

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 48
Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions Part 5

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He never imagines his exploited and effaced wife Maiguru would leave him—leave him even if briefly, in daylight and by public bus, the textual agency of mass discontent! She does (172–75). She does this in a Shona society that views such a public disagreement with or desertion of husband as “a serious act of insubordination” to the man (Holleman 207). In like manner, Babamukuru never assumes that Tambu whom he is *civilizing* would defy his commandment that she attend her parents’ forced remarriage; she too does and accepts her punishment as payment for her selfhood and voice (167–69). Worse still, Lucia, Tambu’s aunt, whom Deepika Bahri calls “an unmanageable free spirit” (9), transgresses the Sigauke family patriarchy (142–145). And the added fact that whites at Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart carelessly mispronounce Babamukuru’s family name as “See-ga-ookkey” reduces him racially to “a generic black-skinned male” (McWilliams 105).

Nervous Conditions points out that where (African) women’s lives are confined in suffocating social or familial spheres or their own rightful and affirmative spaces are assaulted, it would be hard for society at large and the dominating males, particularly, to have restful mind or maintain a spotless home, no matter its size and beauty. This is why Tambu, who refuses to be seduced by it, demystifies Babamukuru’s house from “palace,” “mansion,” “castle,” and “heaven” to simply that—a house! (62). He himself is



This is an NPTEL course titled “Trauma and Literature” on “Nervous Conditions”. We are following this essay that is a very comprehensive coverage of this novel. It talks about the issues and novels as well as offering a critical insight into those issues as well.

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We are seeing how the issue of space is a very important element in the story and how space can be cohesive space can be confining space can be liberating and space is almost always already gendered in quality. There is a gendering of space this discursive spaces and “Nervous Conditions” becomes a very important pointer to the way in which this novel can be read. This essay in particular is about the speciality in the novel.

If we look at it from a slightly more Meta fictional way the space or the novel “Nervous Condition”, the space inside the novel also becomes quite important in terms of how the characters are played out, how the characters are fleshed out and promoted foregrounded marginalized etcetera. This is why Tambu who refuses to be seduced by it demystifies Babamukuru's house from palace mansion castle and heaven to simply that a house.

The way in which the definition of a space the classification of a space is quite political and quality, if we call a particular house a palace, we are conferring a certain authority to it certain power to it certain prestige marker to it. But if we are refusing to do that if we are rejecting that kind of authority, we can just simply call it a house which brings it down to a more egalitarian, more democratic, and more demystified definition.

The whole idea of palace mansion castle heaven and these are more often than not very patriarchal constructs of fantasy spaces of control the power prestige of authority etc but the feminist rejection of it is again gets played out in very simple subtle terms in terms of calling this just a house. It is a demystification that is also some kind of a radical revision of this discourse he himself that is Babamukuru he himself is no more than a man in fact a delimiting distant and destructive divinity.

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no more than a man, in fact a delimiting, distant, and destructive divinity. This destructiveness is reinforced in his house's damaged and damaging attributes and in his severance of his household's familial, spiritual, and gender bond. In his capacity as "God" in "Heaven" or *up there*, Babamukuru is not close to the pulse of females in his household *down here*. He operates from an "other-worldly" space different and distant from the earthly realities of female experience. While he shares physically the same domestic space with the women—we are told that he could "detect alcohol on your breath at five yards in a strong wind" (41)—he is not in touch emotionally and spiritually with their inner plight and life. Little wonder, then, Babamukuru "feel[s] out of place in [a] feminine [sp]ace," the dressmaker's shop in Sakubva Township, again a "very small" space where the multi-tasking woman dressmaker, as does Maiguru with the mission house kitchen, manages to "keep the clothes clean, the patterns together" even with the shop's spatial and other constraints (161). Little wonder he, the *omniscient*, fails to "know" and to "see" his daughter Nyasha's rapidly worsening health (199), but instead misjudges it as "not so serious. What she needs," he concludes, "is to rest" (199).

Babamukuru's persistent steeliness as his daughter's health declines deepens his human and ideological flaws: however, in tandem with the

The conferring of the divine status to the male is part of the patriarchal impulse that this novel has and that impulse is deconstructed that ideology is deconstructed although this novel is much more than just a deconstruction of patriarchy it is a very complex novel about complex human conditions emotional conditions.

And so, ambivalence and ambiguity play very key roles in this novel in terms of what in terms of how there is no black and white good or evil. Everyone is ambivalent in quality everyone is great in quality and this greatness of characters this greatness of conditions is what makes this novel a novel about nervous conditions because we spend some time already talking about the title of the novel “Nervous Conditions”.

It is a medical metaphor but then we see the novel how this gets manifested and it is informed by political conditions how the medical and the political are connected categories. We have seen that already if one has read Malibu and the other writers who we have read “Mrs. Dalloway” for instance how the convergence or the collusion shall we say between medicine and politics has always been there historically through different points of time.

This novel is just another very classic example of that. A very typical example how the political condition is also the medical condition and vice versa. This destructiveness is reinforced in this house's damaged and damaging attributes and in this in severance and of his households familial spiritual and gender bonds. Babamukuru the protagonist in the house the big man the big masculine presence of the house it seemed to be almost entirely eliminated from the goings on from the domestic discourses in the house.

That alienation is also his vulnerability his that inhalation is also his damaged quality. So, in his capacity as god in heaven up there Babamukuru is not close to the pulse of females and is household down there. So, down here and up there. These become pointers to power but they also become pointers to the gap the yawning unbridgeable gap between the male and the female but the powerful and the powerless.

This novel shows very quickly is that the powerful and this novel or the people in positions of power they are also vulnerable precisely because they are powerful. And they are damaged precisely due to the position of powers the power damages them power damages them mentally emotionally existentially. Power is seen in this novel as some kind of a damaging condition and that is a nervous condition in the novel.

Being powerful does not mean being happy is actually quite reverse the contrary. Being powerful also makes it more vulnerable being powerful also makes him more damaged being powerful also makes him more distant from any understanding of reality from any knowledge and recognition of reality. Babamukuru in this novel along with being a desperate cable figure he is also a pitiable figure he is also a pathetic figure.

Someone we should take pity on and the novel makes it quite clear as well he is not painted as a monster entirely. The monstrosity and the masculinity of Babamukuru is also converged or corresponded to this feeling of his situatedness of being a vulnerable confused man. Someone who is been brainwashed into a patriarchal system but has also been damaged by the same brainwashing by the same process of internalization.

He operates mama mercury operates from an otherworldly space a different from distant from the earthly realities of female experience. The female experience is quite gendered in quality, these spaces are quite gendered in quality the kitchen space in the dining room space whereas Babamukuru space is seen as otherworldly away from all these spaces.

“Profoundly patriarchal and hence other worldly, so, while he shares physically the same domestic space with a woman we are told that he could detect alcohol on your breath at five yards and a strong wind he is not in touch emotionally and spiritually with the inner plight and life.” There is a sense of control and question that he has, he can forbid a woman from drinking he can sniff alcohol from five yards.

He has his detective power, very masculine detective power but at the same time he is emotionally quite challenged he is emotionally quite distant and eliminated from the woman of the house. That emotional disconnect is exactly what makes this entire system. Damaged in quality little wonder then Babamukuru feels out of place in a feminine space the dressmaker’s shop in Sakubva township.

A very small space when the multitasking woman dressmaker asked us Maiguru with the mission house kitchen manages to keep the clothes clean the patterns together even with the sharp spatial and other constraints. This is the sign of a really great novel that it just brings under seemingly unimportant spaces and figures but despite being seemingly

unimportant seemingly insignificant they actually end up being very functional and very symbolic in the context of the novel.

This dressmaker's shop and Sakubva township is a very symbolic space because this is away from the patriarchal control this is run entirely by a woman and we can see the image of the multitasking woman someone who can run a shop maintain a household maintain a an establishment keep counter money. Be very professional efficient and this multitasking woman becomes complete contrast those otherworldly patriarchal authoritative men who are actually quite inefficient in their own ways.

This symbolic spaces which are run by a woman become almost very liberatory in certain sense deliberate the woman from the confines of the household from the confines of patriarchy. And unsurprisingly, this is also the space where Babamukuru feels very eliminated vulnerable very powerless because it is a very female space run by woman multitasking efficient woman.

There is not a big huge space but despite the confines of space that is very heavily gendered in a very a very emancipatory way and it is emancipation that a woman experience while going there is exactly what makes Babamukuru vulnerable in quality it just makes them feel powerless and agency-less. Agency is a very important issue in this novel agency being the ability or the opportunity to carry out one's will or the ability to have that opportunity to carry on to win.

So, which is almost always entirely absent in these women. But this particular dressmaker's shop in the township of Sakubva and it becomes a very symbolic space for female agency. "I just want to spend a little bit of time there and I want to pay some attention to this as well and how does a small space a very small space play such a key symbolic role in a novel like this."

So, little wonder that he the omniscient fails to know and to see his daughter Nhash's rapidly worsening health but instead Miss Judges said as not. So, serious what she needs he concludes is to rest.

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and spiritually with their inner plight and life. Little wonder, then, Babamukuru “feel[s] out of place in [a] feminine [sp]ace,” the dressmaker’s shop in Sakubva Township, again a “very small” space where the multi-tasking woman dressmaker, as does Maiguru with the mission house kitchen, manages to “keep the clothes clean, the patterns together” even with the shop’s spatial and other constraints (161). Little wonder he, the *omniscient*, fails to “know” and to “see” his daughter Nyasha’s rapidly worsening health (199), but instead misjudges it as “not so serious. What she needs,” he concludes, “is to rest” (199).

Babamukuru’s persistent steeliness as his daughter’s health declines deepens his human and ideological flaws; however, in tandem with the novel’s disinterest in narrowness and one-dimensionality, he is depicted not as a total monster but rather a pitiable confluence of competing historical inheritances. If it is any indication Nyasha’s anguished comment that it is not altogether her father’s fault in that “They [England] did it [...] especially to him. They put him through it all,” turning him into “a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir” (200), then it makes sense the argument that he is as much a victimizer as he is a victim of warring cultural institutions (Begum 25). He is the product of his time, consistent with how Nhamo, before his death, was acting “in the expected manner” (12). Babamukuru is a man “overwhelmed by the responsibilities his success entails” (Bardolph 41). Sue Thomas says it best: Babamukuru’s “position is a difficult one: he is placed within and has to negotiate two systems of economic, political, and family regulation—the English and the Shona” (29).



The ability or the authority or the law whereby the six subjects should be confined in the house and then be killed in the process of resting. This is something very similar to what happens in Virginia Woolf’s “Mrs. Dalloway” where the soldier the PTSD suffering soldier that time called shell shock soldier was asked to be confined in the house was asked to go to this rest skill.

In other words, his mobility his motor movements his bodily movements will be controlled and confined in a very cohesive way. Despite having the word rest to it this is actually a form of question a form of sort of a cohesive treatment whereby the doctor or the figure of authority almost always the male figure of authority would confine the sufferer again more than more usually than not the woman suffer into the confines of a house.

That confinement was supposedly something which will cure the suffering person but then we can see how this confinement also comes to authority with an absence of agency the absence of basic motor agency one cannot talk, one cannot leave the room etcetera. This is a form of imprisonment and we can see how this age-old patriarchal principle of curing the suffering woman by confining the person in a small room gets replicated in this novel as well.

“Nervous Conditions” where Babamukuru pompously pronounces that his own daughter Nyasha whose health is worsening and suffering very rapidly actually if one reads the novel it is very rapid deterioration but he misjudges it and to considers it not. So, serious

and confines her in the house confines in a small room in the house and what she needs he concludes is to rest.

The voice of authority the voice of this all-knowing male authority is quite is amply evident is abundantly evident over here and that is again part of the age-old custom of male control patriarchal control and that's something which we see here in this novel as well. Despite being omniscient, so, we can see the word omniscient is ideally sized over here which is a symbol of an ironical parody to it. He is the omniscient God figure in the house fails history or fails to understand even the basic medical condition.

His own daughter is suffering from and he just pronounces it to be some kind of a nervous condition which should be which can be killed by making the person rest. The age-old way to treat the Quran hysteric woman by confining the person. Babamukuru's persistent steeliness as his daughter's health declines deepens as human and ideological flaws.

We can see how the medical condition very quickly connects to and is informed by ideological conditions pathological indoctrination ideological internalization however in tandem with the novel's disinterest in narrowness and one dimensionality he is depicted not as a total monster but rather as a pitiable confluence of competing historical inheritances.

This is a bit in a novel where it really begins to become a complex narrative about human beings rather than being about monsters and angels. They are not really sufferers and victims in a very clear-cut way. Sufferers, victims and perpetrators in a clear-cut way everyone's suffering in this novel everyone's suffering in different degrees and novels some people suffer directly in the hands of authoritative figures and there are certain people who are actually authoritative.

But they also sufferers because they internalize this doctrine and in their head in their mental state in their principles they just grow up consuming a very confused set of principles a confused and confusing set of principles therein lies the quality of competing historical inheritances. He has grown up inheriting certain ideologies which are sometimes contradictory sometimes at conflict with each other.

This conflicting quality of this ideology is exactly what makes them a confused character and in this confusion he just becomes more authoritative but also in a pitiable way sad way in a petty pathetic way rather than being this monstrous figure. There is no attempt on the part of the novel to make him just a monolithic monster that will just be a little reductionist.

But what is happening here instead is that Babamukuru becomes a great character, he is quite vile he is quite authoritative he is quite patriarchal in a very vicious way. But what we also see is how this vicious patriarchy that he has is just a process of indoctrination that he grew up consuming as a child as a boy as a young man and then now as his patriarch.

We have seen the novel is how this competing cultures of colonialism and local tradition makes it worse for him. There is this hodgepodge of all kinds of influences makes them a very confused character which makes them misjudge conditions which makes them misread people and which makes them ultimately very lonely and very eliminated from everything that's going around him.

He is a pitiable confluence as we see of competing historical inheritances if it is any indication Nyash's anguished comment that it is not altogether her father's fault in that they in England did it especially to him they put him through it all turning him into a good boy a good month a bloody good cafe. This English education is exactly what has confused him and that in the process has made him more of a patron rather than less.

Then it makes sense the argument that he is as much a victimizer as he is a victim of worrying cultural institutions. We can see the borderlines between perpetrator and sufferer begins to get a little blurred on this novel. We find that despite being largely the patriarchal perpetrator of all kinds of violence physical corporeal emotional existential violence, he too becomes at the end a sufferer of the same violence.

Because he is confused he does not know what he is doing and he thinks that part of his things this is a good thing and the other part of him is completely clueless because he is just got a very incomplete grasp of reality despite his position of authority. This is what

English education has done to him. He is a product of his time consistent with how Nhamo before his death was acting in the expected manner.

Babamukuru is a man overwhelmed by the responsibilities his success entails. Sue Thomas says it best Babamukuru's position is a difficult one. One of his place within and has to negotiate with two systems of economic political and family regulation the English and the Shona. There is this local cultural interactive of the Shona tribe that he is grown up with at the same time he is been further confused and complicated by the English education.

At the end of it all we have this entanglement of different kinds of patriarchy which has made him the flawed even character that he is which more often than not manifest itself through monstrosity. But then he can be monstrous as a character but he is not a monster and they realize a difference. His monstrosity is a combination is a is a function or as a construct of his conflicting internalizations is a constructive as conflicting brainwashing a conflict in consumption of ideologies that is what makes him monstrous in quality.

That is the subtle but significant difference between being a monster and being monstrous. Being monstrous means there is a human quality to it. We just become monstrous because we are making a series of bad decisions and making series of vicious decisions this does not justify at all but then what it also does it opens up the character to a study of greatness of ambivalence of perhaps being a victim in its own way and that's something which we see in Babamukuru's character as well.



Despite being a patriarchal figure and we can see him as much a sufferer of patriarchy rather than just being a blunt perpetrator of it. Dangarembga worries nonetheless that false yet despotic male divinities and spaces could emerge are the fortitudes convergence or the complications the ones positioned as family benefactor and the other element that transform other elements that transform some of Africa's postcolonial elite into powerhouses and spaces.

There is a question of post-colonial elite which comes into being and that is something which we will find in almost all post-criminal condition that after the end of the colonial control what takes over the section which takes over is the post-colonial elite.

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cultural institutions (begun 29). He is the product of his time, consistent with how Nhamo, before his death, was acting "in the expected manner" (12). Babamukuru is a man "overwhelmed by the responsibilities his success entails" (Bardolph 41). Sue Thomas says it best: Babamukuru's "position is a difficult one: he is placed within and has to negotiate two systems of economic, political, and family regulation—the English and the Shona" (29). Dangarembga worries nonetheless that false yet despotic male divinities and spaces could emerge at the fortuitous convergence of the complications of one's position as family benefactor and the other elements that transform some of Africa's postcolonial elite into power-houses and spaces. The elements include: order of birth, privileged gender, pioneering education, professional hierarchy, marital position, parental rights, and economic benefaction (87). When those forces interact unchecked, especially in a patriarchal culture, men become Providence: the omnipotent, revered, feared, and incontrovertible shaper of human destiny—a "God" status that colonization assumed in its encounter with the native. This is an encounter that has left the latter, whose world is now permanently disrupted, with enduring tensions.

So could anything be done about all this? In other words, how can the ex-colonial handle healthily the lingering tensions from that imperial



That in a way becomes a replication of the colonial quest of quality the colonial culture of control creation and exploitation. That same structures continue and we find something similar happening here as well. So, in a Babamukuru may be seen as a post-colonial elite in a temporal sense as well as in a systematic cultural sense. The elements include these are the attributes and the markers of elitism in a post-colonial framework.

The elements include order of birth privileged gender pioneering education professional hierarchy marital position, parental rights and economic benefactions these are the markers of elitism. The position of power the birth what kind of family the order of birth is a hierarchical system of family this comes from a series of different kinds of kinship systems and cultural systems.

“The order of birth becomes important which family are you born into which sub-section of society are you born into that demands positions of power that informs positions of power subsequently and connected to all this is obviously the privileged agenda whether you are male or female the access to education more often than not colonial education.

A professional hierarchy what kind of profession are you seeing yourself in a miracle position whether you are married or not married and where are you married into who do you marry and parental rights and economic benefaction. The kind of benefaction you receive economically what kind of inheritance do we get as being born in a certain

family. All these factors come together and create the culture and constructive relativism which continues to run after the colonial condition comes to an end.

When these forces interact unchecked especially in a patriarchal culture men become providence and the omnipotent revered feared an incontrovertible shaper of human destiny a God status that colonization assumed in his encounter with the NATO.” We find that the whole idea of godliness the whole idea of supremacy the sort of metaphysical supremacy which manifests itself into godliness is something which the colonial control had historically sought to produce and perpetrate.

With a disappearance with the completion of the colonial system, the new people who take over are the important powerful authoritative men. They begin to replicate the same godliness that colonialism had conferred historically. That shaper of destiny whoever that person whatever he says whatever he does would shape other people's gestures.

That position of authority is conferred to them and that is reflective of a very flawed cultural condition a very bipolar, a very imbalance power position, a very imbalanced power hierarchy in a system like this which puts certain people permanently in a marginalized position of certain people permanently at a privileged position.

“They construct an ontology of privilege and marginalization I did not mind from birth or at birth shall we say which is obviously a very, very unfortunate and tragic situation and it just reflects a very flawed system of governance etc.” This is an encounter that is left the latter whose world is now permanently disrupted with enduring tension. The latter here is the native.

When the colonial encounter happened when the colonial experience happened the native was controlled and coerced not just physically and militarily or economically. But also a level of knowledge the native was told again and again that the colonizer is supreme the colonizer is superior the colonizer is a greater person a greater man closer to God etcetera. That process of brainwashing the process of interpolation that is the technical word interpolation. It is a process through which internalize certain ideologies.

We internalize certain belief systems and that interpolation means it is a term used by Louis Althusser the Marxist critic philosopher but that process was rampant during colonialism and what we see over here is that process of internal interpolation continues even after colonialism even during the post-colonial moment with the only difference being that it is the men the local tribal men who now occupy positions of power they become the new colonizers and a woman the less powerful men they continue to occupy inhabit the marginal positions.

The enduring tension that is there is just a result of colonialism but also is a confusing mixture of colonial attributes colonial principles as well as local principles which both promote hierarchy of certain kinds and that combination creates this permanent disruption and that produces this enduring tensions, ongoing tensions in the colonial space.