

The Complexities of Growing Up: A Study in Colonial Hybridity and Womanhood in TsitsiDangarembga's *The Book of Not*

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Abstract

The non-white, non-Western women in the post-colonial world have been greatly affected by the political, economic and cultural effects of colonialism. Postcolonial feminist theorists analyze why postcolonial theory fails to address issues of gender. They analyze why the women of colour are not adequately represented in feminist scholarship. Postcolonial feminists believe that both the colonial power and patriarchy join hands in oppressing women. They try to explode the myth that women are a universal group and the idea of global sisterhood. This issue is addressed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a principal theorist in this realm in her essay, 'Under Western Eyes'. She is of the view that third world women are depicted by the Western feminists as victims of masculine control and traditional culture. Thus, they overlook the cultural difference and the historical context. Ethel Crowley accuses Western feminists of theoretical reductionism when it comes to third world women. Western feminists and feminists outside of the West hold many differences in terms of race and religion which are not given due acknowledgement in Western feminism. Such differences are often ignored or denied by main stream feminism.

Keywords: colonialism, feminists, Hybridity

I. Introduction

TsitsiDangarembga's novel, *The Book of Not* is a sequel to her greatly acclaimed novel, *Nervous Conditions*. These novels highlight the representation of young African girls and women as worthy subjects of literature. It is the effects of colonization that permeate these narratives. A plurality of nervous conditions, especially sexual colonization is explored in these novels. This sexual colonization results from the social construction of male privilege within African society. Dangarembga's novel, *Book of Not* illustrates how the acquisition of education and the adoption of Western ways change the outlook of modern African women. The protagonist of the novel, Tambudzai Sigauke, through action and dialogue resists aspects of racism, sexism and oppression in the society. At the same time, she adopts the good values of both traditional and Western colonial culture. Thus, she proves to be a 'hybrid' woman.

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Homi K Bhabha in *The Location of Cultures* speaks of the mutual influence of the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. It is this mutual influence that creates 'hybrid women' - women who share the good values of both the colonizer and the colonized. Other key theorists in this realm are Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, Robert Young and Paul Gilroy. Dube recognizes hybrid spaces as decolonizing spaces. She says that feminist enterprise takes place in these spaces in the native culture. Young speaks of the tension between nationalist movements and feminist enterprises associated with the colonial power. Kelly Chien Hui Kuo is of the view that hybridity overcomes cultural unevenness and challenges binary divisions between Western and Eastern, White and Black, occident and orient etc.

In 'Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*', Rosanna Kennedy says that in narrating Tambu's struggles to become someone, the novel dramatizes ordinary, everyday acts of racism in a gendered colonial context. In the view of Rjilkaku, in *Tambudzai* one can locate the black woman's body as a war-zone. According to the author, she is a walking representation of the "wretched of the earth."

The novel, *The Book of Not* deals with the struggles of a Zimbabwean girl - the complexities of growing up, in the wake of the conflict between anti-colonial nationalists and colonial forces. The novel traces Tambu's continuing self-development in facing women's inequalities. Most of the action of the novel, *Book of Not* takes place against the backdrop of Zimbabwe's independence struggle. The novel begins with a meeting of the villagers with the guerillas. Tambu's uncle and benefactor, Babamukuru is subjected to a trial and subsequently severely beaten by the guerillas for collaborating with the colonizer and running a school where the education was superior to the education given to the children of other people. It is at that time that a leg of Netsai, Tambu's sister is blown off in an explosion.

"In the darkness, Netsai's leg arced up. Something was required of me! I was her sister, her eldest sister" (*The Book of Not* 3) Tambu feels very miserable. She realizes that nothing lay in her power. The powerlessness and misery frustrated her. She felt as though the strings of her heart strained and tore. She felt as though she jumped on to the spinning limb and rode it as it rotated, moving up somewhere out of it. "What I wanted was to get away.", she says. Tambu says that she never felt sorry for her sister. She really wants to escape from the scene which she thinks primitive. She wished to escape to the prestigious Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart. She wanted to be transformed into a young lady with a future.

But she is always haunted by the memories of the loss of her sister's leg which severed from its body, flying through the air and getting hooked on the branch of a tree, to remain there suspended, dripping blood. She says: "So, sitting in class you could see the mountains where your sister still talks of walking...back and forth that perseverating path towards that exploding off of a leg (21). She could see her clearly as she sat in class and she could not concentrate.

It was against the wishes of her mother that Babamukuru enrolled Tambu as a student of the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart. When she went back home on holidays, there was her mother's constant innuendo: "Oh, you, wekuchirungu! (people from European places) Do you still eat matumbu, Tambudzai! Can you, white people eat mufushwa with peanut butter?" (*The Book of Not* 7) Then her heart sank. She felt alien in her own home. She felt that she was being treated like a guest by her mother. Tambu's mother speaks tauntingly of her aunt Maiguru,

when they were summoned to the meeting of the guerillas.“ Does she think she’s coming to one of his European meetings! Today she will see it, how things are moving here in the village.” (7)

It pains Tambu deeply when she realizes that her mother is enjoying the ill treatment that her uncle, Babamukuru suffered at the hands of the guerillas. She ceased finding the homestead appealing and could not now contemplate going there again having seen the satiation in her eyes during Babamukuru’s beating. She hated her mother’s fawning. She feels it as detestable. She wants to escape from her family, from her village, and from her Africanness. Tambudzai thinks proudly of herself: “I was a teenager, an intelligent one, who had been given a scholarship by the nuns of the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart. I was thereby being transformed into a young woman with a future. What I was most interested was myself and what I would become.” (11)

When the O’level exam results came, Baba Mukuru, becomes angry and asks, “Can you tell me what good these results are? Tambudzai, what good are these Ds and Es, these low marks?”(185). Babamukuru becomes devastated at her poor performance in the exam. He has invested a great amount for her education and had great expectations about her. He shouts at her: “Tambudzai, I am shocked. I did not believe a daughter of mine- I did not believe you after everything we have invested in you, would spoil your chance at this school and engage in such behaviour” (88). He shows her the letter the headmistress wrote telling him of her misbehaviour.

Tambudzai has a complex. This makes it difficult for her to adapt to the spirit of the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart. She believes she is above convent rules designed for the welfare of the pupils. Her inability to be a part of the college causes her considerable distress. If she is not happy here, perhaps it is best to remove her. Constantly she wears a supercilious expression.”(89)

It was one of the worst moments she had ever lived through. She wanted the earth to open up and remove her from everything. She said idiotically: “It’s my eyebrows.” Then she went on, “They are high. They make me look supercilious.” (90). Babamukuru becomes upset at her poor show. He blurts: “Tambudzai, I am paying more for you, for one, just for one of your terms at the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart than I am submitting each year for my daughter, Nyasha, here at the mission.” (89)

Her cousin, Nyasha and Maiguru, her aunt try to break the tension that night. Maiguru speaks reassuringly to her, “Tell us, Tambudzai, It must have been something. What happened?” she asked. Nyasha tries to save her, saying: “Life! If you are interested, Mum, life happened. It’s been happening to Tambu a lot, you know.”(185) When Tambu was studying at the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart, she realizes that not much is sacred or hearty for the native students. She joined the first form full of hope and high expectations. It was considered prestigious to get admitted to the whites only institution.

Tambu was a girl of high ambitions. The Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart delivered a formidable education and its standards were set kilometers before the school gate was arrived at. When she enters into high school, she says, “I knew what I wanted. My desires in that initial year were positive: to achieve, achieve, achieve some more. I was going to learn until I had more learning than anyone about me.”(21) She selected each time a place up close to the teacher, in order to be a good student. She was determined to work hard. But she fails to achieve what she so desperately aspires. Her goal proves to be unachievable. Her sister’s involvement in anti-colonialist struggle

embarrassed her. She had misgivings about how it will affect her prospects. She felt ashamed of her sister. “Oh, Netsai, how I wish you were not my sister. Who informed you a woman’s business is aiming communist rifles at people like kind and gentle Sister Catherine!”,shelaments. (31)

There were great many challenges awaiting her. To the African girls in the school, racism was a great issue. They were offered less glamorous hostels. They were not allowed to play some games. Certain places were no- go zones for them. They also do not have the freedom to outperform their peers. At times, Tambu feels that she is metamorphosing into a racist.However, she cherishes her life in the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart that helps her escape from her family, her village and from her Africanness.

The school is run by nuns, headed by Sister Emmanuel who often speaks of her act of admitting five African girls as an act of Christian charity. But there were several restrictions before the African girls. They should not have contact with the white students. They were packed in one room known as the African dormitory. Though she had the best O’level result, her name does not find a place on the honour roll. Her place is taken by a White girl named Tracey. She tries to identify herself with the White classmates and school authorities by knitting for the White Rhodesian soldiers during civil war. It makes her friend, Ntombi exclaim: “You don’t care about anything,Tambudzai, unless it’s yourself! And that’s why you just love those Europeans.” (107)

When she broke some hostel rules, punishment was announced on the noticeboard. When Tambu walked past the notice board, her fingers often clenched into a fist.When the violence broke out, teachers were not available for some subjects.When the students in Tambu’s class studying science, subjects were driven to the neighbouring school, Tambu and other African girls were left behind. The teacher tells them that though they will miss the classes, they can copy the notes of their classmates. It makes her disappointed. She feels that her dreams are shattered: “I wondered, was I a Rhodesian, if I could not sit on Rhodesian seats, read formulae from a Rhodesian blackboard and press down upon Rhodesian desks?” (153)

African students were treated like dirt by the school administrators. Six African students were crammed in a room meant for four. Even the senior students are forced to share the hostel with first formers. They were also not allowed to have contact with the white students or to touch them.So, they were very careful not to touch them by accident. They lived in constant fear of accidental contact with the white students. Tambu says: “We spent a lot of time consumed with this kind of terror.We didn’t speak of it among ourselves...but the horror of it gnawed within us.”The African students were not allowed to use toilets of the white students. One day, by an instinct and out of curiosity,Tambu dares use their toilet. But she is caught in the attempt.

The humiliation was too much for her. Tambu stood unable to look at anyone. She says:

“How absolutely awful it was! I who, unlike a lot of the other girls in my dormitory, had sat on flushing toilets at an early age now being humiliated in this fashion! It was so horrible I could not comprehend how it happened. I could not believe I had behaved in such a silly fashion that resulted in my being caught, as it were, in flagrante.” (67)

Because of this behaviour of her, black mark was entered against her name. The horror of not making the honour roll loomed. To make it worse, she is summoned a day later, to the headmistress and receives a reprimand.

The Headmistress also writes to Babamukuru accusing her of having a complex. They were constantly made aware of their inferiority. As a result, they developed a kind of self-loathing. She has always felt that she is superior to the other black girls. Now that difference that she always felt proud of vanishes. Tambu laments: "You came to a school where you frequently had to pinch yourself to see if you really existed." She even wishes she did not exist. Finally, Tambu finds relief in the philosophy, "live and let live", the idea of unhu(ubuntu) what she calls, "I am not well, so you are not well." But she realizes that this philosophy is meaningless if it is not reciprocated.

She wanted to etch her name in the annals of the school. With this purpose, she worked hard. She could surprise everyone by beating a white girl named Tracey who was as studious as her. Thus, she could come top of her ordinary level exam class. But the school administrators changed the rule and the honour was given to her rival, the white student named Tracey Stevenson. She faces a series of nots in her life at school. The school becomes a site of her rebellion. Later, the credit for her brilliance in copy writing also goes to a white male superior.

The Book of Not deftly delineates the transformation of the protagonist, Tambudzai, an innocent African girl who passes through all kinds of complexities in her effort to survive. She enters the threshold of the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart with lofty dreams. Her hybrid nature does not allow her to turn a blind eye to the racial discrimination at school. Hybridity in her nature equips her to challenge the undesirable practices she found in her own community as well as among the Europeans. The novel deals with the racial discrimination practised by the colonizers as well as the identity crisis experienced by the natives. As Kackery says in 'Voices of Resistance: A Relocation of Fanon through the Works of Tsitsi Dangarembga', the novel "exemplifies a humanist positioning of Fanon's works by exploring themes of national consciousness and psychoanalysis within the narrative voice."

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