

# CONFRONTING SCENARIOS IN TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *SHE NO LONGER WEEPS*

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the role of the play titled *She No Longer Weeps* by Tsitsi Dangarembga in interrogating the prevailing status quo of, what the paper refers to as, the “scenarios.” In this paper, we focus on how the play facilitates and shapes social change in independent Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Whereas it is undeniable that social change occurs at various levels in society, we concentrate on the change that occurs in the domestic space of the family and/or home, and specifically in gender power relations, as this is the play’s main focus. The paper argues that *She No Longer Weeps* represents a discussion about ways in which characters attempt to change and/or resist the transformation of the Zimbabwean society. Relying on textual analysis and the historical and material conditions that informed the dramatist’s vision, the paper concludes that gender power relations, as in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, need to be rethought and transformed, but we also question the dramatist’s wholesale acceptance of radical feminism. We conclude by rejecting radical and/or Western feminism in favour of Africana womanism as the latter encourages co-existence and understanding between men and women within the family institution.

**Keywords:** scenarios; anti-scenarios; gender power relations; Western feminism; Africana womanism; Zimbabwe

## INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the role of the play, *She No Longer Weeps*, in interrogating the prevailing status quo of what is referred to as the “scenarios” (Taylor 2003; Mucheke 2014; Vhutuza 2014). We argue that the play focuses on how individual characters either conform to or fight against Zimbabwean societal values and ideas of the 1980s. We illustrate, for the most part through the main character, Martha, how the play facilitates and shapes social change in patriarchal Zimbabwe, especially change that revolves around gender power relations.

Historically, Zimbabwean dramas or plays written in English have always attempted to create new conditions for a new or better society. Ben Sibenke's *My Uncle Grey Bhonzo* (1982), which was published around the time of independence, aimed to highlight social change in the home and family. Later, when citizens became aware of the follies of the new black leadership, a number of dramatists turned to calling for change beyond the confines of the home and family. Among the plays written in English that go beyond the domestic space of the home and family and that tackle contentious issues between citizens and the state are Gonzo Musengezi's *Honourable MP* (1984), George Mujajati's *The Wretched Ones* (1989) and *The Rain of my Blood* (1991), and Continue Loving Mhlanga's *Workshop Negative* (1992).

Although we argue that *She No Longer Weeps* focuses on social change in the domestic space of the home and family, we acknowledge that it can to a certain extent be read as a play that calls for change beyond the domestic space. As a political satire, the play can be read as an attack on the black government's failure to uplift women in the newly independent Zimbabwe of the 1980s. To Tsitsi Dangarembga, the socialist ideals of equality as espoused by the new government at the time merely remained tokenistic as far as equality between men and women was concerned. Read this way, the play is an attack on government rhetoric on women empowerment and equality between men and women. However, we argue that the play best demonstrates gender power relations and that the focus of the dramatist is the “civil war” going on in the home and the family. Thus, this is what the paper focuses on.

## INTERROGATION OF SCENARIOS IN WRITTEN PLAYS

Written drama has always been associated with the interrogation of the status quo and, as Bolton (1984) argues, the principal purpose of drama is change. Bolton posits that drama is a site of contestation as it provides a cultural space for dialogue and exchange of ideas and viewpoints. Kershaw (1992) argues that in Britain, written drama was successfully used as a counter-hegemonic tool to challenge the neo-liberal agenda of Margaret Thatcher's government in the 1980s. Kershaw adds that in Russia in the 1920s, drama was used to agitate for change when ordinary citizens felt the governing party and the government were neglecting the needs and aspirations of the population.

In Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii (1982) used written drama as a tool to challenge corruption and bourgeoisie culture among the ruling elite. As suggested by Mangeni (2000), drama does not have to reproduce the prevailing culture but it should be an empowering force for social change in any given society. In other words, drama should not merely echo the hegemonic tendencies of the status quo but should question and seek to overthrow scenarios that may only serve to oppress and disadvantage those who are on the margin or the periphery. Litkie (2003) echoes the views of Mangeni (2000) by strongly asserting that drama played an important role in bringing democracy to apartheid South Africa.

In Zimbabwe, Marechera's drama sketches (1984), Stephen Chifunye's *Intimate Affairs and other Plays* (2008), George Mujajati's *The Wretched Ones* (1989) and *Rain of my Blood* (1991), Continue Loving Mhlanga's *Workshop Negative* (1992), and Musengezi's *The Honourable MP* (1984) have all been instruments of change at various levels of the Zimbabwean society. Alongside civic society, opposition parties, workers, the church and students, written plays have in a large measure helped in the fight against entrenched scenarios at different epochs in the history of the country. It is against this background that Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps* (1987) should be read in this paper. The play is a celebration of pioneering dissent among female dramatists protesting against a steeped status quo which disadvantaged women at a time when, in the 1980s, the government used spirited rhetoric that focused on independence, equality and progress for all citizens regardless of class, race and gender.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is informed by two opposing theories: the theory of scenarios developed by Taylor (2003) and the theory of anti-scenarios put forward by Sandi-Diaz (2007). Taylor (2003, 54) defines a scenario as "an act of transfer, as a paradigm that is formulaic, portable, respectable and often banal because it leaves out complexity, reduces complex to its stock elements and encourages fantasies of participation." Taylor further explains that a scenario simply means the transmission of common knowledge and that it refers to actions or beliefs that are socially accepted and usually taken as if they were "natural" in a given society. A scenario in the context of this paper refers to the status quo which carries the values and ideas of the ruling class or those that are more fortunate and/or powerful than others.

Anti-scenarios, on the other hand, encourage the interrogation of the status quo and help to bring social, economic or political change in society. This is clearly an antithesis of the scenarios that encourage illusion and the creation of myths. We argue that anti-scenarios encourage or show alternatives to prevailing realities. These two theories—the theory of scenarios and the theory of anti-scenarios—best anchor the discussion in this paper.

## CONFRONTING SCENARIOS IN *SHE NO LONGER WEEPS*

Tsitsi Dangarembga is well known for her ground-breaking novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Commenting on that novel, Zhuwarara (2001, 235) says that the writer “consciously set out to write a novel that would address those issues that she felt strongly about but which she found either missing or not fully reflected in most of those African texts that she read.” Although the comment was made in the context of *Nervous Conditions*, it can also strongly apply to *She No Longer Weeps*, which incidentally happened to have been written and published before *Nervous Conditions*. In both texts, the writer’s preoccupation is a woman’s place in the Zimbabwean patriarchal society, which she judges to be a huge burden on the woman’s shoulders. The question of gender power relations seems to haunt her writings, even her unpublished play, *Lost of the Soil*.

*She No Longer Weeps* places a female character, Martha, at the centre of the narrative as if to suggest that women have for a long time been side-lined and that it is time for writers, especially female dramatists, to place them at the centre of their writings as movers and shakers. In the play, she implicates patriarchy as an institution that compounds the female characters’ predicament. The play revolves around Martha’s life; her trials and tribulations from the time she is abandoned by Freddy, the father of her daughter, to the time she graduates from university and becomes a successful lawyer.

Martha is impregnated by Freddy when she is not only young but also a vulnerable university student without any material possession to her name. She single-handedly raises her child in the absence of the father who has taken to drinking, and, against all odds, she graduates from university and goes on to become a renowned and successful lawyer who does not need Freddy’s support. As she is beginning to enjoy her newly found freedom and a space of her own, Freddy comes back into her life not to complement it but unfortunately to take her daughter away. Faced with the prospect of losing her dear daughter she has raised alone to the careless, carefree and unrepentant Freddy, she is left with no choice but to confront the new threat and challenge by killing him with no remorse whatsoever. In earlier times as a young female student, she would cry after he had abandoned her, but, strikingly, after killing him, Martha shows no remorse at all, hence the title of the play, *She No Longer Weeps*. Martha’s killing of Freddy is the climax of the play, and what is notable is the fact that she does not feel sorry at all for the loss of life. The question that remains unanswered is whether Martha has “killed” patriarchy or a fellow victim of patriarchy in the person of Freddy.

In the play, Martha is portrayed as an exceptional woman who should take the lead by literally killing someone, an act which portrays the figurative or metaphorical killing of that which stands in the woman’s way to independence, freedom and prosperity. It is as if for the very first time, the woman’s priorities have to come first, especially before the needs and wants of a man such as Freddy. To magnify the new woman’s assertion to have a space of her own, the dramatist juxtaposes Martha with her mother,

the stereotypical pastor's wife who unlike her daughter finds nothing wrong with the system as she considers the scenario that women find themselves in as "natural" and God-given. Whereas Martha's mother shows enduring tolerance, stoicism and resilience in respect of the oppressive patriarchy, her daughter does not. In this case, patriarchy is shown as a system that is not only encouraged by men but also by women. In Martha's eyes, it is a system that benefits Freddy. Martha's own father, mother and ironically the two women characters representing the Women's Association for the Protection of the Illegitimate Mother (WAPIM) do not share in Martha's dissent and attack of the status quo.

All these individuals and institutions seem to encourage the enslavement of the female character much to Martha's dislike. As the epitome of the new woman who is not only educated but also liberated and independent economically, Martha disagrees with her father who wants her to go back to Freddy, her former boyfriend and father of her daughter. As a pastor, her father is worried about what the society will say if people get to know that Martha, a pastor's daughter, has a daughter out of wedlock. It is ironic to note that the same society that will judge Martha and her father for a daughter born out of wedlock is the same one that socialised Freddy to treat her as a second-class citizen just because she is female. Even Martha's mother and the two women who represent WAPIM, Mrs Mutsika and Mrs Chiwara, all want her to go back to Freddy despite the fact that he left her when she was young and pregnant and needed him most. These women characters and Martha's father support the scenarios that treat women as second-class citizens. They merely reinforce the suffering of women by asking Martha and other women to accept their station in life.

Martha is the only one who is different from the rest as she challenges and confronts the scenarios. When Freddy comes back to Martha he expects her to be thankful that at least he is back in her life even as one who has to take away her daughter. Socialised by patriarchy to disregard a woman's feelings, Freddy expects Martha to be like Getrude, one of his girlfriends whom he treats as a sex object. To Freddy, every woman is a bitch, as he declares in this conversation with Martha: "I tell you ... you are a bitch" (12).<sup>1</sup> Freddy calls Martha a "bitch" when he learns that she will not allow him to treat her as he pleases. He expected Martha to beg him to take her back together with the child, and when she shows her sense of independence and liberation, he concludes that she is a bitch. Freddy is surprised that Martha is confronting the scenarios unlike Getrude who, according to him, "doesn't expect me to marry her. She doesn't even expect me to see her regularly, she doesn't expect anything from me, all she wants is for me to make love to her when I feel like it" (13). Freddy regards Martha as a bitch, a prostitute and a dangerous woman because she confronts the status quo. As Gaidzanwa (1985) writes, any woman in the African society who challenges the status quo is labelled as dangerous, a witch or a prostitute. Freddy is taken aback by Martha's resolve to raise

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1 The page numbers of the quotations in this section refer to the play *She No Longer Weeps* (Dangarembga 1987).

the child alone. He questions her almost in disbelief: "Tell me this ... what you think that you, a woman, can do in life if not taken care of by a man?" (27). Up to this point, Martha is indeed admirable. Unlike Martha's mother, Freddy's girlfriend, Getrude, and the other two women, Martha craves a space of her own and demolishes the status quo. No-one fails to admire her for raising her daughter alone, let alone for successfully graduating to become a renowned lawyer. However, we question the author's meaning of social change and her vision of a new society especially in light of Freddy's killing, as if the killing of Freddy in itself marks the end to Martha's stumbling blocks in life.

We agree that there is a need for change, in particular around gender power relations in Zimbabwe, but the ensuing new society envisaged leaves some questions unanswered, especially when the dramatist seems to imply that men should be wiped off the face of the earth for women to achieve their liberation. We agree that scenarios with their values and ideas that perpetuate the system have to be confronted with a view to changing them. We also agree that Martha admirably carries the theme of social change in the play and that the anti-scenario as espoused by Sandi-Diaz (2007) has to be ushered in. However, we do not agree with Dangarembga's wholesale implementation of Western and/or radical feminism as a panacea for women liberation, especially in the African context. To us, this kind of feminism may need revision to achieve its noble intention of gender parity and the liberation of women.

## TOWARDS AN AFRICANA WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE

Mucheke (2014) argues that Martha's celebration of Freddy's death can only be understood from the perspective of radical feminism according to which society is divided into males and females, a society in which the former consider themselves superior to the latter. Radical feminism has the near impossible agenda of wiping man off the face of the earth as a male is considered as the "other"—an enemy and an outsider to the woman's world of complete independence. In this scheme of things, there are no complementarities between females and males.

In this paper, we argue that there is a need for an ideology or world view that recognises the liberation of women alongside the acknowledgement of their male counterparts. Thus, the alternative we argue for is Africana womanism as espoused by Hudson-Weems (1998). Africana womanism, like radical or Western feminism, calls for the liberation of women but such liberation is still envisaged within the confines of the family where males and females complement each other. As a theory, Africana womanism privileges the family and argues that the family should be cherished over the unnecessary alienation of this institution, which works better when women and men live harmoniously together. Africana womanism is an acceptable brand of feminism that "encourages negotiation, accommodation and independence between the women and their men" (Nnaemeka 1998, 11).

Hudson-Weems (1998, 50) supports the above view and adds that Africana womanism is rooted in the thesis that Western feminism, which tends to be radical, is “not entirely relevant to the African woman.” Thus, although both advocate the liberation and independence of women, Africana womanism argues that the marginalisation and oppression of women in the African context can best be resolved within the family set-up. In fact, Africana womanism, according to Hudson-Weems (1993, 143) should be embraced at the expense of Western feminism as it seeks to mould a woman with the following traits: “self-starter, family-centred, genuine sisterhood, strong, in concert with men, whole, authentic, flexible, role player, respected, recognised, spiritual, male compatible ... and nurturing.”

Based on the above descriptors, Africana womanism is a better alternative to radical feminism. Thus, Martha should not kill Freddy but negotiate with him not only for her own good but also for the good of the family. Against this background, Martha’s killing of Freddy and her later not weeping over his death is not an answer to women liberation. Although it is not stated in the play what happens to Martha, she is most probably arrested and perhaps hanged for murder, leaving behind her daughter without a father and a mother. In addition, even if she escapes prison, she and her family are likely to face the avenging spirit of the dead person known in Zimbabwean Shona culture as *ngozi*. We argue that Freddy, like Martha, is a victim of patriarchy as he was socialised to treat women as second-class citizens. Thus, we are of the view that the killing of Freddy is not the killing of patriarchy.

## CONCLUSION

We conclude that the disparities between men and women in Zimbabwean society are not solved by isolating women from their male counterparts. As espoused by Africana womanism, there should be no competition between women and their male counterparts. Instead, co-existence, accommodation and understanding between women and men should be encouraged especially within the context of the family and/or home. This way, both men and women can best fight that which is a stumbling block to their progress. After all, even the villain Freddy is a victim of patriarchy. It is socialisation that has taught Freddy to disregard the interests of women: he was not born having this view. In this regard, both Martha and Freddy are victims of the same system (scenarios) that should be fought and negotiated within the family and the home set-up.

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