

# “I Shall Go to School”<sup>1</sup>: Girls’ Education and Displacement in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions

«سأذهب إلى المدرسة»: تعليم ونزوح الفتيات في رواية ظروف عصبية لـ تسيتسي دانغارامبغا

## «J’irai à l’école»: Education et Déplacement des Filles dans des Conditions Nerveuses de Tsitsi Dangarembga

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### Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga’s, award-winning<sup>2</sup> first novel, *Nervous Conditions* is set in Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) during the 1960s and 1970s. In this postcolonial text, “the first published novel in English by a black Zimbabwean woman” (Vizzard 1993:205), Dangarembga depicts the oppression that African women endure under patriarchy and colonialism. The patriarchal system of the Rhodesian community considers women as mere servants in their husbands’ house. They are encouraged to learn how to clean, cook and obey from a very early age. Within this system, the education of young girls is given less importance compared to boys. This gender discrimination is due to the fact that the male patriarchal figures in the family do not want to spend any of their resources on the education of their daughters, since their husbands will gain from this. This paper examines how the young female character Tambu succeeds in transcending patriarchy and makes her dreams for a good education come true.

### 1. Colonial Education in Rhodesia

The two scholars on colonial education, Kelly Gail and Philip Altbach, define the process of colonialism as an attempt “to assist in the consolidation of foreign rule” (Gail and Altbach 1984:1). Colonialism is, thus, an attempt, by all means, to drive the colonized people away from their indigenous traditions and force them to accept the colonizer’s language and culture. This ideology is based on the widely held belief that the white race is supreme and has the duty to civilize people of colour living in less developed countries.

1. Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. Washington: Seal Press. p. 16

2. Winner of the Africa section of the 1989 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize

The school was one of the means which the white colonizer used to domesticate Africans in order to facilitate their indoctrination. Western education helps the Africans to reach a descent economic and social life while simultaneously contributes to the establishment of western-like African elites that could be exploited and manipulated for the interest of the imperial power. According to Rugano Zvobgo (1994), colonial education was deployed to:

Pattern the character of the African, to fashion his lifestyle on the basis of western culture and reshape his behaviour and needs to suit those of a huge and complicated industrial capitalist system. Once he had become part of the white system he would easily obey white laws and observe social obligations while abandoning the ancient tribal sanctions, rules of conduct and economic system. (Zvobgo 1994 :39)

The African novelist and activist Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1986) was among those intellectuals who harshly criticized colonial education in Africa. He argues that this educational system, loaded with western cultures, initiates the process of distancing the natives from their natural and safe environment, which further cause psychic disintegration on an individual and collective scale.

The cultural and linguistic alienation experienced by the Africans during the colonial era pushed them to reject colonial education and view it from the very beginning with resentment and aloofness. This rejection was also due, as Oginga Odinga (1974) explains, to the Africans opposed the religious teaching that the missionary schools offered to their children along with education. For the majority of them the principles of Christianity were a real threat since it undermined their traditional beliefs. According to Abiola Irele (1992), the African student who receives Western education usually finds himself perplexed between embracing the new alien Western culture or retaining his traditional one. He goes on to say that: "it is within our traditional culture that we are happiest, most at ease with ourselves" (Irele 1992:204). For this reason amongst others, many Africans were reluctant to send their children to mission schools.

In fact, the rush towards school begun after the Africans started recognizing the dangers of colonialism. As the European colonialist established its grip on the Africans and their land these latter started losing faith in the ancestors upon whose power and goodwill they had relied for victory. Consequently, education came to be seen as having a dual role; a way through which the African elites excel themselves to achieve personal fulfilment, and an essential strategy for acquiring or countering the power of the white men.

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, is a good example of the Africans' desire to learn the colonialist's wisdom and knowledge in order to stand up to him. In this novel, Ezeulu, the chief priest of the god Ulu, worried by the coming of the Europeans, sent his son Oduche to a church school in order to learn the white man's ritual and wisdom as being believed to be the source of his great power and conquest. Within a short time, increasing European intervention

Reinforced the view which had been gaining ground that the best way to deal with the white man was to have a few people ... around who knew what the white men knew. As a result many people - some of them very important - began to send their children to school. Even Nwaka sent a son—the one who seemed least likely among his children to become a good farmer. (Achebe 1964 :214-215)

To Ezeulu, Western education is important as long as it raises the natives' consciousness towards the importance of land and the preservation of their traditional culture. Later generations of Ezeulu's people, both adults and children, enrolled in the church school, and even sent some of their brightest children to study in England, after being persuaded that without education outsiders would come to rule them. This highlights the fact that education is a *sine qua non* for any society moaning under all forms of oppression. The educated elite are called upon to use their knowledge for the well-being of their people. Education could be seen as the definite and unique pathway for the achievement of freedom

## **2. Tambu's Education under Patriarchy**

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga's female heroine, Tambu, from a very early age struggles against the patriarchal traditions in her community to receive the same education as her brother, Nhamo. "I shall go to school again" (Dangarembga 1988:16) she announces to her parents. Tambu's father considers her endeavour for education a waste of time and money because at the end of the day she will find herself in her husband's house cleaning, cooking and bearing children. In contrast, Tambu's brother, looked upon as the rescuer of the family from the moor of poverty, benefits from all the family's resources to continue his education in the mission school. Affected by this sexist discrimination, Tambu painfully recounts how, at an early age, her family choose to send Nhamo to school.

My father thought I should not mind. 'Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, it's nothing,' he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest. 'Can you cook books and feed

them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables'. (Dangarembga 1988 :15)

Similarly, Tambu's cousin, Nyasha, also suffers from sexist discrimination. While she was restricted to get her education at the mission school, where her father, Babamukuru, is the headmaster, her brother, Chido, was sent on a scholarship, arranged by the white missionaries, to a boarding school.

Through the two female characters, Tambu and Nyasha, Dangarembga maintains that African women in general are discriminated in the field of education in favour of their male counterparts. This fact is confirmed by Grace Okereke and Itang Egbung (2014) who argue that in Shona as well as Igbo traditions boys' education is of utmost importance, and is given top priority. This distinction between girls and boys, they explained, is mainly due to the old held belief that an educated and economically powerful woman will marry one day and benefit the family of her husband. From her part, Niara Sudarkasa (1982) argues that in most countries, especially the developing ones, there are unfair inequalities in the realm of education. These inequalities are mainly the results of gender discrimination.

In the developing nations, educational delivery systems are directed mainly toward males. Women partake of formal and nonformal education in fewer numbers and for shorter periods of time than do men. At the higher levels of schooling, women and men typically pursue different courses of study. (Sudarkasa 1982 :279)

Even after Tambu earned money, from the selling of her maize crop, to pay for her own school fees, she was banned from resuming her education. The only reason she was faced with by her patriarchal father is "Because you are a girl" (Dangarembga 1988:21). In Shona as well as Igbo traditions, boys' education is of utmost importance, and is given top priority because an educated and economically powerful woman will marry one day and benefit the family of her husband.

More interestingly, boys benefit from female's incomes to secure their education. For instance, when Tambu's uncle, Babamukuru, the headmaster of the mission school and the only provider of her poor family, travelled to England, Nhamo found no options but to rely on his mother's small incomes that she earned from gardening and poultry farming to pay his school fees. Additionally, following the death of Nhamo, Babamukuru reminded Tambu of her financial responsibility towards her youngest brother. Therefore, when she was granted a scholarship at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart,

her uncle volunteers to keep aside some amount of her money for the future education of her younger brother: "Every month I put away a little bit, a very little bit, a very little bit every month, so that when he is of school-going age everything will be provided for" (Dangarembga 1988:180).

Through this arrangement, the author points out that the African woman is forced to hold the responsibility for the wellbeing and success of her male relatives, and should sacrifice herself completely for that. Babamukuru did not ask for Tambu's approval about the deduction from her scholarship for her brother's education. Her consent did not concern him. In actual fact he undervalued her because of her gender. This shows clearly gender discrimination in the Shona tradition. Through this discrimination, girls are socialized in a way to accept low status in life than boys. Consequently, this gender based socialization curtails their social development and exploration instincts. It is considered as a precondition for any society which looks out for a bright and prospering future to invest in all its children boys and girls alike. The African novelist and activist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1993), for instance, while defending the cause of children, argues that:

Children are the future of any society. If you want to know the future of a society look at the eyes of the children. If you want to maim the future of any society, you simply maim the children. Thus the struggle for the survival of our children is the struggle for the survival of our future. The quantity and quality of that survival is the measurement of the development of our society. Enslave the children and you enslave parents. Enslave the parents and you enslave children. Thus if you enslave children, you are enslaving the survival and development of the entire society—its present and its future. (Wa Thiong'o 1993 :76)

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o explicitly denounces all forms of exploitation and abuse against children. According to him, children should benefit from a good quality education. They are considered as the mystery for the survival of any modern society and the cornerstone on which an everlasting development and success can be established.

Similarly, women writers, in their fictional and non-fictional works, are strongly committed to the issue of the education of children, mainly girls. Their discourse is a mean through which they denounce patriarchal oppression against female members of society and their deprivation from the right of education. Virginia Woolf (1929), for instance, asserted that the exclusion of women from schooling began with the wrong idea that "there was an enormous body

of masculine opinion to the effect that nothing could be expected of women intellectually” (Woolf 1929:45). On the contrary, women writers are strongly convinced that enthusiastic girls and women, if given the equal opportunity to get a good education, as their male counterparts, can solve many of the world’s social, economic and political problems.

Despite all the frustration and disillusionment Tambu experienced at the homestead she displayed a strong determination to continue her colonial education. She had a firm belief that education is the only hope for escaping her two biological, subaltern roles: blackness and womanhood. It is a unique and efficient tool for self-emancipation from poverty, deprivation and gender discrimination. This is observed in her forthright confession:

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. Babamukuru was my touchstone who showed me that this was true. (Dangarembga 1988 :151)

As far as Tambu is concerned, a good education can guarantee for African women economic independence so as to insure an influential position within their patriarchal societies and an honourable life for themselves as well as their dependents. Tambu’s hope for a prosperous future through education made her brother’s death, from mumps, not simply an event of sadness for her. “I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling” (Dangarembga 1988:1). In fact, Nhamo’s death opened the door wide to a potentially bright future for her through education.

After the sudden death of Nhamo, Tambu seized, with great zeal, the educational opportunity that was denied to her because of her gender. As a result the poor village girl, Tambu, became, overnight, a student at the mission school of her diligent, intelligent and prosperous uncle, Babamukuru. The professional and social successes of Babamukuru set him up as a model for Tambu and motivated her to pursue her education. As far as Tambu is concerned, education equips women with knowledge and consciousness of their legitimate rights as human beings. Furthermore, it guarantees for them economic independence so as to insure an influential position within patriarchal societies and honourable life for themselves as well as their dependents. Tambu’s hope of a prosperous

future made her brother's death, from mumps, not simply an event of sadness for her: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all" (Dangarembga 1988:1). Nhamo's death opened the door wide to a potentially bright future for her through education.

### **3. Self-Displacement and Personal Sacrifices**

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, the first form of displacement occurs within the same country, Rhodesia. It is an interior emigration of people between different places for various reasons. Tambu's grandmother, Mbuya, the mother of Babamukuru, explains to her how they unwillingly came down to live in the new land of Umtali:

Your family did not always live here, did not move to this place until after the time that I was married to your grandfather. We live up in Chipinge, where the soil is ripe and your grandfather was a rich man in the currency of those days, [...] Wizards (the white men) well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. (Dangarembga 1988 :18)

Tambu's family was a victim of land dispossession. They were forced, after the arrival of White man in Rhodesia, to leave their fertile land in Chipinge to settle upon the stony and barren soil of Umtali. Under colonialism the living standards of the majority of African people change drastically. After living in complete peace and welfare, they are now facing the danger of impoverishment and disempowerment. For Tambu's grandmother the situation was even worse. Not only she was a poor and abandoned woman, but she found herself feeding and taking care of six children after the death of her husband. The settlement of the White missionaries in Rhodesia, not far from the homestead, brought hope to Mbuya, Babamukuru's mother. She had a sharp foresight that enabled her to see a bright future, for her family and people, with these holy and powerful White men.

Babamukuru was the headmaster of the mission school which Tambu passionately attended. His success story started at the age of nine, when he was willingly given to the white missionaries by his mother, Mbuya, "to prepare him for life in their world" (Dangarembga 1988:19). The missionaries took good care of him and provided him with a good education both in Rhodesia and London. Through colonial education, Babamukuru books a place for himself among the elitist members of his society. The day Tambu left the homestead to join her uncle's family at the mission marked an important shift in her life. She was set on the right and straight path towards glory and success, the same path her

uncle travelled. The opportunity offered to Tambu by her uncle, Babamukuru, through education, was priceless and worth her consciousness. It was an ideal way to escape from the misery of the homestead and the subjugation of her patriarchal father.

I was to take another step upwards in the direction of my freedom. Another step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease, from my father's abject obeisance to Babamukuru and my mother's chronic lethargy. Also from Nyamarira that I loved. (Dangarembga 1988 :183)

Tambu considered colonial education as the only alternative to stand up against colonialism and patriarchy. By moving to live with Babamukuru's family at the mission, Tambu was provided with the opportunity for financial support as well as adequate atmosphere to ensure her success in school. She believed that the precarious living conditions in which her family lives, adding to that the irresponsible and unambitious father and powerless mother, were real hindrances in her pursuit to achieve freedom. Far from being ungrateful to her family and culture like her brother, who forgot even how to speak his Shona language, Tambu showed a strong connection with her family and the kind of life she left behind on the homestead by disclosing her love for the river Nyamarira.

The displacement of Tambu to the mission school constituted a turning point in her life. The amount of knowledge and wisdom she was enthusiastic to get would enable her to be a respectful woman within her family and community. Additionally, it would help her fight poverty and gender discrimination imposed on them, as African women, by colonialism and patriarchy. Tambu was very conscious about this opportunity provided by her uncle, and she felt indebted to him for his endless support. Therefore, she decided to make good use of that support. The first priority for her was to realize her childhood dreams by breaking gender barriers and achieve a good education. Besides, following the advice of her aunt, Maiguru, Tambu was determined to work very hard at school, to please her uncle Babamukuru who spared no efforts to guarantee for her the adequate conditions for a good and continuous education.

After she finally settled down at the mission, Babamukuru reminded Tambu about how lucky she was to have such an opportunity to attain the mission school. According to him, through education she would make a great leap towards a bright and successful future. At the same time, he called her attention,



as a prospective educated woman, to her duties, responsibilities and personal challenges towards herself, her own parents and siblings.

As it turned out, Babamukuru had summoned me to make sure that I knew how lucky I was to have been given this opportunity for mental and eventually, through it, material emancipation. He pointed out that the blessing I had received was not an individual blessing but one that extended to all members of my less fortunate family, who would be able to depend on me in the future as they were now depending on him. (Dangarembga 1988 :87-88)

For Babamukuru, The transplantation of Tambu, from the disadvantaged conditions of the homestead to the mission school would help in her mental and material emancipation. In other words, the good education Tambu receives under the support and supervision of her uncle equips her not only with awareness and knowledge of her rights and duties as a woman but also with economic independence. As a matter of fact, the emancipations Babamukuru was talking about, at least the material one, was relatively true, because it charges Tambu with the financial responsibility towards her destitute family which was once the duty of her uncle. But, what really matters for her was to invest the opportunity of displacement to the mission school, as possible as she could, to withstand as a young woman the double oppression of patriarchy and colonialism.

## **Conclusion**

European colonialism and patriarchal traditions in Africa undermine the potentials of women and gives them a passive and secondary role in society. These two oppressive and discriminatory systems put unfair restrictions on young African women's access to colonial education and training compared to their male counterparts. This gender discrimination brings resistance from the part of women and determination to get good educational opportunities that lead to individual strength and ultimately to an unwavering voice.

The position of Tambu as a girl child in a patriarchal family made her relentless endeavours to get an adequate education condemned to failure. Fortunately, the sudden death of her brother, Nhamo, paved the way for her to move from her father's homestead to the mission school to be educated under the supervision of her uncle, Babamukuru. This displacement to join her uncle's family at the mission was conceived as a blessing for her. It was a new beginning in her life. At the mission school, she had no other duty than to excel in her education and turn a bleak page in her life full of oppression, discrimination and wretchedness.

Dangarembga depicts colonial education as an indispensable tool in the ongoing and fierce struggle, conducted by African women, against gender discrimination under patriarchy and colonialism. Education is perceived as the main road for men or women to attain high social and economic status in society under colonial rule, especially for the most ambitious ones. Particular attention is given by the author to girls' education since they are victims of the double oppression of patriarchy and colonialism.

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to explore the challenges that young African women face in their quest for a good education during the postcolonial era through Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*. Because of the patriarchal structure of the African society, colonial education in Africa was mainly male-oriented. It provides African men with the adequate knowledge and wisdom that guarantee for them a good social and economic

life, while women are deprived from this opportunity and condemned to subordination. Tambu, Dangarembga's female protagonist, was a victim of gender discrimination in her father's homestead. As a very young girl she resented the fact that her brother, Nhamo, was sent to school while she was obliged to stay at home. The sudden death of Nhamo allowed Tambu to take his place at the mission school. This displacement from the homestead to the mission was a real opportunity for her to get a good colonial education and achieve her freedom.

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## Keywords

nervous conditions, Tambu, colonial education, patriarchy, postcolonialism

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## Résumé

Cet article cherche à explorer les défis auxquels les jeunes femmes africaines sont confrontées dans leur quête d'une bonne éducation pendant la période postcoloniale à travers le roman Nervous Conditions de Tsitsi Dangarembga. En raison de la structure patriarcale de la société africaine, l'éducation coloniale en Afrique était principalement axée sur les hommes. Il fournit aux hommes Africains les connaissances et la sagesse adéquates qui leur garantissent une bonne vie sociale et économique, tandis que les femmes sont privées de cette opportunité et condamnées à la subordination. Tambu, le protagoniste féminin de Dangarembga, a été victime de discrimination fondée sur le sexe dans la ferme de son père. Très jeune, elle n'aimait pas le fait que son frère, Nhamo, soit envoyé à l'école alors qu'elle était obligée de rester à la maison. La mort subite de Nhamo permit à Tambu de prendre sa place à l'école de la mission. Ce déplacement de la ferme vers la mission a été pour elle une réelle opportunité de recevoir une bonne éducation coloniale et d'accéder à la liberté.

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## Mots-clés :

conditions nerveuses, Tambu, éducation coloniale, patriarcat, postcolonialism

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## مستخلص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى استكشاف التحديات التي تواجهها الشابات الأفريقيات في سعيهن للحصول على تعليم جيد خلال حقبة ما بعد الاستعمار من خلال رواية ظروف عصبية لـ Tsitsi Dangarembga. بسبب البنية الأبوية للمجتمع الأفريقي، كان التعليم الاستعماري في إفريقيا موجّهًا بشكل أساسي للذكور. فهو يزود الرجال الأفارقة بالمعرفة والحكمة الكافية التي تضمن لهم حياة اجتماعية واقتصادية جيدة، بينما تُحرم المرأة من هذه الفرصة ويُحكم عليها بالتبعية. يمكن اعتبار تامبو، بطلة رواية ظروف عصبية، ضحية للتمييز بين الجنسين في منزل والدها. كفتاة صغيرة جدًا، استاءت من حقيقة إرسال شقيقها، نامو، إلى المدرسة بينما تم إجبارها هي على البقاء في المنزل. الموت المفاجئ لنامو سمح لـ تامبو بأخذ مكانه في مدرسة الإرسالية التبشيرية. انتقل تامبو من المنزل العائلي إلى المدرسة من أجل فرصة حقيقية للحصول على تعليم استعماري جيد وبالتالي تحقيق حريتها.

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## كلمات مفتاحية

ظروف عصبية، تامبو، التعليم الكولونيالي، البطريركية، ما بعد الاستعمار