

# Novel-film interface and postcolonial dystopia: A comparative analysis of Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel and film, *Nervous Conditions* and *Neria*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper comparatively and contrastively explores two art forms, the novel and film, by the same artist, Tsitsi Dangarembga, with a view to gauging their effectiveness in configuring Zimbabwe's postcolonial dispensation. What is gained and what is lost when an artist shifts from one art form to another? Dangarembga belongs to the protest tradition of Zimbabwean postcolonial artists and the conceptual fibre of this tradition is notably the dystopian themes like disillusionment, cultural confusion, sex-role stereotyping, as well as social power relations. Dangarembga's canonical novel, *Nervous conditions* (1988), and the highest grossing film in Zimbabwean history, *Neria* (1993), are both sterling attempts within the feminist tradition. The film and novel mirror a society in the throes of an epochal transition, the sense of impending change giving the works the commonality of an apocalyptic vision. Against a backdrop shaped by the interplay of historical, cultural and colonial forces, the works become perceptive anthropological windows into a society replete with multiple contradictions. In both her novel and her film, Dangarembga equips her protagonists, Tambudzai and Neria respectively, with a self-defining voice that questions and subverts the status quo. Salient manifestations of toxic masculinity in this patriarchal society account for the subtlety with which Dangarembga critiques gender relations within and without the boundaries of race and class. The protagonists in both works undergo rigorous struggles from which they ultimately emerge as different persons. This paper focuses on the nature of this struggle and its concomitant change.

## Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a Zimbabwean novelist, playwright and film-writer, whose artistic enterprise perceptively situates postcolonial history within the crucible of social power relations. Writing of the kind she does refuses to accept superficial uniform notions about women in Africa. Instead, Dangarembga acknowledges clinical differences among African women whilst also probing the contradictions born out of postcolonial arrangements of power. In her novels and films, Dangarembga grapples with the silent agony of the female

principal who is at the centre of her society's epochal transition. Against this backdrop, Dangarembga presents the portrait of a self-conscious African woman who is sensitive to her own sensibilities. Such a woman is notably a challenge to entrenched practices that have hitherto scuttled her voice and denied her autonomous access to and influence over the dynamics at play in her past, present and future. Dangarembga makes decided and fruitful efforts to liberate her literary discourse from the counterproductive monolith of cultural nationalism that characterises the first generation of Zimbabwean postcolonial writers. As such, her visibly gendered narratives foreground the cardinal place of the female principal in the making of history, thereby presenting the rich continuum of African life in expanded parameters of engagement. The author, therefore, joins the collective crusade of African women in her time who, in the words of Esi Sunderland-Ady (2001: viii), endeavour to locate the fault lines of memory in order to counter the long-enshrined assumptions about the shaping of African knowledge, culture and history.

Emerging during the independence movements in Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, African cinema reappropriated the camera as a tool to dislodge the colonial gaze which had dominated visual representations of Africa. African women enter the cinema arena during this nascent phase and hence they introduce new accents in the discourse. Stephanie Newell (1997:1) observes that concepts such as 'womanism', 'motherism' and 'femalism' were coined and adopted during this dynamic period in which women began to author themselves anew. Spurred on by the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985), the 1970s launched a call to action in all areas of women's lives, thereby according women unprecedented global attention. Evolving into a universal movement for the promotion of women's rights and of feminist activism, it helped to heighten the African's consciousness on the ideals of gender and social relations of power. Proceeding into the 1980s, many women reiterated the UN Decade themes in their films. Across Burkina Fasso, Kenya, Senegal and South Africa, films were emerging which reflected the strides the continent was taking in the representation of women in moving images. In Zimbabwe, a generation of women cinema professionals emerged in the 1990s, as evidenced by the birth of Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ). In 2001, WFOZ launched a women's film festival and, in 2009, inaugurated the Distinguished African Woman in Cinema award.

It is essential from the outset to try and map the trajectory of Zimbabwe's history of cinema development. When Zimbabweans talk about the greatest films ever made in their country, they almost invariably refer to the 1990s. This decade produced *Neria* (1993), *More Time* (1993), *Everyone's Child* (1996), *Flame* (1996) and *Yellow Card* (2000). The older and mature audience may affectionately identify with *Jit* (1990). As Zimbabwe moved into the 2000s, there was a hint of euphoria with regard to the emergence of 'Zollywood', a term used to refer to the Zimbabwe film industry, and which has become synonymous with most of the newer movies. Zollywood is noticeably modelled on 'Nollywood', its more prolific Nigerian counterpart. Most of the material in this body of later Zimbabwean films is produced by filmmakers based in the United Kingdom and the United States. These are countries with a large population of diasporan Zimbabweans.

In comparison, the earlier movies of the 1990s have retained more appeal than those in

the Zollywood phase and this is largely explained by the fact that the movies of the 1990s had better funding, a lot of which came from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Such movies were required to deliver strong social messages, particularly about AIDS, children's rights and women's rights. In contrast, the Zollywood movies tended to be lower-budget material and obviously ventured into the fun and excitement of less weighty themes such as romantic love. Tazarurwa Brighton's (2005) *Kukura Kuremerwa – Size Does Matter* is a typical example of how the less committed and less weighty material of Zollywood can border on the mundane with ephemeral and transitory social subjects like the latest street lingo, the newest jokes in town, the juvenile excitement of young boys using vulgar language, teenagers sharing childish notions about sex-life and so forth. Although these short films emerged in Zimbabwe during an obvious crisis period, they are exciting both thematically and cinematographically. Being experimental, they also demonstrate Zimbabwe's encounter with the dynamics of animation, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in the wider context of globalisation. The aims and objectives of the Short Film Project are enunciated by the producer and coordinator, Nakai Matema:

The project aims to fill a void in the Zimbabwean film industry. Due to the economic and political turbulence in Zimbabwe over the past few years, feature film has ground to a halt. Indigenous production companies can no longer afford the costs involved with such an undertaking and negative international press discourages filmmakers and investors from locating their films in Zimbabwe (<http://www.comminit.com/en/node/124485/304>).

Dangarembga's writing of the feature-long fictional and imaginative *Neria* (1993), a much more developed and avant-garde film in comparison with the short-film project films, demonstrates her fine-tuned handling of the postcolonial discourse, which can be traced to her initial novelistic rendition, *Nervous conditions*. Dangarembga is relentless in her clarion call for the emancipation of women from repressive social power structures. From the fictional character of Tambudzai in *Nervous conditions*, Dangarembga develops a wholesome, fuller and more sophisticated protagonist in *Neria*. The novel makes its intended case for the women's crusade to occupy their rightful place and space in society. Furthermore, *Neria* foregrounds the complex and diverse layers of reality surrounding the circumstances of the African woman in the postcolonial dispensation. The sophistication of the film in comparison to the novel could be discerned.

To place Dangarembga's decidedly feminist agenda in perspective, it is rewarding to pay attention to Anthony Easthope's (1986:1) outline of three bases for considering gender, namely: the biological body; our social roles of male and female; and the way we internalise and live out these roles. These three main levels invariably interlock in the lives of people and they partly explain the outlook with which one perceives and treats others in society. As can be made out in Rudo Gaidzanwa's (1985) detailed discussion on Zimbabwean women writers, a strikingly peculiar feature of *Nervous conditions* is that women in particular are portrayed from a perspective different from that depicted in earlier Zimbabwean literature in English. Dangarembga adopts a significantly feminist tone that culminates in the climax of the protagonist's penultimate self-assertion without fear and apology.

Dangarembga joins in the unisonant tune of African women writers across the continent, who respond to the entrapping cycle specified by Susheila Nasta:

In countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfilment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism. Does to be a 'feminist' therefore involve a further displacement or reflect an implicit adherence to another form of cultural imperialism? (Nasta, 1991: xiii–xxx).

The type of feminism championed by African women writers has, therefore, involved the challenge of working towards social transformations, constructing women's history and also simultaneously avoiding absorption into Western feminist discourses. Mohanty (1988: 65–88) observes that Western feminist discourses, being foreign to the unique African experience, have tended to subordinate and speak on behalf of the typical 'third world woman'.

Feminist criticism is a self-aware form of literary criticism that gained official recognition in the 1960s. It is important, however, to note that feminism has a long history in seeking equality for women. One of the dimensions provided in this form of criticism is gynocriticism, which built a specific framework for looking at literature from a feminine perspective. In tracing the historiography of feminist criticism as a model of critical scholarship in art, politics and society, it is unavoidable to take a look at some key Western authorities in this discourse. In her immortal volume, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792:144) bemoans society's creation of women who are 'silly' and 'superficial'. She refers to women, for example, as 'spaniels' and 'toys'. Wollstonecraft, however, argues that this is not because of an innate deficiency of mind but rather because men have denied them access to education. The focus is on illustrating the limitations that women's deficient educations have placed on them:

Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison (Wollstonecraft, 1792:157).

Evident in this analysis is that the feminist model is born out of a different set of circumstances from those shaping the lives of women in postcolonial Africa. In this regard, it is apparent that although recent feminist film theory has acknowledged the issue of differences among women, there have been very lean efforts at exploring the finer implications of these differences in order to perceptively problematise gender relations within racially and culturally non-homogeneous textual environments. Without proper exploration of the rational and national boundaries of its discourse, feminist literary theory cannot convincingly articulate the contradictions and asymmetries provoked by postcolonial arrangements of power (Said, 1978).

The Bulgarian-French philosopher, Julia Kristeva (1981), is regarded as a key proponent of French feminism together with Simone de Beauvoir (1952). Kristeva is seen as one of the architects of postmodern feminism which largely feeds into the doctrine of political

correctness, multiculturalism and identity politics. Kristeva believes that it is harmful to posit collective identity above individual identity, and that the political assertion of sexual, ethnic and religious identities is ‘totalitarian’ (Riding, 2001). Simone de Beauvoir’s (1952) thesis is quite telling of the social construction of womanhood when she categorically states, ‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman ... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature’. Toril Moi (1986:204) makes a phenomenal distinction of ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics. Such a distinction helps to configure feminist criticism as a specific kind of political discourse proffering the praxis for a committed struggle against patriarchy and sexism. The critical dimension of commitment in feminist criticism is enunciated quite remarkably in the words of Greene and Kahn (1985:2):

Feminist scholarship both originates and participates in the larger efforts of feminism to liberate women from the structures that have marginalized them, and as such it seeks not only to interpret, but to change the world.

These currents of critical engagements in the Western world can be more interestingly read if one pays attention to the feminist critical thought on the African scene as well.

## **Gender dynamics in *Nervous Conditions* and *Neria***

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga strongly registers the presence of African women who face repressive cultural and colonial practices head on. Fully conscious of the varied battle fronts along gender, race and class lines, Dangarembga’s novel negates the perception of the helpless and agentless African woman. Kapasula (2010:113) offers a broader and more perceptive definition of patriarchy as mirrored in Dangarembga’s works:

... an ideological and hegemonic force that advocates the creation and perpetuation of male dominance in society, the power that men of any age, race, class, religion and ethnicity use to dominate women (Kapasula, 2010:113).

Through her protagonist, Tambudzai, Dangarembga deals with the oppressive nature of a patriarchal family structure, whilst also portraying the experiences of a woman’s coming of age. The dialectical fusion of traditional culture and colonial culture is what results in another complex form of male chauvinism, colonial patriarchy. In ways that strike salient parallels with the novel, *Neria* on the other hand deals with two aspects of society: women’s moral rights and clashes between the traditional and modern ways of life.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga catalogues in graphic detail the lives of five women characters (Tambu, Nyasha, Lucia, Ma’Shingayi and Maiguru) whose varying experiences under patriarchal conventions demonstrate different degrees of success in the battle against marginality. A very telling confession offers readers a window into the toxic constraints of the Shona family’s traditional patriarchy:

The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate. That was why I was in Standard Three in the year Nhamo [the brother] died instead of in

Standard Five, as I should have been by that age (*Nervous Conditions* (NC) p. 12)

Tambu's personal experience, detailing her hamstrung academic career, her psycho-emotional bruises as well as the deleterious effects of toxic masculinities are all situated in the wider struggle of women in this set up to earn a voice and register their sensibilities meaningfully. This confession by Tambu seems to place her apparent coldness and callousness in perspective when the novel begins by Tambu's shocking reflection, 'I was not sorry when my brother died' (NC p.1). Tambu has had an acrimonious and largely ambivalent relationship with her brother, Nhamo. He has everything she is denied and he represents the social structure and family hierarchy into which she has been born. Simply because he is a male and the eldest, he is the sole repository of the family's hopes and ambitions. Tambu, regardless of her intelligence, talents, and abilities, must be satisfied with a secondary role; an understudy whose sole job it is to support and assist Nhamo as he makes his way in the world. With his sudden and unexpected death, Tambu's life takes a dramatic turn for the better. She is offered his place at the mission school, and because of his death, she is able to write the story she is beginning in the novel's opening paragraphs.

In *Neria*, Dangarembga begins the narrative quite differently. Neria and her husband, Patrick, are at the centre of the opening scene as a loving couple, sharing house-renovation duties willingly and visibly buying into each other's vision. Whilst *Nervous Conditions* begins by registering bitterness and resentment over an apparently anomalous and dystopian set-up, *Neria* begins by showcasing the ideal healthy social intercourse in a balanced scenario where men and women partner each other in their mutually inclusive engagements. This is not because there are no challenges in the lives of Neria and Patrick. Phineas, Patrick's brother, insists that Patrick does not have to consult Neria when it comes to critical decision making. In making his request or demand that Patrick buys him a bull to add to his herd of cattle, Phineas says,

So what do you say, Patrick? ... Ah, there you go again. Neria, Neria ... you just cannot make up your mind without consulting Neria. Look man, she is your wife – our wife. This paddock here helped pay for her. Since when do you ask your wife permission for anything?

Interestingly, Patrick makes a point of talking Phineas into realising a paramount social dynamic that wives ought to be consulted in any decisions that have a bearing on the family. Patrick thus answers in the same scene,

Neria also earns money ... more than I do. There's a new world out there, and you refuse to see it.

Apparently, in *Neria*, Dangarembga does not romanticise the Shona community as a blissful universe safe from the commonplace challenges visible in *Nervous Conditions*. If anything, Patrick's words indicate the need to shape life in accordance with the imperatives of a dynamic fast-paced dispensation. Dangarembga delineates the clinical differences in the lifestyles of characters with a village orientation and those with a flair in sync with the urban space. Patrick's immediate family, having lived mainly in Warren Park, has a different set of dynamics from Phineas's family whose life is visibly circumscribed by the rural environs. In the movie's eleventh minute, Uncle Jethro's (Oliver Mutukudzi)

song, 'I was born in the ghetto ... and my Life's in the ghetto' prepares the audience to empathise with Neria a little later when she drops and shatters the clay water pot which she fails to balance on her head on their way from fetching water with Phineas's wife. Dangarembga seems to be making a point for the Shona community to accept diversity in its members, fairly judging the set of social circumstances that have constructed their respective orientations.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu highlights that her story (which is indeed the story of women in her society) is the prism through which the reader will understand the gruesome circumstances which oppressed women in her community yearn to escape from. At the beginning of the novel (which is actually its end) Tambu makes it clear that her story is not one of death but 'about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion' (NC p. 1). If Tambu's escape from entrapment is a result of her enlightenment through education, Lucia's escape demonstrates the resolve of a woman character that refuses to be limited by patriarchal stereotypes that inhibit self-expression. The novel raises pertinent issues about the social construction of the identity of the supposed inferiority of women from which they have suffered for a long time. Tambu's aunt, Lucia (Ma' Shingayi's sister), has the freedom to give her body freely to any man she likes as and when she feels like it. She ignores the social tags of 'whore' and 'witch' which she believes are patriarchal constructs meant to control her sexuality. On the other hand, Dangarembga demonstrates that Western and modern educational systems do not necessarily entail liberation. Maiguru has a masters degree from England, yet she sheepishly submits to her husband's patronising tendencies in a way that makes her a mere obsequious surrogate of male power structures.

## Conclusion

If the characters of *Nervous Conditions* are not one-sided, flat and monolithic sketches, then they represent the nascent phase of Dangarembga's apocalyptic vision of a society sensitive to the sensibilities of its members across the gender divide. In *Neria*, the world of animation and moving images becomes the technological midwife that delivers Dangarembga's pregnant apocalypse into a realised eschatology. In tracing Dangarembga's ideological evolution in the interface between *Nervous Conditions* and *Neria*, it is notable that the limited scope of the written page creates the necessary rudimentary outline of the caviller; the questioning woman who forcefully registers her presence in a dystopian universe militating against her self-conscious actualisation. Against this background, cinema comes in to fill in the missing link in the novel's character outlines. The wholesome, complex, sophisticated and multidimensional characters of *Neria* mediate the gaps created by the mono-dimensional characters of *Nervous Conditions* who, unwittingly or inadvertently, could divert the author's noble crusade into romantic idealisation. The Tambu of *Nervous Conditions* is a straight-jacketed girl whose all-consuming desire for education and its concomitant economic emancipation almost closes her out of the rest of life's other necessary realities. It is as if Dangarembga denies us a window into

Tambu's teenagehood mischief, sexuality and juvenile experimentation. However, the protagonist of *Neria* is a sweet-natured lady, a mother, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a work mate, a friend and a visionary. She possesses the multiple qualities of a well-rounded character who can convincingly champion the cause of women, and indeed the cause of her society. Little wonder that her immediate family, a sweet example of impartial and balanced gender relations, becomes the metonymy of society's strategic partnerships for upward social mobility. *Nervous Conditions* is the conceptualisation of a noble struggle, and *Neria* is its pragmatic strategy.

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