

Trauma and Literature
Prof. Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology - Madras

Lecture – 44
Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions Part 1

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Space Matters: Form and Narrative in Tsitsi Dangarembga's "Nervous Conditions"
Author(s): Christopher Okonkwo
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This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel “Nervous Conditions”. This is a very complex novel about Zimbabwe. It is about racism it is about the female condition it is about trauma which is the reason why we selected this for this course. But it encompasses a very complex historical period. But for the purpose of this course we look at a very interesting essay on the novel “Nervous Conditions” and it is a very well acclaimed essay by Christopher Okonkwo.

It talks about the Okonkwo essay talks about the spatial quality and the material quality which informs the narrative shape in Tsitsi Danganronpa's novel and it is called space matters quite literally. And how the speciality the discursive space the gendered space the traumatic space and also the physical space. How that informs the shape of the narrative in Dangarembga’s novel in a way that how the form of the novel at a very formalistic level and how that is influenced by the space which novel describes.

It is a very complex understanding of narrative shape and how the physical space informs the narrative shape and that is a very interesting essay which is the reason why I

thought it would be useful for us to study this and Dangarembga's novel through this essay. So, as I mentioned this essay by Christopher Okonkwo is called space matters form and narrative in Tsitsi Dangarembga's "Nervous Conditions".

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Space Matters: Form and Narrative in
Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Christopher Okonkwo
University of Missouri-Columbia

Wherever Something Stands, Something Else will stand beside it.
Nothing is absolute. I am the truth, the way, and the life would be
called blasphemous or simply absurd. . . .
—Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*

You have to keep moving. . . . Moving, all the time. Otherwise you
get trapped.
—Nyasha, *Nervous Conditions*

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is an ingeniously written novel. Its appeal goes beyond Dangarembga's arresting interest in (post)colonial, gender, and cultural politics and the fact that the novel came out at a moment in Zimbabwean history when there was little supportive space for women in that country who wished to write themselves into the public sphere and discourse by pursuing publishing careers, particularly in English language (see George and Scott). The novel's biggest strength lies in its superior crafting or, rather, in how its narrative instruments, from the obvious to the veiled, enhance effectively the work's layers of meaning. For what we find on close reading of this book is a text that exemplifies the notion that content and form complement each other and thus are inseparable. In *Nervous Conditions*, this reciprocity shows in how different narrative elements are interwoven skillfully and tightly with the umbrella motif of space, all performing as organic components that work not alone but cooperatively and hence cohesively to create the insight of

It gives a very a short description of the novel "Nervous Conditions" and then he moves on to talk about the politics of speciality the politics of materiality and how all that informs the narrative form in the novel. We can start unpacking it in terms of how that reflects on the novel and then by extension reflects on our course like this which is about trauma and literature.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's "Nervous Conditions" published in 1988 is an ingeniously written novel its appeal goes beyond Dangarembga's arresting interest in postcolonial gender and cultural politics and the fact that the novel came out at a moment in Zimbabwe in history where there was little supportive space for women in that country who wished to write themselves into the public spare.

And the skills by pursuing publishing careers particularly in English language. Now the most important bit over here is the; phrase write themselves. There is a very corporeal quality a very semiotic quality about writing over in the sense that the only available

option the only available instrument to these women and in this climate Zimbabwean climate over here to access the public space was through the actor writing was through the act of publishing.

The act of publishing, the politics of publishing, and the instrument of publishing became the only instrument through which the public space became accessible to women and Dangarembga's novel "Nervous Conditions" inhabits that time that historical time in Zimbabwe and that is something this essay highlights right at the beginning the novel's biggest strength lies in his superior crafting or rather in how this narrative instruments from the obvious to the veiled enhance effectively the works less of meaning.

The narrative veil in terms of how the different kinds of layers in the novel and the level of narrative and others reflective of the translucent condition that characterized the post-colonial gendered condition and Zimbabwean history at that point of time. By translucent of course I mean the combination of transparent and opaque the half seeing the half visible the not entirely normal quality.

It is something which categorizes the quality to a large extent in this novel. We can see how the very dark of the novel "Nervous Conditions" it has it uses medical metaphors but it also talks about how it also connects that to very strong progressive cultural conditions and this is something which we see a lot in terms of how it happens and post colonial novels where the medical condition sometimes becomes a metaphor for the cultural racial condition of discrimination oppression exploitation and trauma.

Trauma in the process becomes a medical as well as a political quality medical as well as a political condition informed by a political condition to a certain extent and how that this biopolitical quality of trauma becomes an existential private condition as well as a shared condition. It is shared by certain groups of people certain people who are connected by certain historical movements certain forces of oppressions and certain forces of emancipation or exploitation whatever the case may be.

There is this connective quality about trauma here. It is the existential private quality of trauma and these sort of work in connected ways these work in complementary ways they do not come at the cost of the other rather inform the other in a very interesting way

in a very interesting entanglement. And Dangarembga's novel is about its entanglement how the medical is also already political.

How the political is also already medical and how the existential condition of trauma especially the female condition as depicted in the novel must be located historically must be historicized in the context of his times. That becomes the very interesting backdrop which we need to unpack. The works layers and meanings are reflected by the different narrative layers as well from what we find on close reading of the book is a text that exemplifies the notion that content and form complement each other and thus are inseparable.

The shape, the content and the scope they compliment one another. The way the novel is written is that the novel appears the level of structure is informed by what happens in the novel the level of absence, loss, trauma disappearance spirituality reputation exploitation etcetera.

All that information, the shape, the structure, the novel at a very structured level as well. In "Nervous Conditions" this reciprocity shows on how different narrative elements are interwoven skillfully and tightly with the different narrative elements with the umbrella of motive of space. All performing as organic components that work not alone but cooperatively enhanced successfully to carry the weight of Dangarembga's serious message.

These different elements the narrative element the political element the medical element all come together and convey Dangarembga's really serious political message, existential social message. The novel's overarching model against hegemony exclusion and status and thematic support of prudence balance and growth are reflected variously in how the story is told.

And the ingredients Dangarembga's as author assembled to make it come alive. So, this is something which we may have discussed earlier the ability of literature to give something life to give life to something to animate something and to bring together different registers historical register, fictional register, material register, abstract register effective register, illogical register.

Now, this combination of different registers; how that makes literature a very interesting instrument of animation a very interesting activity of animation that is something which we see here as well. As Derek Wright has stated “Nervous Conditions” in the work in a naturalist tradition. But it is remarkable for its high level of imaginative organization and contains some finely judged poetic symbolism rosemary gray and general goal echoed his assertion noting that a novel is sophisticated and complex.

The allusion to naturalism of the natural tradition naturalist tradition it alludes to the very graphic content of the novel. It is very bare it is very graphic it is very explicit in many ways in terms of how it represents human laws and represents torture it represents a trauma and represents violence at various levels. But along with this graphic explicit representations also a lot of symbolism a lot of poetry of imaginary a lot of figurative elements which make the particular work a really sophisticated work of literature as well.

We are talking about historical trauma we are talking about trauma which is materially produced ideologically discursively produced. It affects people at a very bodily level at a very existential level, level of identity as well. That is very much part of historical reality very much part of historical materiality as well.

But on the other hand it is represented in a medium which is fiction which relies on figurative elements which relies on symbolisms which relies on metaphase which relies on a whole host of different tropes which also then as a result of which this what becomes not just a depiction of historical reality but also a very fine example of great literary writing which represents a certain moment in history.

In reading this complicated novel then critics have talked about among other things Dangarembga’s feminist leanings her appropriations of France Fennel her manipulation of food language the bildungsroman psychosis the poetics of vocal resistance and in this case the matter of space. There is a whole range of perspectives one can take while reading and interpreting this novel.

It really yields to some very rich interpretative investments and the presence of Fano is it is interesting because Fano was a philosopher a culture thinker who worked in a setting of the French Algerian colonialism a very vocal fighter for Algerian independence. A very key figure and post-colonial studies at a theoretical philosophical level.

But equally and it is something which is sometimes overlooked he was also a trained psychiatrist Phantom. The medical vocabulary is very much there in his work. In the “Wretched of the Earth” where the political oppression manifests itself in symptoms medical diagnosis medical conditions. The political and the medical are also connected in Fano.

There is a lot of similarity in overlap that he has with some another like “Nervous Conditions”. Dung Wrangler's appropriation of the medical vocabulary is reminiscent of Fano to a large extent because that is also the kind of vocabulary family uses in his case studies and his depiction of the Algerian condition or the black condition.

And how the being black or the fact of blackness which is also something he writes about is not just an experiential condition it also becomes some kind of a semiotic category. So, being black in France being black in Paris that becomes some kind of semiotic situatedness which bears or reflective or it is very negative associations and very violent associations the violence directed at the black body.

Similar interface the medical and political operates in Dangarembga's novel as well which is what this essay studies along with that we have a whole host of readings that is possible. The use of food for example user consumption and how consumption and corporality become connected categories. The body and the food that is consumed by the body and that becomes reflective of the cultural consumption where identities and races and bodies get consumed at different discursive levels.

There was this quality of bildungsroman growth narrative the travel narrative psychosis one of resistance and of course for the purpose of this essay the metaphor and trope of space. So, how space becomes an experiential an ontological category in this novel. A hugely important but critically underdeveloped issue in the novel the idea of space has to

date receive what seems to be it is more involved treatment in Subiman Basu's insightful essay “Trapped” and Troping allegories of the transnational intellectual.

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ries of the Transnational Intellectual” (ARIEL 1997). While Basu’s observations reinforce the present discussion in some ways, his focus serves nonetheless as my departure point.

“Trapped” proffers the thesis that *Nervous Conditions* could be seen alongside other postcolonial “fictional texts in which their narrators or protagonists function as surrogates for writers as transnational intellectuals” who query and reject Western intellectual structures while, paradoxically, occupying them (7). Identifying Tambu as one of those developing transnational thinkers (11), “Trapped” engages, among other things, the novel’s “meticulous [...] attention to physical space, both geographical and bodily” (7) and also the characters’ movement through “the tertiary space of the homestead, the mission, and the Convent” (11). As Basu rightly argues, “The relationship among the three spaces is fluid” and their boundaries are continually redrawn (11). “Trapped,” however, does not quite deal with the other aspects of the novel’s spatial configurations. It fails, specifically, to engage either the gender, character, and familial implications of the text’s structural, ideological, and narrative spaces or how the characters’ actions and their very movements, particularly Tambu’s, tie directly to the novel’s open-end plot and its journey motif and hence advance the narrative’s resistance to stasis—an idea Basu recognizes as well (13). With the interplay of space and the novel’s other devices not explored in “Trapped,” and with some of the available criticism on the text stressing more conventionally the operations of a single narrative apparatus relative to theme while overlooking the explicatory possibilities of the story’s various implements working together, a significant gap is left in our understanding of this important novel.

This essay attempts to close that gap a little more by offering a reading that conjoins toward thematic explication the focal idea of space and a number of the text’s other literary elements, namely: “point of view,” character, plot, action, narrative. I argue more specifically that interweaving those resources, *Nervous Conditions* explores the following premise: It asserts that its female characters’ plight is codified in various domestic and public spatial structures, ideologies, and experiences that differently impede the women’s lives under (post)colonization, which itself is an unfinished tale



Subiman Basu is a critic who is alluded to and where he talks about the idea of the allegory in a transnational setting and how the transnational intellectual draws an allegory as some kind of a spatial category. It was an essay published in 1997 in an essay and a generical aerial. While Basu's observations reinforce the present discussion in some ways his focus serves nonetheless as my departure point.

“Trapped” proffers the thesis that “*Nervous Conditions*” could be seen alongside other postcolonial fictional attacks in which the narrators or protagonists function as surrogates for writers or as transnational intellectuals who query and reject western intellectual structures while paradoxically occupying them. The idea of the non-western intellectual as someone who rejects or deconstructs the western intellectual tradition while also paradoxically occupying such a position is the quality of being trapped which is being used by Basu.

There is something which is deconstructed over here. There is something which is seen as simplistic aware and departed from. Identifying Tambu as one of the developing transnational thinkers trapped engages among other things the novel's meticulous attention to physical space both geographical and bodily and also the characters movement through the tertiary space of the homestead the mission and the convent.

Looking at Tambu the figure of chamber in the novel "The Journey of Tambu" view through different markets and three markers away are interesting homestead the mission and the convent. The Christian presence the missionary project, the conversion project and how that becomes the major market a major sort of milestone in that road of emancipation or negotiation with modernity.

It becomes a very interesting instrument in the study of how space is fleshed out how space appears in the novel. As Basu rightly argues the relationship among the three spaces is fluid. The three spaces are defined as this homestead the mission and the convent. It is a very fluid relationship the overlap with each other they sort of invade each other they connect to each other in ways which is sometimes not very disintegrable.

The relationship among the three spaces is fluid and the boundaries are continually redrawn. Trapped however does not quite deal with the other aspects of novel's spatial configurations. It fails specifically to engage either the gender character and familial implications of the Texas structural ideological and narrative spaces or how the character's actions and the very movements particularly Tambu tie directly to the novel's open end plot and its journey motive.

The narrative's resistance to stasis and idea boss recognizes as well. This novel particularly with the character of Tambu and the movement of Tambu is that it defies any closure it defies any needs resolution to the feeling of being entrapped. It defies a neat address and any solution in terms of how the feeling of big trap can be counted.

Instead what it shows is that it is a complex navigation of different kinds of troops different kinds of coordinates, the missionary the homestead the convent and all this becomes institutions through which the individual moves towards emancipation towards agency towards articulation and yet that articulation is never complete that emancipation is never complete.

There is no we are not looking at binary of being trapped and emancipated. We are looking at constant processes through which the feeling of being trapped and a feeling of being free appear as performative processes of mutation and manipulation which are

never complete in quality which never closed in quality. With the interplay of space and the novel's other devices not explored and trapped.

With some of the available criticism on the text stressing more conventionally the operations of a single narrative apparatus relative to theme while overlooking the explicatory possibilities of the story's various implements working together a significant gap is left in our understanding of this important novel.

It looks at the understudied quality of space in Dangarembga's novel because at one level this is about "Nervous Conditions" and already titled "Nervous Conditions" it implies a certain degree of claustrophobia. A certain quality of claustrophobia certain quality of being trapped and not being able to move for agency less nests and you can think of examples like Septimus Smith immediately that comes to mind as someone who is despite moving in London was existentially and so, medically trapped.

The way space plays out in the novel it is not fully explode and this essay comes as a useful intervention and also a reflection of how the author uses that troop of space as digitalization detacialization and retablization as important motives which agency can be negotiated with. Now this essay attempts to close the gap a little bit more by offering a reading that conjoins to us thematic explication.

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are continually redrawn (11). "Trapped," however, does not quite deal with the other aspects of the novel's spatial configurations. It fails, specifically, to engage either the gender, character, and familial implications of the text's structural, ideological, and narrative spaces or how the characters' actions and their very movements, particularly Tambu's, tie directly to the novel's open-end plot and its journey motif and hence advance the narrative's resistance to stasis—an idea Basu recognizes as well (13). With the interplay of space and the novel's other devices not explored in "Trapped," and with some of the available criticism on the text stressing more conventionally the operations of a single narrative apparatus relative to theme while overlooking the explicatory possibilities of the story's various implements working together, a significant gap is left in our understanding of this important novel.

This essay attempts to close that gap a little more by offering a reading that conjoins toward thematic explication the focal idea of space and a number of the text's other literary elements, namely: "point of view," character, plot, action, narrative. I argue more specifically that interweaving those resources, *Nervous Conditions* explores the following premise: It asserts that its female characters' plight is codified in various domestic and public spatial structures, ideologies, and experiences that differently impede the women's lives under (post)colonization, which itself is an unfinished tale of history and identity—a work in process, in progress, in motion. It is, in other words, an open and ongoing human-journey, sometimes tense, incoherent, and transgressive, one whose continuity makes it impossible to offer a clear narrative conclusion. The novel points out concomitantly that survival and transcendence of that colonization experience and its stresses demand that one, especially the ex-colonial, remain ideologically flexible rather than unbending and repressive. Because so many value systems (indigenous, Western, and others) now collide, and because this journey into history, identity, and growth is complicated and enduring, it behooves the ex-colonial not only to select wisely from among the rival values what is most useful but also to keep "moving" intellectually and balancing as healthily as possible the choices made. That is the new reality.

Whether played out in the experience of the Igbo of Nigeria or that of the Shona of Zimbabwe depicted in *Nervous Conditions*, this "new order"



The focal idea of space and a number of the texts are the literary elements namely point of view character plot action narrative. It is a nice play of words over here the focal point

of space the focal idea of space and also point of view. It is also focalization in other words which is a point of view that is being espoused while telling the story.

A point of view which has been appropriated while telling the story because the same story can be told from different perspectives. All perspectives can have different points where each perspective has its own unique point of view. The focalization becomes almost a political category who is a teller of the story, who controls the narrative and that in a way also reflects the control of space the controlled territory.

These become connected categories. It is argued more specifically than interweaving those resources “Nervous Conditions” explores the following premise. It asserts that its female characters applied as codified in various domestic and public spatial structures ideologies and experiences that definitely impede the woman's lives under the post colonialism of colonization which itself is an unfinished tale of history and identity a work in progress a working process in progress and motion.

The codification of the female characters is interesting over here in terms of how the plight is codified and different vectors and different tropes and different metaphors. Now also connected with this codification the idea of how the woman's location and the post-colonial space is necessarily suspended because the entire poor's kernel space is itself an incomplete project it is an unfinished project.

It is something which is also going on because then if you look at post colonization as an end of decolonization that process of decolonization is still operative at different levels physical level intellectual level ideological level experiential level epistemic level. It is a work in progress; because as a working process; the woman's condition in the process is doubly suspended.

There all not like the fluid quality of space in the novel there analyze the fluid quality of identity in the novel because we have incomplete project of a post-coloniality or decolonization. It is in other words an open and ongoing human journey sometimes tense incoherent and transgressive and one who is continuity makes it impossible to offer a clear narrative conclusion.

The inconclusive quality of the narrative is part of the transgressive quality of the narrative as well. It is a novel about transgression it is a novel about loss is a novel about journeys as a novel about discoveries, which are sometimes incoherent and sometimes transgressive at the same time. None of these are connected categories it is transgressive.

It is incoherent in a certain sense it defies coherent meanings or coherent codes right and the transgression is part of the inconclusion or inconclusive quality or the definite conclusion. The novel points out concomitantly that survival and transcendence of that colonization experience and it stresses demand that one especially the ex-colonial remain ideologically flexible rather than unbending and repressive.

The very interesting idea of ideological elasticity or ideological flexibility becomes important and that ecological flexibility is reflective of the very quickly changing times and spaces in the novel. Because decolonization opposed colonization is a very mutable process. It is a process of becoming unbecoming real coming. That entails a sense of ideological plasticity that entails a sense of ideological elasticity which this novel seems to promote with this inconclusive quality and the lack of conclusion for the matter.

Because so, many value systems some indigenous western and others now collide and because its journey into history identity and growth is complicated and enduring it behooves the ex-colonial not only to select wisely from the among the rival values. But what is most useful but also to keep moving intellectually and balancing as healthy as possible the choice is made this is a new reality.

We are looking at a medical metaphor how health becomes an important category in a post-criminal situation. The ideology to choose which is schools to align yourself with which narrative to align yourself with also becomes marker of health. It is to question whether they are a healthy postcolonial subject or an unhealthy postcard subject. That is determined by the choice of narrative the choice of ideology and the cognitive structure of the political structure or in this particular argument the choice of the narrative structure.

It is to question the kind of narrative one chooses and structure to use to tell a story. It determines the health or the healthiness or you the unhealthiness of the location the subjective location in a post-colonial space whether played out in experience of the Igbo of Nigeria or that of the Shona of Zimbabwe depicted in “Nervous Conditions”.

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and their very movements, particularly Tambu's, tie directly to the novel's open-end plot and its journey motif and hence advance the narrative's resistance to stasis—an idea Basu recognizes as well (13). With the interplay of space and the novel's other devices not explored in “Trapped,” and with some of the available criticism on the text stressing more conventionally the operations of a single narrative apparatus relative to theme while overlooking the explicatory possibilities of the story's various implements working together, a significant gap is left in our understanding of this important novel.

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Whether played out in the experience of the Igbo of Nigeria or that of the Shona of Zimbabwe depicted in *Nervous Conditions*, this “new order”

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This new order could be summed up in the following paraphrase of Chinua Achebe's “Things Fall Apart”. “Things Fall Apart” might be a very familiar novel in a way it is sort of a retelling of “The Heart of Darkness” story to know what shape is there is some intertextual. Influential references that the Achebe's novel carries here in Dangarembga's novel “Nervous Conditions”.

The white man has had a cataclysmic encounter with Africa and Africans and things of fallen asunder in many ways in the context of African experience nothing is or can remain stable again not to say however that everything ever was fixed speaking culturally. How people create or amend space for and manage the realities of new dispensation be the cultural ideological agenda determine literally the ability to escape or at least mitigate the consequences of restrained growth.

An adverse experience is that near sight the novel's rebellious teenager equates to entrapment. Entrapment, according to Sigou Ike who's one of the characters one of the principal characters in the novel entrapment did not mind. So, did not mind by the ability to escape or mitigate the consequences of restrained growth. Now restraint growth again

a medical metaphor it is almost like some kind of a biological problem in a cellular biological problem.

It is repressed stunted growth now that stunted growth is a medical metaphor it also has very serious political overtones in this novel. Entrapment is a function of stuntedness entrapment is a function of repression entrapment is a function of repressed growth repress agency repress ability repress mobility repress opportunity. All these become again you can see the interconnectedness of the medical and political conditions over here.

As evident in Siguraki's intra-familial battles once uncompromising insistence on absolutes the one is the corporal metropolis and must be so, revered it is not only absurd but also enemies the human growth. Parent-child relationship and to the health of the foundation of African peoplehood the family whether in Colonel Rhodesia or elsewhere today. The insistence on absolutes or inflexibility or inflexible attachment to absolutes is seen as inimical to organic growth inimical to mutation.

Mutation becomes very healthy mechanism of replication. We are looking at something about cellular metaphor over here is not it the sort of cellular replication of identity, and how those very healthy replication as opposed to the repressed condition the stagnant condition which becomes one of entrapment in this novel. It becomes a very interesting interplay of entrapment and liberation it becomes very interesting interplay of growth and mutation and entrapment and inflexibility.

These categories operate on biological as well as political levels and this interface of the biological. The political makes this novel a very complex biopolitical statement of the Zimbabwean condition around that time like the whiter example in "Mrs. Dalloway" this tree emerges as the subject's entrapment the subject's claustrophobia and nervous conditions in a time which is politically very volatile and complex and very fast changing as well.

We will look at the historical background the essay for the next lecture and we sort of keep connecting and how it does how the trauma operates in a novel. Not just in macro public spaces but also in intimate spaces and that that complexity of the intimate trauma

and the macro trauma is something which we have seen already in Butalia's "The Other Side of Silence".

But we see here at a more fictional framework which makes it perhaps more effective and more moving at various levels. So, we will stop at this point today we will just carry on this essay in the next session, thank you for your attention.