

Review Article

## The Protagonists in Two Female Writings: A Comparative Perspective of Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Alice Walker's The Color Purple

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**Abstract:** Be they fiction or non-fiction, literary forms are a channel that authors use to show a picture of the past, and present human life to suggest how the future would spring from the already gained experiences. Some of these authors are female writers who take interest in describing how people lived or live so that the audience can draw some needful lessons. In this study, the intent of the author is to clear up women voices on the painful situations they lived. The authors delve into two female writings viz Alice Walker's epistolary novel 'The Color Purple' and Tsitsi Dangarembga's bildungsroman 'Nervous Conditions'. Driven by liberal feminist, and hinged on related studies involving the two authors, discussion measures two stories' protagonists; Celie and Tambudzai (Tambu). It is noted that the two are victims of both gender and colour based violence rooted in colonization oppression and patriarchy. Despite considerable steps achieved to address this rampant issue in many parts of the world, it is high time women voices were heard.

**Keywords:** Literature, epistolary novel, bildungsroman, protagonist, liberal feminism, patriarchy, oppression, Nervous conditions, the Color Purple.

### INTRODUCTION

For a long time, literature has been a channel that authors use to show a picture of the past or present human lives and possibly suggest how the future would spring from the already gained experience. Be they fiction or non-fiction, literary forms are concerned with human beings as victims, oppressors or victimizers; and helpers or mentors of their fellows or community members [4]. Authors of literature depict conflicts and issues of various kinds among different kinds of people. Women right violation is among the leading themes depicted particularly by female writers considered as the advocates for their deprived rights, and as voices for their fellow women; who are oppressed in one way or another, in many parts of the globe. Among them, two female writers are focused here. One is Alice Walker, an African American author of many works including an epistolary novel titled The Color Purple. The plot recounts the pain endured by Celie, the protagonist of the story, addresses most of her letters to God about the painful situation she has endured.

The second author is Tsitsi Dangarembga, a Southern African female writer of Nervous Conditions set in post-colonial Zimbabwe (former Rhodesia). In it, the protagonist Tambudzai (Tambu) and other characters are used to describe women and girls' difficult life conditions where they are deprived of their rights to a great extent by looking into their meeting rather than differing points.

### THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to explicate two literary texts specifically Nervous Conditions and The Color Purple. Driven by feminist approach in light of those two female writings, the study examines how women writers raise the issues of oppression done by human being over their relatives. Through a comparison of two women protagonists,

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Celie and Tambudzai (Tambu), the researchers want to demonstrate that more often than not, authors' characters may experience similar situation despite their two different settings. In this vein, the study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How far are Tsitsi Dangarembga and Alice Walker feminists? (2) To what extent are the protagonists in *Nervous Conditions* and *The color Purple* comparable? and (3) What messages do the two authors convey to their readers through their central characters?

## SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Literature conveys messages about how human beings behaved triumphantly in difficult times and overcame challenges. Readers or audience can benefit from these messages not only by learning some morals and feel that there are people who suffered in the same or far more ways [4]. In this vein, two literary works are greatly concerned in this paper namely Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Alice Walker's *the color Purple*. The first author is an African female writer whose book recounts women experience through the central character Tambudzai. The work is a Bildungsroman; a form that focuses on a protagonist's psychological and moral growth, thus a novel concerned with the character's change and transformation from her young to adult age. It is a semi - autobiography set in Southern Africa area, in Rhodesia (currently Zimbabwe). It is a worthy literary work which, according to depicts the lives of young girls and women in Zimbabwe between the 1960s – mid 1970s [14]. The second author is an American female writer whose epistolary novel slanted towards the hopeless protagonist, Celie who will later develop into a mature self-reliant woman despite the hardships she experienced. The researcher critically pinpoints feminist view with specific interest in Simone De Beauvoir's "advocacy for women rights that 'women can become what they want to be if men give them freedom' [4]. Besides, comparative approach is involved by identifying the interface between the central characters and themes affecting them in the two literary texts. To boost the discussion and character analysis, the researcher draws from the pool of related literary studies conducted in light of feminist reading by various authors.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Alice Walker observed that neither the Women's Liberation Movement nor Black Feminism was enough for all women to stand upon their feet in the racist and sexist society [3]. Exploring the otherness and selfness, Udasmoro [30] found out how some literary works depicted women as positioned lower than men, with the supremacy of males positioned as the highest in the gender hierarchy. Actually, the twentieth century image of a woman has been an important topic not only for literary critics but also in other domains. On the one hand, writers depict the women as treated unfairly due to socio-cultural norms often times accused of favoritism towards men at the expense of women. On the other hand, critics in the twenty first century still advocate for women rights respect despite a considerable step achieved in narrowing some gender gaps in countries like Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Island, Rwanda, Philippines, Slovenia, Switzerland, New Zealand [34]. Hence, a feminist has considerably been a speaking voice for people to claim women empowerment at social, political, cultural and economical levels in many parts of the globe.

Among feminist writers, Alice Walker and Tsitsi Dangarembga have been touted as the advocate of women, black women in particular, affected not only by racist culture but also traditional patriarchal society which defines and violates the norms of traditional gender role [5]. According to Peiman & Bahman [27] the author chooses a female protagonist to demonstrate how women are doubly oppressed in the colonized African society both by patriarchal 'norms' and racism; a shared view with Eslamieh [12] that Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* depicts the coming-of-age process of an adolescent woman of colour living in a society transforming into a multinational one.

In similar vein, Harris [16] demonstrates Alice Walker's popularity due to *The Color Purple*, acknowledged as her speaking voice for people, black women in particular. Following closely, Ayyildiz & Koçsoy [3] assert that Walker is one of the milestones in Black Feminist Movement; while Adams [1] ranks *Nervous Conditions* the best Bildungsroman genre as it is concerned with the character's psychological growth. The novel chronicles women facing difficulties that they try to escape. Eck [11] echoes it using Tambu's beleaguered mother, worn into submission by poverty, got pregnant for the first time as a teenager; married young and took up family life without question, with no stray ambition leftover for education.

Similarly, while Moyana [24] discusses how *Nervous Conditions* points a finger at patriarchy as an obstacle for women to point out the problem they have, while Da Silva [9] demonstrates that the text not only conveys the pain and deterioration of women's minds and bodies, but also the promotion of their rebellion; Cohen [7] put it that the author of *Nervous Conditions* accomplishes "the intense and detailed dissection of the force of gender on the condition, experience, actions, reactions, opposition, and resistance of women, by creating a pantheon of female characters who hold a different observational position for each." Hence, Dangarembga's central character experienced the worst life situation as a result of a patriarchal society, despite some single support from her uncle Babamukuru. In similar context, Bimal [5] reinforces that "The *Color Purple* narrates the story of a young black woman fighting her way through not only racist white culture but also patriarchal black culture".

Thus, it is high time women understood that they are no longer subjects of oppression and violence. They have to break the shackle of their submissiveness and fight for their true identity which represent the image of 'new women' who, after light reluctance, revolt against the socio-moral taboos knowing that their action would be rather hard to condone for the narrow parochial outlook of man. We have these types of female characters as well described in Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* and Walker's *The Color Purple*. They are two (semi) autobiographies that have more meeting areas than differences. Thus far, as little has been done in literary studies to compare the two female protagonists, the present study is deemed worth to bridge some related gaps. In the following section, discussion is intentionally based on the two novels' criticism with an emphasis on the two protagonists. To some extent, the two novels literal contents have been used to serve as primary data.

## **DISCUSSION: CELIE COMPARED TO TAMBUDZAI**

In literature, the protagonist is a central character whose fate is primarily connected with difficulties and challenges. She/he is the subject of interest for the reader(s) and is often times a role model for the audience. When one considers Aristotle's views of literature as a tool for people to understand the world [4], the role of the protagonists is very clear. They are taken as a channel through which authors communicate what gnaw them for each. Some of these ideas include but without limitation to women issues such as oppression, rape, education right denial, or any other pains endured due to human injustice or unfair behaviours. In Ampadu [2], it is reported that women writers present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures [sic] of oppression. The author witnesses the brutality and remnants of patriarchy that still existed in both Africa and America; while Nyanhongo [26] found out that women suffering is implanted in traditional society beliefs and practices connected with racial and sexual oppression.

Each of the protagonists of the two stories under study is subject to nervous condition described as the position of the native who feels as though she or he occupies multiple identities [12]. These issues are what postcolonial feminists strive to grapple with, to fight for women voices to be heard. Gunjate & Shivaji [15] put it well that postcolonial feminist women are challenged by not only ideologies which have trivialized women in general but also the struggle to eradicate the misconception and stereotypes that middle-class woman is the norm; which define women as subordinates and "other". It is a mission that Alice Walker and Tsitsi Dangaremba accomplished in the twentieth century.

The two authors' characters, especially the protagonists in the two stories fall victims of oppression in many settings. To start with Walker, her work is a response to a long period of silence and oppression undergone by black African American women [23]; a point echoed in [19] that *Nervous Conditions* deals with inter-human double viz patriarchal oppression and the one connected with the effects of colonization. It is a story of personal transformation and empowerment [23] of the disadvantaged group. Relatedly, Mbatha [21] explains that the novel depicts black women's agonies brought about by a myriad of oppressions, a parallel view to Narnia [25] that the post African woman has been marginalized a great deal while Khader [18] reports that female characters in *Nervous Conditions* stand up to make their voices be heard because they are disadvantaged in favour of males. On account of this, Tambu's situation reflects male children treated at the expense of their sisters as she explains it below:

Knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had power, the authority to make us do things for him, I hated fetching my brother's luggage[...] You may wonder why I did not stand up for my sister, tell my brother to carry his own luggage... [10:10].

While Simone De Beauvoir- the leading feminist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claims that women exploitation by men has been a historical issue, reporting that "it is unjust and immoral to use sexual difference to exploit women", the situation in the above lines is parallel to the struggle for women liberation. In fact, Tambu is revealing how oppression of female starts at early age when male children feel that they are superior to their sisters. It is rooted in how these young boys perceive and ape what is done by their elder brothers or fathers in a patriarchy-based society. Of course, when children help one another in a family, it is a good culture. However, when one gender feels they are superior to the other side, this is an unfair behavior. Thus, showing that they are authoritative and have power to make their sisters do things for them means that female children are already less powerful than their brothers as shown in Tambu's words:

In this way, she scraped together enough money to keep my brother to school understood that selling vegetables would not be a lucrative business. I understood that there was not enough money for my fees. 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. My father thought I should not mind. 'Is that anything you should worry about?' Ha-a-a, it's nothing', he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest. 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables. [...] I complained to my mother. 'Baba says I do not need to be educated.... 'He says I must learn to be a good woman' [10:15-16]

Actually, there is nothing evident than the above words to show that female right to education is violated to a certain extent. In many parts of Africa past, particularly in the twentieth century, it was believed that male children could attend school first; and ladies second or not. Girls would stay home, cook for their brothers and the whole family; grow vegetables and do household chores; until they are ready for a husband. It is another oppression and human women rights violation that Tambu tasted. When she says “Baba says I do not need to be educated... he says I must learn to be a good woman”, Tambu’s claim conveys a message of human right deprivation as she is a female child. Her father dictates her to learn to do the house works, and later get married. This being the case, in an interview held with British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2005, Dangarembga reveals that the socio-economic challenges faced by post-colonial African women are connected with the roles assigned to them. She adds that their voices are not adequately heard at national and international levels. Tambu’s mother’s reaction to her daughter’s complains puts it clear:

Aren’t we the ones who bear children? When it is like that, you can’t just decided[Sic] today I do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are Sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with this poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strengths’ [10:16]

It is surprising that instead of being educated, young girls are being imposed and convinced to stay home, learn to cook, clean, grow vegetables and learn to become good women. What Tambudzai’s mother is revealing to her shows that females are oppressed a great deal. They are disadvantaged at two levels. Being black person on the one hand and being female on the other hand. Unfortunately, the mothers to whom they claim are not able to change anything from the decision taken by the father. They are influenced by patriarchy dominated society acting at the expense of females. In many parts of Africa and even beyond, particularly some decades ago, women and young girls have been considered as care takers for children and husbands; as household works doers, or the like. It is really a burden that Dangarembga wishes women should get rid of and enjoy the same rights as men who take advantage of their society’s favoritism. Generally, in many societies, mothers are mentors to their daughters as fathers are to their sons. It is not surprising that the mentorship that Tambu receives from her mother is not a remedy to her claim. Rather, it makes her think deeper of her situation. While she expected her pain to be successfully halved, her mother shows that she cannot escape from it reason being their society structure which betrays them (women). They are living in a situation where the female is underprivileged in favour of men. Conversely, in the long run, Tambu will learn that she could not give up.

Along the same line, Alice Walker’s central character, Celie is described as a victim of both gender and colour based violence - victimized as a woman on the one hand and as black person on the other hand [8], a situation which makes her feel worthless; to trust nobody less God to whom she addresses most of her unsigned letters. In Bimal [5], Celie is described as a woman empowered with skills to move from an object of someone else’s care to an independent woman in contrast with the long lasting of patriarchal belief and if one can agree with Cheung (1988), the unschooled black young girl Celie, represents the historical experiences of stages that women writers traveled from suffering patriarchy to rebelling against its conventions. By the same token, Tambudzai had to become the essence of all that is wrong in order to get people to come along with her and see what’s wrong [29] as well explicated in Meyer [23] that “While African American men and women have been silenced historically because of race and class, African American women’s silencing is compounded, both within and without the black community, by gender. He argues that The Color Purple is Walker’s response to this history of silencing and oppression. He concluded by saying that the novel fulfills African American women’s need for a “female hero,” an African American “everywoman” whose condition speaks to that of many other African American women and who ultimately masters her world and claims her place within it as an autonomous, courageous and creative self.” Thus, Celie’s letter to God creates no reciprocal communications but a means to identify herself. These letters are poised against self-destruction; they are an attempt to preserve a “real” self by burying it within a diary [32]. Referring to one of these letters as an illustration, we will find that Celie rape by her step father, whom she used to call Pa, shows the extent to which she has become victim of sexual violence:

Dear God, He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You goanna do what your mammy wouldn’t. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t never git used to it. And now I feels sick every time. I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look at me. She happy, cause he good at her now. But too sick to last long Dear God, [...]when I start to hurt and when my stomach start moving and that little baby come out of my pussy chewing on it fist you could have knock me... [SIC] [33:11-12].

From the above letter, Celie expresses her intense sorrow to God. She is raped by her step father a great deal. She has suffered from incest by her parent and got a baby by then. Nothing is more oppressive that being tortured at this

level. In some cultures, that is a calamity. The mother who could listen to her is not in the position to hear and heal her pain. Celie says “She happy, cause he good at her now” [Sic] meaning she has been suffering the same way. Worse than that, her Pa (or father) kills the baby born as a result of a committed incest while he is the father of the two innocent human beings. Such behavior of a father towards his daughter is inhuman and is beyond women bearing in particular, not only as victim of rape but also mothers who “give life”. Thus, Celie illustrates how being passive about a negative condition creates victimhood. Her example showed that by fighting back against adversity, one can simultaneously examine identity, discover selfhood, and free the spirit from the bondage of oppressive [23]. Parallel to this view, in *The Color Purple* a patriarchy maintains power by forcing the female body into a position of powerlessness, thus denying the woman's ability to shape an identity. The author adds however that Celie learns to reshape those forces of oppression and to define herself through her letters; these letters act as a “second body” that mediates her relationship to the power structure in such a way as to give her a voice (Wall, 1988) despite that there is no direct feedback to comfort her, to ease her painful situation.

To wind up this section, it is worth confirming that the protagonists in *Nervous Conditions* and *The color Purple* reflect their authors’ interest for each in what Yang [35] tags as “black woman's life [...] and their struggle for freedom, equality and liberation in the society full of discrimination”. They are two novels of change and transformation. The two protagonists have two meeting points: Having tasted the worst childhood of parental (father) abuse rooted in the patriarchal system but are now mature women who discovered themselves after a long period of suffering from the ills done to them by other human beings with whom they have been living for each.

## CONCLUSION

Gender difference [and colour based violence] has been a global concern for feminist discussion [22] with an attempt to address that issue but the problem is still rampant in some parts of the globe. Women rights in general and black color women in particular, have been violated for a long. Education and property right deprivation, rape and oppression to name a few of them, are the painful challenges that women suffered as a result of patriarchal society belief that feminists are coping with. In this study, discussion revealed that “little room that the world gives Black women is among the leading factors which made and still make them “fail-artistically and morally”. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* are two channels by which post colonial Black African women are depicted as marginalized at two levels: They are the victims of patriarchal oppression and colonization oppression. The protagonists described by the two authors are the twentieth century female characters sharing the painful experiences rooted in the patriarchy which they try to escape and become independently empowered and skillful women. To that end, the twenty- first century woman should then be free and ready to struggle for her rights, simply because Kelundra [17] says “If you do your part and show up, the universe often has a big gift for you”; and understand that good empowerment is the one free from supremacy of one gender over another. Taken all in all, men and women could complement each other; and seeking equality between the two is viewed [13] as a source of problems and frustrations on one side or another. The author wonders whether gender equality can be achieved when the whole world is fully masculine. Be that as it may, we need complementarities between the two rather than supremacy of one over another or “equality”.

Men and women treating each other fairly can make contemporary societies uproot a rampant gender and colour based violence. If that is not the case, oppression or inter- human right violence takes place as happened in most of African patriarchal societies where female are taken as “other” and objectified by the other side, the “ones”. In a world where human beings act fairly to one another, equality cannot be claimed because it is hard if not impossible to be achieved altogether. It would be unfair to wind up this discussion without coming back to William Faulkner’s words that “The past is not the past” implying that “The past is never dead”. In other words, a past event can still affect and influence the present and the future. The two protagonists, Tambudzai and Celie, are a good pool from which society can draw if they wish to ban human violence, promote gender complementarily and live a harmonious life as found [20] that [in some areas] “...woman has been seen as complementary to man who is primarily seen as active in the social field works”. Notwithstanding analysis of characters in this single study, it is important to declare that this discussion is not exhaustive. The shortcomings can be covered by looking at how the two protagonists developed and transformed into empowered mature women who stand for themselves.

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