

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 49
Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions Part 6

(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)



The reader may remember Ma'Shingayi cautioning against extremes: that one cannot afford to internalize too much Englishness which she divines as the cause of Nyasha and Chido's mental and cultural crisis and, indirectly, of Nhamo's untimely death (203). Her insistence that Tambu be careful with assimilation does not imply a call for complete and uncompromising renunciation of Western cultural values, *when* and *where* they could be useful to one's specific needs, but an imperative destabilization and rejection of their predominance, as well as a judicious fusion of those acquired values and one's ancestral and cultural heritage. Her prudent response to Babamukuru's generosity/gift clearly demonstrates that logic. We are told that Babamukuru gives Tambu's parents a house as wedding present (168). The house comes with a symbol of Western civilization, technology, and material progress: a Dover Stove. But while Ma'Shingayi is "very proud of her house and Dover Stove," she "preferred her old hearth [*choto*]. She said she felt more comfortable beside it" (182-83). Ma'Shingayi refuses wisely to appropriate from the "gift" package an alien material and ideological construct that, on the one hand, she is not yet conditioned by experience to use both *safely* and efficiently and, on the other, could upset her comfort/balance, as in Babamukuru's connotative lack of sleep (84) or Nyasha's bicultural impasse.

Nyasha's mental crisis further exemplifies the narrative's thematic insistence on balance. Nyasha suffers a nervous breakdown because, among other things, she loses her psychic balance when, for instance, Tambu



This NPTEL epidural course titled "Trauma and Literature" on the novel "Nervous Conditions". We were talking about how the enduring tensions between the colonial and the post-colonial moment continues to function. That just keeps putting certain people in positions of privilege in certain people positions of marginality or marginalization of powerlessness it just continues to operate that way.

The novel also does it offers a very complex gray area a very complex great depiction that sort of cuts against any kind of attempted monstrosity it is not as if some people are just bad and some people are just good. It is a battle between good and evil it is not. Simple or dualistic like that. It resists that kind of reductionism and in doing. It just becomes a very fine novel about colonial times in Zimbabwe.

This question of Englishness comes up again. "The reader may remember Ma'Shingayi cautioning against extremes that one cannot afford to internalize too much Englishness which she divines as a cause of Nyasha and Chido's mental and cultural crisis and

indirectly of Nhamo's untimely death." The consumption of Englishness becomes interesting.

It becomes a cause of conflict and cause of tension or cause of crisis in this novel because Englishness is seen as the other culture and consuming the other culture is also connected to a possibility of contamination. We can see how these concepts contamination illness etcetera they straddle or connect the medical and the political realms quite complexly.

For insistence that Tambu will be careful with assimilation does not imply a call for complete and uncompromising renunciation of western cultural values when and when they could be useful to one's specific needs. But an imperative destabilization and rejection of their predominance as well as a judicious fusion of those acquired values and one's ancestral on cultural heritage.

The ideal point of course is the integration of the acquired values the positive acquired values and one's positive inheritance of lineage one's positive cultural heritage and that kind of integration is more often than not theoretical in quality but what happens in life experience is a very symmetric entanglement consume something more you reject something more.

In that process we just end up being end up consuming a flawed ideology which is a strange combination of different kinds of cultural inputs which is what happens in this novel as well. It is impossible to define and have a symmetrical understanding of western and eastern western or non-western attributes they just mix in a way that is asymmetric mixed in a way which is undefinable undefinable.

In the process it just becomes a problem and a problematic in terms of ideology and this is something which we find even in small instruments small machines small objects. Objects play a very important role in this novel as do spaces. This essay for instance talks about the discursive design of spaces the gendered quality of spaces.

But we find something similar happening with objects as well and the object question this particular essay is the Dover Stove for the electric machine that will produce and

facilitate cooking in the process bring about a change in the kitchen bring about a change in them, the woman space in the house “the female space in the house” that is something which is examined here.

“The house comes with a symbol of western civilization technology and material progress adorable stove but while Ma’Shingayi is very proud of her house and Dover Stove she preferred an old hearth (choto) she said she felt more comfortable beside it. Martian Guy refuses wisely to appropriate from the gift package an alien material an ideological construct that.

On the one hand, she is not yet conditioned by experience or to use both safely and efficiently and on the other hand could upset her comfort slash balance as in Babamakuru connotative lack of sleep on ash's bicultural impassive.” We find how the very symbolic material and we talked about the symbolic space the hairdresser's space in the previous session. But here we find a very symbolic domestic material domestic machine the Dover Stove.

It is to question how that becomes a complicated instrument in the house. It just remains an alien instrument and motion guide does not appropriate it and the refusal to appropriate this western machine is seen as wise and is seen as judicious in the context of a novel because she holds on to her traditional instruments of cooking the culinary instruments. We find that how this uncritical consumption of western technology western ideology western belief systems causes some kind of bodily problem nervous medical problems.

Babamukuru's discomfort while sleeping or Nyash's empathy and then subsequent deterioration in health is seen as connected to consuming and alien cultures and healing belief systems which complicate them at a bodily level as well as at an ideological level. We are looking at how ideology and biology become connected conditions in this novel.

This is something which we find in many postcolonial novels where medicine politics health hygiene body copper reality these become enmeshed together and that is the whole purpose of a course like this “Trauma and Literature”. To look at trauma as

mentioned the very introduction to this lecture as an embedded neural biological condition.

But also a political and active shared social condition and that is something that you find that interplay of the social and the biological happening almost simultaneously. Nyasha's mental crisis further exemplifies the narrative's thematic insistence on balance. The lack of balance is what causes nervous conditions and balance is cultural ideological discursive and quality Nyasha suffers a nervous breakdown.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:17)



Christopher Okonkwo 67

goes to Sacred Heart. Tambu, who sees her fondness for her cousin as her first "love affair" (78), had been Nyasha's buffer, distraction, room/space mate, confidant, and character foil, the person with whom she juggled and balanced her radical idealism and teenage grievances. Nyasha admits to Tambu in a letter: "In many ways you are very essential to me *bridging* some of the *gaps* in my life, and now that you are away, I feel them again" (196; emphasis added). Tambu herself confesses that Nyasha is "something unique and necessary for me" (151). Reminiscent of the interdependent characters Sula and Nel in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Nyasha and Tambu may differ in idea and personality, but they need and mutually reinforce each other in various ways, as the narrative details.

Reinforced beyond what Wright sees as Dangarembga's use of "culinary details and matter of cuisine" (10), various narrative moments yield additional cues of choice, caution, and the collective that buttress the novel's stress of the productiveness of mediation. They include, for instance, the adult Tambu's reflection on the *mainimis*' disharmony over Lucia's pregnancy. Brenda Bosman notes that for Ma' Shingayi "the concept of sisterly solidarity is vitiated by the polarization of poor/rich, ignorant/educated,

Because among other things she loses some psychic balance when she for instance Tambu goes to Sacred Heart that in a missionary school Tambu who sees a fondness for a cousin has her first "love affair" had been Nyasha's buffer distraction room space mate confidant and character foil the person with whom she juggled and balanced her radical idolism and teenage grievances.


Nyasha admits to Tambu in a letter: "in many ways you are very essential to me bridging some of the gaps in my life and now that you are away I feel them again." The spatial metaphors determine Tambu was the bridge through which nation in a connected different positions and those gaps have come back again now that Tambu is away.

We can see how the human body the human self the human identity is also a spatial identity in the novel and very symbolic as well as experiential ways. "Tambu herself confesses that Nyasha is something unique and necessary for me reminiscent of the

interdependent characters Sula and Nel and Tony Morris and Sula Nyasha and Tambu may differ in idea and personality. But the need it mutually reinforces each other in various ways as narrative details.”


This idea of contradictory characters or different characters coming together and creating ambivalence and experiencing ambivalence is again a hallmark of any great work of fiction and great work of literature. It is something which we find and over and over again in this particular novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:54)



Tambu's "shocking" keynote—her suspenseful opening assertion in which she, one, refuses to feel sorry for her brother Nhamo's death; two, understates the efficacy of Nyasha's defiance; and, three, introduces the major players in the unfolding tale—does more than serve as a stylistic device that slides into the narrative space an oral element. It also extends the text's suggestion of cautioned balance as a pragmatic survival strategy for the ex-colonial. Together with Dangarembga's subsequent injection of Shona-language terms and tonality, this keynote initiates authorial placement of the story in what I have called complementary duality of narrative mode (1). By having Tambu pose that rhetorical statement immediately, Dangarembga does something striking, stylistically and thematically. She makes the narrative a collaboration or dialogue of modes: orality/"the novel," the told/the written, the resiliently African/the imported Western. Illustrating Mildred Mortimer's insight as to how, "[i]n Africa [and African literature in general], orality and literacy often inhabit the same space" (1), Dangarembga makes both modes function cooperatively under the same narrative roof.

While Dangarembga has chosen from the colonial gift-package "the novel" and its partner English language as formal framework for Tambu's story, however, she expands and subsumes that frame under and equally situates the narration proper in orality, or the resiliently African. This intentional insertion of oral elements is much more than a clever balancing act



We will come to Tambu's keynote and that keynote has some kind of a shuddering quality shocking quality is meant to shock it is designed to shock. The shock aesthetic in that keynote is reflective of the mental condition the nervous condition but also the political condition from which the subject is speaking or writing.

“Tambu's “shocking” keynote her suspenseful opening assertion in which she one refuses to feel sorry for her brother and mammals that do understate the efficacy of Nyash's defiance and three introduces the major players in the unfolding tale does more than serve as a stylistic device that slides into the narrative space an oral element.”

On the one hand, there was this negative design in the novel, it is a work of narrative it is a piece of writing center but what it also does this particular keynote is it infuses into the narrative design this written relative design an oral voice. An oral element is someone speaking and that oral quality is interesting.

Because we have to remember that these are cultures like every other culture in the world which rely on oral narratives in terms of an intergenerational play of meaning and values and philosophy etcetera. Now what is interesting is how the traditional oral narrative which produces and preserves value is used as a medium to shock over here.

The oral narrative over here is not meant to consolidate or to comfort or to give some kind of an intergenerational idea and philosophy of this culture rather the oral narrative over here the oral voice the oral quality over here is meant to shock. The medium is conservative but the content is radical and that is what makes this novel so, interesting and complex and quality.

This is the shocking quality of the keynote. It also extends the text suggestion that of cautioned balance as a pragmatic survival strategy for the ex-colonial. So, together with Dangarembga subsequent injection of Shona language terms and tonality this keynote initiates authorial placement in the story in what I have called complementary duality of narrative mode.

This is an interesting term used in this particular essay, the complementary duality. On the one hand it is dual in quality there is this narrative design and there's this oral voice but then they complement one another. Hence, the term complementary duality. It is doable at the same time it is complementary they come together as one instrument of storytelling.

By having Tambu pose that rhetorical statement immediately Dangarembga does something striking stylistically and thematically she makes the narrative a collaboration of dialogue on myths reality the novel the tool the written the resiliently African or the imported western. We find there are these binaries and dualisms running across over here. But what this particular keynote does in a very defiant way in a very subversive way is it brings those dualisms together on the table.

As a reader we find these are complementary dualisms, complementary duality. The narrative is designed in such a way to bring the dualisms together and also make them complementary in terms of being connected categories rather than being ontological

opposites of each other and there are not like the genius the brilliance of this novel or shall we say the medium of fiction the uniqueness of the medium of fiction is exactly this.

It can bring all the dualisms together it can bring this ontological opposites together and yet create this complementarity through which we can find we read this or we comprehend this as connected categories. The connectivity is a key over here and that's something which we find very useful. All these dualisms come together reality the novel, the tool the written the resiliently African the imported western.

“The stereotypical differences and dualisms brought together and produced together as one ambivalent condition one connected condition one complementary condition illustrating Mildred Mortimer's insight as to how in Africa and African literature in general reality and literacy often inhabit the same space Dangarembga makes both modes function cooperatively under the same narrative roof.”

This is a very elegant metaphor the narrative roof is the same narrative umbrella the same roof the same shelter the same space and that is what I meant in the previous session when I talked about spaces because even in a very meta fictional way the novel is a space where those different voices can be combined and seen as complementary to one another rather than being distant.

Along with the space that are housed along with the space of the school around the space of the market along the space of the hairdresser the novel nervous condition also becomes a space where these complementary dualisms can come together and emerge together and function together. There is also this Meta fictional quality about speciality in this novel.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:18)



TAMBU IDENTIFIES HERSELF AS A STORYTELLER (DOSHAN 71). CONSISTENT WITH oral storytelling, therefore, Dangarembga technically presumes an immediate listenership or what she herself calls an "amorphous audience" (qtd. in Wilkinson 192). Most of all, by startling the audience immediately and also leaving holes in the story through suspense, she invites the audience's participation and deferred response to her storyteller's prefatory and performative comment/"call" in which is also revealed the occasion for the story. Dangarembga would like for us, as Tambu's audience and chorus—the "you" to whom she addresses the story (85, 103)—to suspend judgment until we have been fully "inside" the narrative space and have heard/read or can now juggle and balance the whole text/tale, even as "complex and delicate" as is its content (79).

Being inside the narrative space patiently and fully offers us better clarity on things and helps us decide better. Prudence and deliberation—a willingness to thread a little more slowly, thoughtfully, and carefully—is, the novel posits, a virtue capable of moderating further the tensions of postcolonization. It is therefore only when we have entered the entirety of that narrative space and heard Tambu recall, especially, her brother's

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So, and then we can see I am just skipping a few paragraphs and this should be on the screen Tambu identifies to serve as a storyteller consistent with old storytelling therefore Dangarembga technically presumes an immediate listenership it is a lovely word listenership or what she calls an amorphous audience. The fluid amorphous audience which can absorb many voices many forms of storytelling many forms and narrative designs.

Now most of all by startling the audience immediately and also leaving holes in the story through suspense she invites the audience's participation and deferred response to a storyteller's preferentially and performative command slash call and which is also revealed the occasion for the story. Now what this does over here is that the amorphous fluid quality of the audience, see the presupposed audience is very mixed audience a very fluid audience.

But then that audience is startled this audience is informed as audiences told the story through different deliberately left suspense's little bit left gaps. Now those gaps invite the audience to co-create the story to be co-writers of the story. In that sense this novel becomes very open-ended novel it becomes very complex fluid novel which invites interpretations of all kinds rather not being a closed story.

The whole idea of prefacing the story and performing the story began to become combined began to sort of connect to each other. There is a preferential equality to the story and there is a performance of quality of the story and that performative quality

leaves open-endedness leaves open-ended occasions in the story which in a way arouses the empathy of the of the reader.

Because we can imagine what is going on you can imagine to the suspensions what may or may not have happened and this invitation to imagine is what makes the novel. So, profound in quality at a level of empathy. Dangarembga would like us as Tambu's audience and chorus to whom she addresses the story to suspend judgment until we have been fully inside the narrative space.

And have heard slash read or can now juggle and balance the whole text slash tail even as complex and delicate as is its content. We find there is this quality this is correct quality about us when we are reading the novel because the novel is addressed to the reader. The readers directly address but it is also an invitation it is not just a passive consumption we also invited to participate in the story.

We can only participate fully if we suspend our judgment and we just get involved and absorbed in the narrative space. We can see how this dualisms hearing and reading happening simultaneously there are voices in the novel which we are supposed to hear. There are sections which are supposed to read but there is also a human voice trying to tell us a story and that idea of the text and the written text and the spoken tale they all combined together in a novel.

It makes the novel complex and delicate the form becomes as complex and delicate as the content in the story. This is the classic quality of form and content combining together that is something which we see over and over again.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:52)



Dangarembga has masterly embedded the issue of openness to the novel's plot, collaborating plot/movement/journey and space, and addressing this rather important question: how long will decolonization, the female characters' battles against spatial limitations, and this balancing act last? Speaking broadly, how long will the ex-colonial's responses to the crises go on? The novel's plot offers some answers.

Gilian Gorle has noted correctly that the novel's plot is open and cyclical: "[T]he end of the novel provides no sense of closure: although it brings the reader full circle (with the first paragraph neatly echoing the words of the opening paragraph), it resolves nothing and secures no one. Instead Dangarembga leaves the reader in postmodernist suspense [. . .]" (180). This is true. Yet the novel's inconclusiveness is actually its "conclusion" and answer to the questions posed above. Closure/conclusion, with its meanings of *cessation, complete, stop, end, final, authority, inextension, neatness and order* would be inconsistent with not only the chaos of decolonization but also Dangarembga's thematic "battle" against fixity and spatial congestion. As embedded in the operative terms "process" and "stretched" with which Tambu describes her growth (204), or the comparable motif of travel(ing) encrypted in the novel, the story's inconclusion, its circular plot, speaks of an open, expanding or ongoing, human-journey in time and space for both character and nation.

Had the story "closed," such a closure would, first, imply an authorial and narrative endorsement of the problematic catch-word, "post-colonial." This term is contested by the extant experiences of many African nations, *see: The Decolonization of Zimbabwe: Twenty Years after Independence*



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This is a basic story about what the questions or the colonial condition and how long the marginalized will continue to stay the marginalized. How long will female subjects be limited to certain spaces how long will speciality inform identity. These are the fundamental questions the big questions the novel asks but the novel's plot offers some answers but it is not a closed novel.

So, just leaves it open-ended in the end for us to imagine and reinterpret over and over again. We will sort of wind up now and the last bit is interesting because that is what the essay will connect the novel to some of the other writers writing in that tradition china word chair base things fall apart. For example is another case in point but this novel emerges has the very complex novel about medical female spatial conditions which is as much a part of the local tradition as much as part of the post-colonial tradition.

The posts going on the local merge together and create this asymmetric production and condition of power.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:38)



the experiences of thousands of African parents, children and families outside Shonaland, Zimbabwe, and the African continent as a whole. While *Nervous Conditions* offers such families no simplistic solutions to rather difficult and at times painful problems, it nonetheless has faith that this post-colonial experience is indeed survivable and indigenous sexism, no matter how rooted, cannot go unchallenged and unbent. It must be stressed also that regardless of how much the text associates them with it, the women's "position" is not the kitchen! In addition to its revolution trajectory, its change imperative, the novel advises perseverance, "gent[ility]" (68, 118), understanding, patience, and inclusion in response to Africa's familial matters. It also presents the characters' fortunes, especially Nyasha's and Babamukuru's own tragedy, as sites of instruction.

If Okonkwo's tragedy in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* results mostly from his intent to remain unbending when the times call for ideological and attitudinal adjustment, the consequences of Babamukuru's rigidity and exclusionism at a comparable historical moment become cautionary: we are not to emulate his troublous inflexibility and spatial domination. Maybe the larger point is that there is really more than enough space *here*, on this earth, for all of us, for all of our voices, including those of women who simply want to be able to live their lives unfettered, in both the private and public domains. Should *Nervous Conditions* become a classic as some are predicting, it may be because of how, among other things, Tsitsi Dangaremba



“While “Nervous Conditions” offers such families no simplistic solutions. These are families where people suffer, people are imprisoned people are confined to certain spatial conditions it offers such families no simplistic solutions to rather difficult and at times painful problems it nonetheless has faith that this post-colonial experience is indeed survivable and an indigenous sexism no matter how rooted cannot go unchallenged and unbent.”

There is this element of hope and redemption that noble also has. So, in this deep seat of sexism this postgraduate problem can be transcended can be moved away from if we just keep questioning it if we keep rebelling if we keep engaging with it in very complex ambivalent ways.

“It must be stressed also that regardless of how much the text associates them with it the woman's position is not the kitchen in addition to his revolutionary trajectory his change imperative the novel advises perseverance gentility understanding patience and inclusion in response to Africa's familial matters. It also presents the characters fortunes especially in the ashes and curious own tragedy as sites of instructions.”

There is a instructive quality for the novel as well the tragedy is also instructive the tragedy in this fictional form also instructs us and the people closer to this culture in terms of how to negotiate how to engage with these conditions and perhaps offer or move towards some kind of a solution or liberation through a constant process of engagement. If a conqueror's tragedy in a chair base things fall apart results mostly from

his intent to remain unbending when the times call for ideological and attitudinal adjustment.

The consequences of Babamakuru rigidity and exclusionism at a comparable historical moment becomes cautionary we are not to emulate his troubles his troubles inflexibility and spatial domination. We find how these unchanging men in both novels they become the sides of tragedy and to which but other people also suffer. We find even that Okonkwo is just him as a conservative character who is not willing to change.

He is not willing to sort of reshape himself and therein lies a tragedy when things are falling apart from his perspective. We find something similar in Babamukuru and “Nervous Conditions” this rigidity and exclusionism is also there and that becomes a site of tragedy. Maybe the larger point is that there is really more than enough space here on this earth for all of us for all our voices including those woman who simply wants to be able to live their lives unfettered.

In both the private and public domains should “Nervous Conditions” become a classic as some are predicting and the reason this essay is chosen because it is written at the time when the novel did not become a class it was just written it is in the 80s and then the essay is also around that time. It is amusing how the novel this essay is predicting this novel will become a classic as it is today.

Should “Nervous Conditions” become a classic as some are predicting it may be because of how among other things Dangarembga succeeds remarkably in making the serious message that a narrative instruments can convey at work not separately but productively together. The message in the novel is not of exclusionism it is not about separatism it is not about majoritarianism.

It is not about something identity information or privileging or certain kinds of identity rather the message the moral message in the story is about inclusion it is about inclusivity it is about plasticity it is about coming together accommodating different kinds of voices and that accommodation and articulation different kinds of voices is played out novel even at a formal level.

So, if you remember just a session we were discussing earlier where the oral traditional storytelling and the written tradition storytelling are both included massively in the novel and that kind of integration that quality of integrating different kinds of voices that the polyphony voices the heteroglossia of voices is indeed what makes this novel. So, radical in quality at the same time very, very human in quality.

The radicalism in the novel does not come at the cost of the humanity the novel rather radicalism informs humanity and vice versa. This is a novel about traumatic condition. This is a novel about nervous conditions. This is a novel about profound medical conditions serious medical conditions of damage of devastation of despair but at the same time it is also novel about hope.

Redemption and possibilities of change which is what great box of fiction end up doing more often than not with all the tragedy all the despair with all the existential and real tragedy and grief. But it is also this kernel of hope that is there in the novel through which change may appear change may emerge in the times to come. We conclude “Nervous Conditions” by Tsitsi Dangarembga.

It is a marvelous novel and this essay is also quite comprehensive. This essay was written around the same time when the novel was written roughly the same time. It is very immediate in quality the essay and it is sort of spontaneous in a way it reads the novel. It is not really a studied essay which is done from the present. Looking back at that time of publication is done in a very immediate ad hoc spontaneous way and that's what makes the essay.