Gender Apartheid and Its Effect on Family Relationships in TsiTsi Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract

One of the features of contemporary discourse is the emphasis on gender equality underscored by the efforts of the United Nations pursuit of an engendered culture and development. This paper approaches this subject from a different perspective. It focuses on the effect of gender apartheid on family relationships. This is done through the analysis of TsiTsi Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions*. Traditional masculinity provides the theoretical framework of this study. The aim is to highlight the dangerous effect of gender apartheid on family relationships and to call for its total deconstruction. The paper dramatizes sour relationships among family members occasioned by the institution of gender apartheid in the family and concludes by calling for its total deconstruction. The paper recommends that parents especially fathers should endeavor to build intimate family relationships among siblings devoid of gender discrimination and inequality in pursuit of the construction of a more egalitarian society.

Key words: Gender; Gender apartheid; Family relationships; TsiTsi Aangaremgba and *Nervous Conditions*

INTRODUCTION

One of the features of contemporary discourse is the emphasis on gender equality underscored by the efforts of the United Nations pursuit of gender equality for the purpose of human and physical development. For example, the United Nations declared 1975-85 as Women's Development Decade and in 1979 adopted the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Ajala, 2016, p.1). In spite of this, gender discrimination remains one of the greatest challenges of contemporary Africa. This is because both sexes have been taught through a socialization process that the male is superior to the female and the female has accepted this inferior position in her consciousness. Millett (1973) argues that both sexes undergo right from childhood a conditioning to patriarchal ideology with regard to temperament, role and status (p.33). Hooks (2010) affirms that "patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles; …it was clear to us that our behavior had to follow a predetermined gendered script" (p.1). Accordingly, in the traditional African setting, the roles of boys and girls are clearly defined. Orabueze (2004) observes that "boys are taught how to build huts, mend fences, and cultivate yams, which are regarded as king of crops. On the other hand, women plant crops like okro, beans, cassava, and vegetables between the yam mounds. They are also taught how to cook, clean houses and bring up children and mend dresses" (p.109). This recalls Agbadi's injunction to his children in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1980): "My sons, you will grow to be kings among men. My daughters, you will grow to rock your children's children" (p.29). Qureshi (2014) affirms that "the notion of male superiority, … validates the systematic subjugation of women (one

social group) by men (another social group)" (p.94). She adds that male superiority "continues to provide the backbone to a system of domination" (Ibid.).

Many studies on gender apartheid center on its effect on the human, social, economic and political development of a people but this study takes a leave from this perspective to explore the effect of gender apartheid on family relationships. This will be done through the analysis of TsiTsi Dangaremgba'a *Nervous Conditions* (1988). The aim is to delineate the dangerous effect of gender apartheid on family relationships and to call for its total deconstruction. Traditional masculinity provides the theoretical framework.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Traditional masculinity according to Ander Bergara, Josetxu Riviere and Ritxar Bacete (2010) "is a set of values, beliefs, attitudes, myths, stereotypes and behaviours that legitimizes and endows men with power to exercise it" (p.27). They add that traditional masculinity is "an androcentric vision of the world within a patriarchal social and cultural system based on the idea of male authority and leadership. A system in which there is a predominance of men over women, where the structures of production and reproduction of power are largely grounded in inequality between men and women" (Ibid.). Key concepts are also defined to facilitate the study.

Gender: According to Taiwo Ajala (2016) "gender is a socially constructed component that reflects a society's views regarding appropriate roles for men and women, and is only instigated by traditional beliefs, cultural norms and customary practices which construct societal rights and entitlements in the form that denies women access to economic and political environments…" (p.3).

Apartheid: It is a system of structured racial discrimination and segregation between whites and non-whites which was prevalent in South Africa between 1948 to 1994. It refers to government policies which serve to regulate the legal and social relationship between white and black, colonizers and colonized.

Gender apartheid: Gender is systematic and discriminatory enough to make a case for apartheid. Thus, gender apartheid is an institutionalized domination of men (one social group) over women (another social group) mediated by the patriarchal ideology. It refers to practices and beliefs which condemn girls and women to second class citizenship and elevate boys and men to superior positions.

Patriarchy: Onyeamaechi Udumukwu (2007) posits that "…patriarchy describes authority and control exercised by men over women" (p.37). To Teresa Njoku (2001), patriarchy is a social system which "emphasizes male importance, dominance and superiority, while giving the female a secondary position" (p.194).

2. THE MALE-CHILD SYNDROME

Patriarchy endorses male privilege which begins at birth where the birth of a male child is celebrated in pomp and splendor while the virility of a father who does not have sons is questioned. Thus, Olumba in Elechi Amadi's *The Great Ponds* (1969) searches for his missing wife and only son because he "could not die without a heir" (p.140) confirming Amara Chukwudi-Ofoedu's argument that "the male child is taken as the pillar of the family for he sustained the family lineage" (2012, p.2). Not only that, having a female as the first child parallels disappointment and a real source of sorrow for the woman. For instance, Buchi Emecheta's Adah in *Second Class Citizen* (1975) recalls the ordeal she passes through for having a girl as her first child:

> After a long and painful ordeal, she had come home to Francis bearing a girl. Everybody looked at her with an is-that-all look. She had the audacity to keep everybody waiting for nine months and four sleepless nights, only to tell them she had nothing but a girl. It was nine good months wasted. (p.12)

Her mother suffers the same fate when she had her. Adah's birth was not celebrated because "she was a girl who arrived when everyone was expecting a boy. Her birth was not recorded as a result" (p.7). It is not surprising then that Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1985) slaughters a goat for his first wife for bearing "her third son in succession" (p.56). The importance attached to male children is underscored in Nawal El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* (1983). Firdaus states that "when one of his female children died, my father would eat supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep" (p.17) giving credence to Nwachukwu-Agbada's assertion that "patriarchy assumes that a son is more important than all the daughters put together" (2011, p.91).

When formal education was introduced, girls were generally speaking denied the opportunity. Orabueze (2004) notes that "the patriarchs decided to send their sons to the white man's school – sons, not daughters…" (p.109). This is because "the female child acts as an object designed for man's satisfaction and comfort" (Chukwudi-Ofoedu, 2012, p.2). For instance, in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1975), Adah's younger brother starts school before her. Adah is only sent to school and allowed to remain in school for a while because "the longer she stayed at school, the bigger the dowry her future husband would pay for her" (p.19). Also, Firdaus' uncle in Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* (1983) refuses to send her

to the university because it is wrong for her "to sit side by side with men" (p.37).

Evidently, patriarchal violence against girls and women as discussed above is systematic and discriminatory enough to make a case for gender apartheid.

3. GENDER APARTHEID IN TSITSI DANGAREMGBA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*

In Tambudzai's milieu, "the needs and sensibilities of the women…were not considered a priority, or even legitimate" (p.12). Accordingly, Jeremiah, prefers to training his son, Nhamo, to train his daughter, Tambudzai. To Jeremiah, sending Tambu to school is a waste of time and resources since she cannot cook the books and feed them to her husband (p.15). This recalls Ajala's argument that "…the education of a girl is traditionally believed to be a waste of resources or a loss to the family of origin of a girl child" (2016, p.7). To Jeremiah, what is best for Tambu is to stay at home with her mother, learn to cook, clean and grow vegetables (p.15) while Nhamo, her brother, deserves quality education because he would lift their branch of the family out of the squalor in which they are living (p.4). Tambu bemoans her situation: "Yes, I did understand why I could not go back to school, but I loved going to school and I was good at it. Therefore, my circumstances affected me badly" (p.15). Jeremiah's attempt to socialize his daughter into the expected gender roles confirms Hooks' assertion that "the most common forms of patriarchal violence are those that take place in the home between patriarchal parents and children. The point of such violence is … to maintain rule through practices of subjugation, subordination and submission" (2010, p.2). But Tambu rejects this imposed ideal. She refuses to be held captive by the 'patriarchal thinking' to use Hooks' words. She wonders if Maiguru, the wife of her uncle, Babamukuru, who has a Masters' Degree serves "Babamukuru books for dinner. I discovered to my unhappy relief that my father was not sensible" (p.16). Her mother, Ma'Shingayi, supports her husband saying to Tambu "father was right" (Ibid.) and adds that "this business of womanhood is a heavy burden … you have to start learning them early, from an early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on…" (Ibid.). Tambu thinks over her situation for "several days" (Ibid.). She muses:

> My mother said being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband .… But I did not think this was true. Maiguru was well looked after by Babamukuru, in a big house… Maiguru was driven about in a car, looked well-kempt and fresh, clean all the time. She was altogether a different kind of woman from my mother. I decided it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood. (Ibid.)

Tambu's decision corroborates Farah Godrej's submission that "the ability to scrutinize and reject dominant narratives while refashioning one's understanding may not simply arise ex nihilo: It may require hearing the voices of others to consciously emulate them in constructing certain kinds of voices within myself" (2011, p.123). She is resolved. She announces to her parents: "I shall go to school again" (p.16). She reassures her father saying "I will earn my fees…if you give me some seed, I will clear my own field and grow my own maize. Not much, just enough for fees" (p.17). Though her decision is met with sarcasm from her father who says "…Such a little shrub, but already making ripe plans! …" (Ibid.), she is resolute and undaunted. "Tambudzai therefore consciously refuses to be compartmentalized into this gender apartheid from an early age…" (Moyana, 1994, p.30). She secures a small farm and plants maize. Udumukwu (2007) avers that by sending herself back to school "Tambu breaks the glass of tradition by demythicizing and therefore illuminating her father's construction of her…" (p.105). On her father's attitude to her schooling, Tambu complains:

> He did not like to see me over-absorbed in intellectual pursuits. He became very agitated after he had found me several times reading the sheets of newspaper...He taught I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living…. (pp.33-34)

Jeremiah confirms his daughter's observation when he tells his brother, Babamukuru, that "Tambudzai's sharpness with her books is no use because in the end it will benefit strangers" (p.56). However, Tambu rejects the subordinate position allotted to her through gender socialization. She remarks: "My father's idea of what was natural had begun to irritate me a long time ago, at the time that I had to leave school…" (p.33). So, both father and daughter "…co-existed in peaceful detachment" (p.34).

There is no encouragement from her mother either. To prepare Tambu early for her feminine roles, Ma'Shingayi discourages her from going to school saying: "And do you think you are so different, so much better than the rest of us? Accept your lot and enjoy what you can of it. There is nothing else to be done" (p.20). From that day, Tambu ceases to pay attention to her mother (Ibid.). Desirous of support and encouragement, she seeks solidarity with Nhamo, her brother, who also disappoints her to her chagrin. He says to her: "Don't you know that I am the one who has to go to school?" (Ibid.) The offshoot is an argument:

Nhamo: I go to school. You go nowhere
Tambu: But I want to go to school
Nhamo: Wanting won't help
Tambu: Why not?
Nhamo: It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl. It was out. That's what Baba said, remember? (p.20)

This was too shocking for Tambu to bear. She says "my concern for my brother died an obstructive death" (p.20). Again, when Tambu complains about the theft of her ripe cobs from the farm, Nhamo taunts her saying "what did you expect? …Do you really think you could send yourself to school?" (p.21). When Tambu eventually discovers that it is Nhamo who steals her cob just to frustrate her, she fights with him and "brings him down in a single charge" (p.22). She "sat on top of him, banged his head into the ground, screamed and spat and cursed" (pp.22-23). She "was thoroughly disgusted with him" (p.37). Tambu stops speaking to him. Hear her: "…not that I consciously decided to ignore him. It just happened. Try as I would, I simply could not open my mouth to talk to him" (p.50). Their mother distressed, asks: "Now what evil spirits have arisen between you two? If you have been bewitched, then tell us so that something can be done. If it is your own madness, stop it straight away!" (p.51). Evidently, the mother misjudges the situation. The unfriendliness between Nhamo and Tambu is neither caused by evil spirits nor madness; it is rather in consequence of the institution of gender apartheid in the family by Jeremiah, their father. The relationship between the siblings breaks down so terribly that even when the news of Nhamo's death came, Tambu feels no sorrow. She says: "… my brother had become a stranger to me. I was not sorry that he died…" (pp.55-56).

Undeterred, Tambu pursues her education to the secondary level through the intervention of her uncle, Babamukuru. However, her success does not come without a price. Moyana (1994) asserts that "Tambudzai ruptures and transforms her world in a painful and halting process" (p.31). Tambudzai herself confesses: "It was a long and painful process…that process of expansion" (p.204).

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the institution of gender apartheid in the family creates sour relationship among siblings. Thus, when Nhamo died, Tambu says: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feelings" (p.1) Undoubtedly, Nhamo's behavior towards his sisters is largely influenced by gender apartheid along with traditional masculinity. Apart from his foul disposition towards Tambu's schooling, he also makes his sisters, Tambu and Netsai carry his bag when he returns from school. He does that according to Tambu "to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do things for him" (p.10). Tambu reasons that Nhamo "was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner" (p.12). She confesses: "I hated fetching my brother's luggage" (p.10). She never misses Nhamo's absence. She says: "Our home was

healthier when he was away" (p.10). In another instance, she muses:

> …I could not cold-bloodedly inform my sisters that I had been thinking of how much I dislike our brother…As he was our brother, he ought to be liked, which made disliking him all the more difficult. That, I still managed to do so meant I must dislike him very much indeed! (p.11)

Hear her:

> I was in standard Three in the year that Nhamo died, instead of in standard Five, as I should have been by that age. In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it, which I could not help but do often since children are always talking about their age. Thinking about it, feeling the injustice of it, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother, my father, my mother – in fact everybody. (p.12)

Excluded from what will give her a sense of identity, Tambu muses: "…exclusion whispered that my existence was not necessary, making me no more than an unfortunate by-product of some inexorable natural process. Or else it mocked that the process had gone wrong and produced me instead of another Nhamo…" (p.40). The injustice of her situation makes her to not only dislike her brother but also other members of the family.

All in all, this study calls for the deconstruction of gender apartheid because it is limiting and damaging. Not every female child would be resilient and undaunted like Tambu to fight her own way in her search for identity and gender equality. The paper therefore recommends that men should endeavor to renounce traditional masculinity which help to foster gender apartheid in the family. They should relieve themselves from the captivity of "patriarchal thinking" which as this study has dramatized, is the problem of Jeremiah and Nhamo and the consequences are grievous. Parents especially fathers should endeavor to build intimate family relationships among siblings devoid of gender discrimination and inequality in pursuit of the construction of a more egalitarian society.

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