does not get the opportunity to go to school because of the poverty that prevailed in her family. And always the first preference is given to boys rather than girls. As her father says, "Can you cook books and feed them husband to your? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15). It was only after her brother's death, she got the opportunity to study in Mission school. It was because of this fact that Tambu was not sad for her brother's death. Even as a small girl, Tambu does all the household chores and it is a compulsion that each girl in the society must know to cook else the community would speak ill about them.

Not only grown up but even the younger boys' demand respect from their sisters. Nhamo, Tambu's brother, tries to subjugate his sisters by asking to carry his luggage from the bus terminus wantedly dropping certain things and asking them to pick it up again. In one particular incident Tambu had a special task of caring

the water vessel in which people would wash their hands. And Tambu had to offer the same service for her own brother and cousins of her age which she felt very fractious.

I knelt and rose and knelt and rose in front of my male relatives in descending order of seniority, and lastly in front of my grandmothers and aunts, offering them the water- dish and towel... Eventually the last younger aunt washed her hands and I rose to depart, whereupon my father asked me why I had neglected to offer Chido the water, so I went down on my knees in front of him. Naturally Nhamo took advantage of this situation to wash his hands too. Then I had to let Nyasha wash as well. (41)

Tambu's mother Ma'Shingayi, portrayed as a hard working woman who toils and sacrifices a lot, thinking that her son would be educated to bring up their family. Eventhough her husband is irresponsible and uncared about their family she respects and abides by him. But in the latter half of the novel she loses patience because of her son's death, daughter's departure and her husband's way of living. As many problems were arising in the family Babamukuru planned for church marriage for Tambu's parent. Ma'Shingayi did not like the plan because she thought that she has already suffered a lot under Jeremiah and this marriage would add to her suffering. But she did not have the freedom to oppose the marriage planned by the men of their community.

Maiguru, Tambu's aunt did not carry herself as an educated woman but follows the traditional role that is expected in her society eventhough she experienced the Englishness in England. She wanted her children to follow their own culture leaving the western culture. She also had a great concern towards Tambu eventhough she is not her daughter. Being educated, she does not go to work following the words of her husband instead takes care of her family. She was not given equal respect eventhough she was educated but one incident in the novel shows how women are being discriminated. When Tambu did not attend her parents' wedding Babamukuru got angry and Maiguru started to defend her but atlast Maiguru left her home and went to her brother's home, where she had to depend on another man. "Nyasha was unhappy that Maiguru had gone to her brother. 'A man! She always runs to men,' she despaired. 'There's no hope, Tambu. Really, there isn't" (177).

Nyasha was educated in England and was influenced by the western culture. When she returned to Rhodesia she forgot even their language Shona and their culture. She was the odd one out in front of all the Rhodesian community because of the dress she wears and her English language. But it was not her fault of forgetting everything but as she was used to Englishness she adopted her life in that way. She suffered between two worlds of Shona and Western culture. She was not given her own freedom to live her life. Unable to withstand the pressure she falls sick and that seems to be the plight of the women in the novel.

Lucia, Ma'Shingayi's sister is of loose morals. She did not care about the societies' views on her. During a function in homestead she goes to see her sister but is not accepted by the people in the community and they try to chase her out. When her secret relationship with Takesure broke out Takesure had put the whole blame on Lucia in front of the society. The male chauvinistic society believed his words than Lucia. Eventhough she was stubborn at one point of time she had to rely upon Babamukuru for her job to lead her life in a peaceful day. The society did not accept her because of the character and behaviour that did not fit into their culture.

In their culture women always kneels down before men. Maiguru and Lucia knelt before Babamukuru for giving Lucia a job opportunity. Even at the table while eating first the head of the family have to try tasting all the dishes and then only others can continue.

Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Theory states that the male and female conversations are viewed as two different cultural dialects. Tannen states that men and women voiced "different words from different worlds"(Hanafiyah).She points that women and men's conversation are not inferior or superior to each other but are different. There are six categories in the theory they are, Status vs. Support, Independence vs. Intimacy, Advice vs. Understanding, Information vs. Feelings, Orders vs. Proposals, Conflict vs. Compromise.

In status versus support Tannen says that, men's world of conversation is very competitive where they try to gain dominance than being dominated that gives them a position in the society, whereas women try to gain support for their ideas. Independence for men is an important factor as they wanted to have separate group where he himself wants to be a leader while women tries to maintain closeness with others. As men go around the society they try to understand the problem and find solution for it but women seeks advice

from others. Mostly men's conversation will be message oriented on the contrary to women's talk about relationships. Tannen states that men speak with great command on the other hand women are polite in her way of addressing people. Finally men in order to show their superiority would converse in a conflicting manner which is dissimilar to women who tries to converse with patience and in compromising manner.

While applying the theory to the novel, it is found that Babamukuru tries to control others through his speech and also mesmerises through his oratory skills may it be elders or younger. His speech often denotes the position of their extended family which shows the importance of status in the society. Tambu tries to get support from her parents for her education, even Lucia gets idea and support from Babamukuru for her unplanned future.

While Babamukuru discusses about their status in the society, an indirect message hidden in the speech is that the growth of every individual in the family, so that they do not have to depend on others which brings the concept of independence. His wife Maiguru, even though not living in the village tried to sustain a close relationship with everyone. She could have maintained aloofness or independence from others but she acted according to their culture.

People try to understand a situation when they have broad mind, Babamukuru has the tendency to understand the problem in detail, rather than taking a wrong decision. Women who are not exposed to the outside world are narrowed down to their family alone and they seek advice from someone within the family. Lucia seeks the advice of Babamukuru in the latter part of the novel.

To focus on men characters, initially they were suppressing the women but gradually they started to respect their beloveds. Babamukuru started to accept what Maiguru suggested and even Jeremiah had patience when Ma'Shingayi offended his brother's family.

Gender Studies brings out both the voices of men and women. In *Nervous Conditions* Tambu achieved her identity only because of Babamukuru. He was the backbone of Tambu without his support Tambu would have been in village working in fields. He motivated her and was a role model in her life. Eventhough the author focuses on women characters, she indirectly tells the readers that behind successful woman there is a man.

Works Cited

- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. "An Interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga." Interview by Madeleine Thien. *Brick Magazine*. 1 Aug. 2013. Web. 10 June. 2016.
- . *Nervous Conditions*. Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke, 2004. Print.
- Hanafiyah, Fatin. "Wanderlust.: Genderlect Theory." *Wanderlust*. N.p., 15 Apr. 2012. Web. 12 July. 2016.
- Jane, Pilcher, and Imelda Whelehan. "50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies." *Welcome! VK*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004. PDF file.
- Moore, Andrew. "Language and Gender." *Andrew Moore's Resource Site Home Page - Default*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Feb. 2016.