

Culture of Hegemony: A Study of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract:

Hegemony is the domination of one social group over others. This paper focuses on the hegemony of the Whites and the Africans by questioning the colonial and native patriarchal ideologies. The manifestation of European language and religion plays an important role as cultural hegemony seeks to diminish the native tradition. Slaves learned that they could not speak their native language freely. The oppressors made constant effort in controlling the consciousness of the colonised people. The colonizers eradicated the local cultures of their colonies and imposed new ideologies on native people. Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *Nervous Conditions* deals with the dual suffering of women; as they are suppressed by African patriarch as well as by the Whites in Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean culture suppresses women. British impose its culture on the natives that leads to the forgetfulness of their native language, Shona, and they attempt to speak English. This paper also studies the hegemony of two cultures, the clashing cultures of Rhodesia, and Britain. As a type of oppression, cultural hegemony developed as a consequence of African enslavement by Europeans.

Key words: Domination, hegemony, leadership, power, subordination.

The influence of patriarchal tradition and colonial rule in the African cultural history leaves each individual to search for their voice in the society of hegemony. According to Stuart Hall, hegemony is the "framing of all competing definitions of reality within the dominant class's range bringing all alternatives within their horizons of thought. The dominant class sets the limits-mental and structural within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them" (333). Power, dominance and leadership are the three main characteristics of hegemony. The dominance may be economic, familial, political or military. In African society, hegemony is seen as a cultural power employed by authorities rather than a power of force. The theory of hegemony is based on Marxist theory of ruling class and working class. The dominant class controls the cultural structures of the society and delivers it to the working class.

In Zimbabwe, colonial rule was first instituted by the British South African Company of Cecil Rhodes. The white invasion ends in the exploitation of the Zimbabwean land. The white settlers in Zimbabwe brought the racial attitudes of the south with them. This led to the enslavement of blacks in the area. Women suffered from double oppression including patriarchal and colonial hegemony. Patriarchal domination is prevalent not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world, where men continues to dehumanize women.

Tsitsi Dangarembga takes the title of her novel *Nervous Conditions* from Jean-Paul Sartre's Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) where Sartre argues about the situation of the natives in a colonized society which is in a nervous condition. According to Milena Bubenechik, "*Nervous Conditions* is an exemplary novel of insidious trauma induced by colonial oppression and discrimination" (Bubenechik 5). In *Nervous Conditions* Tsitsi Dangarembga presents her characters in a society where they need to adjust themselves for survival. The aftermath of colonization and globalization shaped a new African society with all its internal conflicts. *Nervous Conditions* locates cultural hegemony during postcolonial period. According to Clifford,

The culture concept accommodates internal diversity and an "organic" division of roles but not sharp contradictions, mutations, or emergences ... Groups negotiating their identity in contexts of domination and exchange persist, patch themselves together in ways different from a living organism. A community unlike a body can lose a central "organ" and not die. All the critical elements of identity are in specific conditions replaceable: language, land, blood, leadership and religion. (338)

In African countries their traditional, cultural practices increase the illiteracy of women. The status of Shona women depreciated under colonial role. Before the colonial period, women served in powerful position. Their illiteracy deprives women of participating in social activities. They are ignorant of their social rights. Women were denied education in school. Only the boys had the right to receive education as they were considered superior in all aspects. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous conditions* focuses not only on the colonial oppression but especially on sexual discrimination. Women have to endure both colonialism and patriarchy. It is Nhamo, Tambudzai's elder brother, who is given the chance to attend the school. Nhamo reminds Tambudzai, her younger sister that she should forget her dreams about education. Nhamo considers himself higher than Tambudzai because of his gender. Gender discrimination makes Tambudzai feel lower than Nhamo in the male dominated Rhodesia. Tambudzai's father also holds the same opinion of Nhamo is evident when he tells,

My father thought I should not mind. "Is there 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. (15)

Tambudzai tries to oppose patriarchal influence in her family by acting against her father's advice to remain at home. In order to provide her school fee she grows her own maize and sells them. Gender discrimination has annoyed Tambudzai very much that she fails to feel sorry for the death of her brother. She says: "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" (1). Instead she finds it a better chance for her to be educated. Her coldness towards her brother's death is a sign of breakdown in social relations and cultural values under the pressure of colonisation. Tambudzai remembers how her brother refused to carry his own luggage and made Tambudzai to carry it. He also oppressed her emancipation by putting an end to Tambudzai's attempt to grow maize in order to provide with school fees.

As Tambudzai wins scholarship to the Sacred Heart convent school, her mother warns her of assimilation to English culture, but Tambudzai decides on attending the school, which she thinks to be able to make an intellectual woman out of her. As Geoffrey V. Davis remarks, "The convent school, which segregates black and white girls, promotes an even more obsolete form of English middle-class culture than the mission school, because it promises to elevate middle-class girls to cultural nobility" (345).

Oppressed people were forced to interpret the religion of the oppressor. European Christianity perpetuates white supremacy and oppresses the African people. The African representatives of English culture including Babamukuru have lost their traditional Shona culture entirely. Babamukuru, the African patriarch uses his power in order to control his family and imposes Christian English culture on them. He interprets this religious conflict within his extended Shona family; because his brother did not get married formally in church. The enforced Christian marriage encroaches upon Shona culture through these African patriarchs as the working class people depends on the economic support of missionaries. The belated wedding of Tambudzai's parents evidences that their marital affair has been illicit since their elopement about twenty years ago. Consequently, Babamukuru forces Tambudzai's parents to have a Christian wedding at church. This is too awful for Tambudzai and her family. He holds Tambu's parents in ridicule before others by enforcing European rules and conventions. Thereby he challenges the Shona culture of Rhodesia. Moreover, Tambudzai believes this wedding to be an act of stupidity that questions her own legitimacy when she remarks:

The whole business reduced my parents to the level of the stars of a comic show, the entertainers. I did not want to see them brought down like that and I certainly did not want to be a part of it. So I could not approve of the wedding.... I had to think about it, about the fact

that I did not want to go to that wedding. A wedding that made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world. (163).

The patriarchal colonial rule sought to maintain its hegemony by electing African men who received colonial education. Babamukuru is torn between his desperate attempts to maintain a traditional Shona family and simultaneously applying the Western Christian values in them. Tambu's father, Jeremiah is well maintained by the colonial system. Colonial authorities deprived him of his ancestral lands, thus making him incapable of providing for his family. And he depends wholly on his brother's financial support. Jeremiah loses his authority in family as father of his children. When Tambu's teacher, Mr. Matimba helps her with selling maize and keeps her money in safety for her school fees, Jeremiah complains that he is trying to take away his child because it deprives him of holding his authority. He also mistreats his wife who never complains. Dangarembga connects male suffering under the colonial system with the men's inclination to oppress women in their families.

Babamukuru and his wife, Maiguru are equally educated still Maiguru has no voice at home. Babamukuru oppresses his well-educated wife, Maiguru. Maiguru has her own job; still she struggles to cope with the oppressive social situation. She has to give away her entire salary to her husband for the sustenance of her husband's relatives. She is unable to stand up for herself and speak for her daughter against her husband. In spite of her European education, Maiguru has to fulfil the traditional expectations of an obedient and good wife. Caught in her desperate situation she helplessly laments, "I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this house" (175). The oppressed women are often characterised by silence in the novel. Female characters refrain from expressing their opinions. Patriarchal hegemony maintains that all women, regardless of being illiterate or educated are supposed to be submissive at home in Rhodesia. Though Maiguru is oppressed by her husband she feels that she needs a man to protect her and give her a sense of value. Maiguru ingests her pride and remains a silent woman.

Nyasha unlike Tambudzai is very courageous and possesses European hegemonic behaviour. She defies her father Babamukuru and the patriarchal structure of Rhodesian society. She does not want to fall a victim to male authority. She tells Tambudzai:

It's not England anymore 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. (117)

Dangarembga comments on Babamukuru who condemns her own daughter as a 'whore'. He makes her a victim because of her femaleness. This is similar to Tambudzai's victimisation in her home where she is denied education, Nyasha is denied freedom. She states her indignation against sexual injustice that is fundamental to colonialism, "what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness" (118). Nyasha is accused for her femaleness. This accusation would not have happened if she were a male like her brother, Chido, who is always late to home flirting with girls. She is twisted by physical as well as emotional breakdown due to the harshness of her father.

The dominance of colonizers over the language, educational system, and identity formation leads to the commotion in the individual's native identity. The colonizers institute their own educational system in the settler colonies in order to impose a new culture, a new language, and a new way of life, which promotes the supremacy of West and its culture. The natives, especially those who attend the white schools think that the whites are going to civilize them. A good image of the colonizers is shaped in their mind which makes it difficult for the leaders of emancipation movements to disillusion them. Tambudzai's notion of the colonizers is a good example of this phenomenon, "They (the whites) had come not to take but to give. They were about God's business here in darkest Africa....It was a big sacrifice that the missionaries made" (103). There are many references to the gradual forgetfulness of Shona in *Nervous Conditions*. For instance, Maiguru tells Tambudzai that her children who are educated in white schools "...don't understand Shona very well any more, and have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona is gone" (42).

Nyasha finds fault with the whites for all their troubles and says that no longer she considers what the whites teach her. She tells Tambudzai:

'I don't want to do it, Tambu really I don't, but it's coming, I feel it coming.' Her eyes dilated ... They (the whites, the missionaries) have done to you and to him? Do you see what they have done? They have taken us away. They've deprived you of you, him of him, our selves of each other. We're grovelling ... I won't grovel. Oh no, I won't. I'm not a good girl. (200)

Through her novel *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga cross-examines diverse issues of hegemony, both patriarchal and colonial. In post colonial Africa every human being is in search of a solution to their existential condition due to colonial patriarchy that is conferred by the whites. Babamukuru in the novel *Nervous Conditions* is an exponential figure of Patriarchal and Colonial hegemony who imposes their dominion over the people of Zimbabwe. It may be of any gender either male or female; blacks are subjugated by the whites who continue to dominate them as subordinate social group.

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