

# Gender-Based Discrimination as a Trigger for Cultural Hybridity in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, in contexts affected by colonisation such as Africa, the desire to demand gender equality often highlights the cultural hybridity of those women, daughters of the diaspora, who undertake to fight for it. In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Nyasha represents a hybrid teenager that, due to the liberal education that she received in England, refuses to submit to women's discrimination as the key to recover those African roots that she forgot, as she admits, due to European influence and manipulation. This critical attitude toward the two cultures that paradoxically constitute her background is the main cause of her isolation and suffering. Hence, Nyasha stands as a good literary example for proving that hybridity is prompted by intercultural experiences, but that womanhood can also contribute to make this special identity become apparent. Furthermore, she shows that hybridity together with womanhood constitute a fatal combination with painful consequences in our racist and patriarchal world.

More than ever, we are witnessing that borders among cultures are becoming blurred. A phenomenon such as immigration has brought distant peoples closer and our different perspectives of life, contributing new ideas as regards existence, have resulted in serious social and personal conflicts that, for their overcoming, demand a reconsideration of the concept of identity. In this sense, cultural identity, understood as an essentialist "sort of collective 'one true self'" born to "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes" (Hall, 2000: 22), has only proved to be positional and referential. On the other hand, apart from defining ourselves as members of a particular group, we also do it freely, as just individuals and even disregarding a common tradition that can be suffocating. We are

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constantly exposed to external influences and these foster the constitution and renovation of the values that we believe in. In this case, identity creation is actually identity continuous transformation, in S. Hall's terms, a "process of becoming rather than being" (1996: 4). Therefore, cultural identity is not static at all and can change depending on circumstances and at any time.

In any process of identification, difference is the key element for recognising both who we are and who we are not. Consequently, reality turns to be structured in binary oppositions. Nevertheless, the problem of accepting a dual organisation of the world, even if it is only as a reference for becoming social individuals, is that, in unequal power relationships, poles of identification are conceived as fixed and as irreconcilable and those people who represent difference become victims of a Manichean attribution of qualities (JanMohamed, 1985: 61). Hence, as it happened in Africa during the colonial period and still in Europe and the United States nowadays, if you are not Western, white and male, you come to represent evil or at least an inferior human-being and you undergo the discriminatory effects of it (Loomba, 1998: 104).

However, as H. Bhabha (1994: 4) states, there is an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that both] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" and questions the legitimacy of those cultural (and prejudiced) versions of reality relying on binarist systems for their constitution. This *third space* is inhabited by those hybrid people who consciously or unconsciously transcend the traditional boundaries between cultures (African *versus* European) and between socially manipulated categories (black *versus* white and female *versus* male) in the process of their identity construction. In this way, they represent a difference, the true *other*, since they can never be identified with a particular culture or social category to the full, but they may share characteristics of both at the same time.

"Although the 'unhomely' [or hybrid] is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition" (Bhabha, 1994: 9) and can be especially traced among immigrants as a result of their exposure to different cultures, other minority groups such as women can be considered to be so no matter their nationality or where they live. Women are *unhomed* or hybrid individuals, because they are torn among

the conflicting representations of themselves, that is, between who they are, who they are made to believe they are and who they want to become. As for the daughters of the African diaspora, they are to be regarded as hybrid in many different ways, since they are African and women, but they are not represented in or do not identify with the biased connotations associated to them in a racist and patriarchal world. Then, due to discrimination, women in the African diaspora are always becoming, but they either refuse or are never allowed to really be. Therefore, the *third space* that they occupy can mean voluntary independence or forced isolation for them and so trying to live with an uprooted identity may involve serious consequences both at a physical and a psychological level.

In this respect, feminism was created to turn forced isolation into voluntary independence for women. Nevertheless, although *sisterhood is global* (to use the title of R. Morgan's famous book) and feminism around the world is intended to improve women's condition everywhere, there has always been a significant conflict of interests between Western and *Third World* movements. On the one hand, the former believes itself to be the pioneer of the feminist cause without taking into account that, as M. E. M. Kolawole (1997: 5-6) indicates, in developing countries such as Africa, there was already a special kind of female activism before and during the continent's European invasions. For instance, Queen Mothers in Ghana played a crucial political role in the matrilineal societies of the pre-colonial period and rural women in Nigeria fought for and defended the population's rights against colonisers, as it happened in the Igbo Women's War of 1929. On the other hand, Western feminists have always imposed their commitments and objectives as universal, thus disregarding that African women have a different culture, a different concept of gender and different feminist concerns which need to be adapted to the basic priorities that are still to be satisfied in the African context (Cornwall, 2005: 3-4). For example, Western women condemn genital mutilation as the cruellest sign of sexism, whereas many of their African counterparts, despite censuring it, confront this question in a more moderate manner and prefer to concentrate their efforts on the struggle for female literacy.

However, as many feminists such as O. Nnaemeka (1998: 5) states, it is impossible to talk about one single feminism in Africa, since

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this concept covers many representations of it (African feminism, Africana Womanism/C. Hudson Weems, Stiwanism/M. Ogun-dipe-Leslie, Motherism/C. Acholonu, etc.), even those emerging from the diaspora. Consequently, although all African feminist movements share their common resistance against Western feminism's subtle neo-colonialism and their desire to empower their own feminist ideology, they do not appear to agree on certain points, as it happens with the question of leadership. This discrepancy is the most important one, since it reveals both the conflicts that exist between rural and urban women, activist and academic women and older and younger feminists and the necessity for their reconciliation in order to create a more powerful feminist trend in the world. On the one hand, some African feminists such as A. A. Aidoo, G. Chukukere and Z. Sofola believe that women at the grassroots, that is, rural women should lead African feminism due to a history of activism that was fruitful, even in the colonial period of subjugation. On the other hand, other feminists such as O. Aina think that it is urban and academic women that should head African feminism, because, due to their education, they identify true female concerns and leave aside other problems that are already contained in political agendas and that have to be dealt with anyway without the need for direct feminist intervention. Many of the feminists who defend this latter position argue that some rural women are ignorant of their true rights and that they romanticise their pre-colonial past, because they have never been in contact with education or external influences. Therefore, they are logically unable to trace injustice in certain traditional practices and cannot demand what they really deserve. That is why, although many urban women do not want to commit themselves with the feminist cause in order to protect their social position and some academic feminists can be accused of being westernised and even *devomanised*<sup>1</sup> for not acting physically, education, as Aina (1998: 83-84) points out, allows the rest of them to help their rural counterparts to recognise gender-based discrimination in any

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of *devomanization* was defined by Zulu Sofola and refers, according to this playwright, to the process undergone by certain African women who, by acquiring Western education, accepted male-centered systems of authority and submitted to the role of passive wives, thus disregarding other aspects of womanhood such as the condition of daughter and mother and especially of woman as equal to man (1998: 61).

context, thus giving way to a union of forces that may result in the constitution of a more just society for African women.

In her novel *Nervous Conditions*, T. Dangarembga elaborates on both identity conflicts and womanhood in Africa by presenting the lives of the women of a same family at the end of the colonial period in Zimbabwe. Although I could have selected other characters so as to deal with these subjects, I decided to take Nyasha as my point of reference, since the particularity of her testimony can be traced in her imported feminism as the most important and explicit trigger for her cultural hybridity. Even though this girl had been born in Zimbabwe and had been living there during her first years of life, she moved to England with her parents, as these wanted to continue their academic instruction in the metropolis. However, when her father decides to come back to Africa, she is already a teenager who has cultivated an education for herself in Europe. Therefore, adapting to her just recovered mother country and some of its traditions turns to be a very hard and contradictory process for her and it has serious consequences on her personality.

At the beginning, when Nyasha arrives in Zimbabwe after a long time living in England, she turns to be a complete foreigner for her relatives. Tambu, the protagonist, is the first person who becomes aware of the distance that, at that moment, separates her cousin from her, since Nyasha has even forgotten Shona and, as a result, any connection with their common past. As regards Nyasha, she does feel herself as an outsider too. Hence, she tries hard to remember her origins so as to integrate into the African society again. The same as Tambu, she realises that the key condition for coming closer to her environment is to learn Shona anew. After all, “[l]anguage carries culture, and culture carries [...] the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Ngũgĩ, 1986: 16). Nevertheless, despite succeeding in speaking Shona, Nyasha realises that communication with her family is not fluid at all, because she does not agree with the (sexist) values that she is expected to adopt in her patriarchal community.

Although it is a fact that, at first, Nyasha is not conscious of the limitations that poverty imposes on her relatives, she gradually becomes capable of recognising them and she shows her sensitivity toward the problems arising from it, contributing her assistance in

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everything that she is required to readily. For example, at her uncle's homestead, as there is not piping, she fetches fresh water from the river together with the rest of women in the community, she also cleans the pitiable toilet with her cousin without complaining or, due to a lack of space, she sleeps in the kitchen with all the female members of her family. Nonetheless, after her initial endeavours to approach certain African traditions, she also realises that some of these rely on a basis that she fully refuses to accept, female submission:

'I know', she interrupted. 'It's not England any more and I ought to adjust. But when you've seen different things you want to be sure you're adjusting to the right thing. 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.' (Dangarembga, 2001: 119).

Nyasha confesses to Tambu that she does want to integrate into her new society, but that she is not willing to relinquish her freedom and femininity or to accept any relationship with men that entails sexist inequality. Resignation toward this kind of discrimination leads to the annihilation of women and to their total dependence on men.

As for Nyasha's rebellious nature, it is mainly due to the modern education that she has received in England. Her opportunity to acquire an academic formation constitutes a point of departure for transcending theory and establishing a series of principles that makes her be critical of both her African community because of its sexist structures and her previous European society because of its racist configuration. However, it is precisely her amazing ability to reflect on everything that surrounds her that leads Nyasha to her self-destruction. As soon as she is back in Zimbabwe, she becomes aware of her hybridity due to the contradictory influences exerted on her by her European education and her just recovered African background. She was an immigrant in England and she again feels like that in her own

mother country. She undergoes the same vain process of social and personal integration, because, after having been taught a new language and come in touch with its corresponding culture, she realises that she is represented by neither of them. As G. C. Spivak (1990: 51) suggests, “[you] can look at essentialisms, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something that one must adopt to produce a critique of anything”. What is more, “[one] can use ‘essentialism[s]’ strategically without necessarily making an overall commitment to them” (Sarup, 1996: 166). This is what Nyasha does when looking at the essentialist, binary and conflicting poles of identification represented by the African and European cultures. She uses them as the points of reference for creating a social identity for herself, but she cannot avoid criticising certain manipulated aspects inside them that produce a sexist and racist configuration of reality. Consequently, although Nyasha needs to be African in order to feel integrated in society, she is always becoming but can never be due to her ability to condemn. She is hybrid and *unbomed* and she has not learnt to come to terms with this condition yet. Thus, she feels isolated, because nobody around her seems to understand it either.

As far as this *unbomeliness* is concerned, she does not hesitate to blame it on her parents, mainly on her father, since it is them who have uprooted her and now want her to behave as a submissive African woman, but who must ironically excel in class where she receives a European formation:

‘We shouldn’t have gone’, Nyasha was saying, looking disheartened. ‘The parents ought to have packed us off home. They should have, you know. Lots of people did that. Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they’re stuck with hybrids for children. And they don’t like it. They don’t like it at all. It offends them. They think we do it on purpose, so it offends them. And I don’t know what to do about it, Tambu, really I don’t. I can’t help having been there and grown into the me that has been there. But it offends them –I offend them. Really, it’s very difficult’. (Dangarembga, 2001: 79)

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Although she would like to adhere to her African identity in order to recover her roots and have a point of reference in her new life, she cannot avoid remembering her imported social concerns that involve her as a woman against a patriarchal world. Therefore, despite accepting, respecting and loving her native origins, she does not want to identify herself with womanhood as represented in the patriarchal community that she belongs to. Female condition there is an artificially created gender by men and entails total submission to them. Thus, she feels herself as an African who wants to maintain those rights and freedoms that she thinks that she has already gained there in Europe as a woman.

As regards her studies, she tries hard to get the highest marks in order to get at the emancipation that she longs for, but paradoxically to show some kind of obedience to her disappointed father too. However, this strategy turns to be useless and damaging. On the one hand, assimilating European knowledge involves becoming a mimic of those people who subjugated her mother country. On the other hand, her father wants to control her but in a different way, that is, making her submit to the sexist traditions of his patriarchal and sexist community. Therefore, as she becomes aware of the dangers of the education that she is swallowing, she tries to get rid of it by vomiting, a physical attempt at liberation from the main source of her consciousness and commitment, but also of her suffocating hybridity. Nyasha's anorexia has not been invented for his character by chance. Dangarembga is aware of the fact that this illness also has a hybrid nature in Zimbabwe, as it is an eating disorder coming from Europe that illogically takes place in Africa where people frequently starve to death as a consequence of poverty. In fact, this is so strange a disorder in Africa when the novel develops that makes Nyasha become more alienated in her family, since nobody seems to understand the source of her behaviour and suffering. Consequently, feeling herself isolated, Nyasha becomes so frustrated and despaired as to precipitate her own mental sanity's death. This endless conflict gets reflected in one of her deliria caused by anorexia:

'They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped'.  
Then as suddenly as it came, the rage passed. 'I don't



hate you, Daddy', she said softly. 'They want me to, but I won't'. She lay down on her bed. 'I'm very tired', she said in a voice that was recognisably hers. 'But I can't sleep. Mummy will you hold me?' She curled up in Maiguru's lap looking no more than five years old. "Look what they've done to us', she said softly. 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you'. She fell asleep. (Dangarembga, 2001: 206)

Nyasha refers both to Europeans and men, in general, when she exclaims: "They've trapped us". On the one hand, she intends to say that, during her stay in England with her family, Europeans have subtly deprived them of their original culture with a tempting and deceiving modernity that has little to do with Africa's reality and that is also a colonial artefact. On the other hand, she also wants to state that men ("They") have created a patriarchy in the world, where all women are controlled by them. Besides, she insinuates that her rage against his father is due to the ideas that she has absorbed in Europe and that are all related to the preservation of female rights. Therefore, she now refuses to be imposed any obligation that she considers sexist. Then, when she seeks her mother's protection, Nyasha demonstrates that she identifies with her, that she needs the support of the sisterhood that they constitute to continue to be a feminist in Africa. However, although Nyasha now seems to be weak and vulnerable, she does make it clear that, contrary to her mother, she will not resign herself to male oppression. She realises her cultural hybridity, she is aware of the fact that she is African and not European, but she also knows that she does not want to be an African woman as established by her sexist community ("I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you").

As a conclusion, Nyasha's experience as a hybrid shows that, everywhere in the world, the intention to shape an independent identity for oneself involves certain marginalisation and, therefore, a strong feeling of vulnerability and loneliness. If, for this purpose, artificial borders among cultures are transcended either physically or psychologically, social reprisals against *trespassers* are even more alienating, since different perspectives of life are conceived as threats against the uniqueness of absolute identities instead of as essential points of reference encouraging reflection and personal enrichment. As

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for women, their way to a free identity presents many more obstacles, because sexist structures govern societies and these prevent the female population from gaining full-right citizenship. In this sense, it is precisely women's attempt to look for their emancipation that frequently reveals a cultural hybridity that costs them even more isolation. This is what happens to Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*, as she represents an urban and academic African feminist that, despite being westernised in certain respects due to her diasporic experience and so sometimes far aware of Africa's basic priorities, knows how to identify women's necessities in her patriarchal community thanks to formal education. Although her feminist contribution is not the only valid one, she teaches her rural counterparts, especially her cousin Tambu, to identify certain rights unknown for them before and to question the discourse of tradition. Therefore, despite being accepted by nobody due to her cultural hybridity and succumbing to an emotional breakdown as a result of a lack of understanding, Nyasha represents many African women that, even in their madness, convey their refusal to give in to gender-based injustice, to stop fighting for equality or to become lifeless individuals with no opinion at all. These hybrid women can be considered *martyrs* of their feminist cause and their commitment and activism clearly smoothes the path for the next generations who will continue their struggle for female liberation everywhere.

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