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Abstract

You start your novel *Nervous Conditions* with a very provocative sentence 'I INS not sorry when my brother died.' and you continue rubbing salt into the wound 'Nor am I apologising for my callousness.' Do you find that your main character is justified in harbouring such an unnatural sentiment?



Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in former Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, in 1959. She spent her early childhood and received her first schooling in Britain but returned with her family to Rhodesia where she finished her schooling at a missionary school. In 1997, she went to Cambridge to study medicine but returned again to Rhodesia in 1980 just prior to black-majority rule and the emergence of Zimbabwe.

She worked for a marketing agency while studying psychology at the University of Harare. She took active part in the university's drama group and it was by writing plays for this group that her writing career started. She received second prize in a short-story competition sponsored by the Swedish aid-organization, SIDA, but the novel *Nervous Conditions* was to be her real breakthrough as it won the African section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989.

The book was published in Denmark and in July, 1991, Tsitsi Dangarembga visited Denmark in connection with the Images-of-Africa festival.

With her pungent points of view, Tsitsi Dangarembga takes a keen part in the debate concerning the position of women in modern Africa.

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*You start your novel *Nervous Conditions* with a very provocative sentence 'I was not sorry when my brother died.' and you continue rubbing salt into the wound 'Nor am I apologising for my callousness.' Do you find that your main character is justified in harbouring such an unnatural sentiment?*

When you write a novel you want people to read it. I thought I should say something stunning in the opening sentence that would focus very much on the issues I was dealing with. That sentence was really to open up people's minds. It has such an impact that nobody could ignore it. I didn't write that as a value statement, I really wrote it as a literary statement. What runs throughout the whole novel (*Nervous Conditions*) is a black, eight year old girl's quest for education; the novel is set in rural Zimbabwe in the sixties before Independence. The girl was actually more intelligent than her brother, but he was sent to school, he was groomed for stardom. She had to leave school because there wasn't enough money in the family to pay school fees for both children, so when he died she got the chance to be educated, which really meant that she got the chance of a better life. The brother's character was such that we can see that she would never be able to rely on him anyway, although she was making sacrifices for him by not going to school.

What is the reason for this unequal treatment?

The easy answer in the West is the Patriarchal system. I have become increasingly more reluctant to use this model of analysis as it is put forward by Western feminism, because the situation in my part of the world has one variable, which makes it absolutely different: the men are also in a position of powerlessness. So I would offer perhaps also economic reasons, for the family knew that she would not be in a position to help them afterwards; that is not purely a patriarchal problem, it is also a result of the state of colonisation at the time. And so it was a mixed problem, so one cannot say that it was purely a problem of gender.

Nyasha's condition is not just nervous, she has a mental breakdown which takes the form of anorexia. Is it not – again – a provocation to transport, imaginatively,

of course, this disease, which is a symptom of the affluent West, to a continent where people still starve to death? Do you think that it could in fact occur in Africa?

It has happened! Cases of anorexia have been reported in Zimbabwe. The diagnosis of anorexia is something difficult. If a woman in Zimbabwe, rural or urban is depressed, loses weight etc. who is to say whether that is anorexia or not? Of course the extreme form is associated with these images of beauty, which developed in the West during the sixties. That is something else. I find this difficult to answer! When does a depression become so severe that it becomes a disease? And of course, we also have these images of beauty, we have Hollywood films in Zimbabwe, so women are becoming conscious of their weight. This happens particularly in the middle classes where the women have the leisure to read the magazines and decide that they want to look like these people. I would just like to make a point about the relationship between anorexia, beauty and studying: in the families where anorexia is common, even studying has a positive value, just like beauty, and I sometimes think that one of the reasons why the girls are so prone to this disease is that if you live a very intellectual life you do become more divorced from the physical aspects of yourself, and it may not be easy to determine what is affecting what. This may be the reason why these girls project themselves in that way.

Education is always considered a possible way out for women, and yet in your novel you have a highly educated woman who seems to be every bit as oppressed as her village sisters. Why is that?

This shows another classic myth of industrialised society. It was imperative to educate people to a certain standard so that they would be able to work; Africans were to be educated to a certain level, so that they could become hewers of wood and carriers of water. But the woman in this book has gone beyond that level; she has outlived her usefulness in terms of education as a way out. She has gone on to something that is beyond that, and there is no place for her in that system. She lives in a society that is still very narrow in two ways: on the one hand there is the traditional aspect and the role of the woman in the family, which she has broken out of, and on the other there is the colonial system and its attitude to black people. Her education enables her to see, to become conscious of it, but it really doesn't enable her to do anything about it. The question one could ask is should people really become conscious of the situation or should they not. I think that what is shown here is that consciousness always has a very great individual cost. But where one hopes that the benefit will derive is that as more and more people become conscious there is a basis for action, and action, at whatever level is

always very therapeutic. One of the woman's problems was that this was very early, in the 1960s when there were not very many educated women around. The narrator actually observes this point: This family is very isolated, and the reason why I chose such an isolated family is that it pushes all the conflicts I am talking about to an extreme situation which I could build on.

So you are actually more optimistic today. Do you think that woman would be able to act on her insight today and change her role in the marriage?

Not really; she wouldn't be able to change her role in the marriage, but I think she would be able to seek more solidarity from other people, and maybe this is how a change within the marriage might come about: if she had solidarity outside her marriage, friends who encouraged her to use her potential, and if with encouragement from these friends she did act, then she would start feeling better about herself and would probably be a more competent marriage partner, anyway.

And yet, reality in Zimbabwe is not so simple. I am beginning to revise my thinking, actually. I used to adhere to a Western model of feminism, but even this problem between men and women in my part of the world, and in America as well, seems to me more and more to be a policy of divide and rule. If you think back to the time of colonisation when the families were split up, the men had to work in the towns, and the children would not see their father for half a year. I think it would be very difficult not to become bitter.

When people are talking about relationships between the genders they are always talking about going back to their roots, but that again is silly, because the tradition we are talking about is actually the tradition which came into being during the time of colonisation: women were bussed into the towns every weekend and beer-halls were put up, but no schools were built. So many of the negative habits which are a problem between the genders in my part of the world actually started then, and it was done on purpose. Now we are forced to live with the results of that. And of course, the gender problem is always second to the national question. Therefore, I think, it hasn't received proper attention nor the right kind of analysis. One reason for this is that women in Zimbabwe are very wary of being called feminists. It is really a dirty word.

Why?

Well, Western feminists have a very bad name, let me tell you. People think about lesbianism, about breaking up families and... I actually don't understand it, quite frankly. I have tried to say to people that feminists want to make the world a better place, but I think men feel threatened, and then women don't want to lose the social security which they gain

from having a relationship with a man. The feminist, who in Zimbabwe is usually a single woman, is a threat to the other women, and this means that actually there can not be any solidarity between the women either.

What is your attitude to the vexed question of aid to the Third World?

I think this attitude of wanting to help is problematic. The word 'good will' is something very interesting. When you speak of 'good will' you are talking about something willed, something intentional, something rational, and in this question of black and white we are going way back beyond rationality, so you never know what is actually going on inside. I may come to Denmark with the best will in the world, but the fact is that I have a history behind me, I have a personal history, a national history, not to mention a racial history, and this has built up a load of suspicion in me. I think that the only solution to this is for a bit more humility - on both sides. Whether this is possible when we have the whole history of these attitudes and these stereotypes of inferiority and superiority instilled into us is something I am not sure. It is not going to happen in a day. What we are doing now is something which hopefully our grandchildren will be able to benefit from.

A final question: You obviously live between cultures. Who celebrates your victories or on whose shoulder do you cry when you get depressed. Who is your support group?

I don't have one.

(This interview took place in Aarhus, Denmark on July 6th, 1991.)