

Female Self-Definition and Determination in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*

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Abstract

Women, for centuries, across space and time and from culture to culture, have been consistently treated with ambivalence, misogyny and subordination. They have suffered denigration and subjugation in virtually all cultures where man is the carrier. In a patriarchal culture, men define the female just as they define nearly everything else. All male-identified ideals of women are premised on the basic assumption that women are and ought to be completely defined and understood within their biological capacities, sexual and reproductive. This paper analyzes Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*, where the playwright interrogates patriarchal paradigms which conspire to hemline women. The play forcefully harks back Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*, where the overarching theme is a woman's struggle for self-definition and determination in the face of powerful patriarchal forces. In Dangarembga's play, the protagonist, Martha the feminist persona is imbued with self-assertiveness, self-definition and determination who defies patriarchal values and beliefs which conspire to hemline her female gender. She boldly refuses to be cocooned in the maelstrom of patriarchy in a culture which valorizes male sexual potency as social potency. In the end, she repudiates her womanliness and is able to emancipate and empower herself educationally and economically thus contributing meaningfully to economic growth and making informed decisions about her personal life. The basic dramatic statement the playwright seems to be making, through this play is that culture should not be a tool for oppression and marginalization in the hands of men.

Keywords: Tsitsi Dangarembga, Patriarchal, Culture, Feminist persona, self-definition, self-determination

Introduction

To be born female in this culture means that you are born 'tainted', that there is something intrinsically wrong with you that you can never change, that your birthright is one of innate inferiority. (Kate O' Beime xvi)

Women in a male-prominent society are thus like a linguistic minority in a culture whose public actions are all conducted in the majority language. (John Winkler 585)

The epigraphic views paint a picture of how women are being denigrated in a culture where man is the locus. Culture is here presented as a tool for oppression and marginalization in the hands of men. In a patriarchal culture, men define (explain, analyze, describe, direct) the female just as they define nearly everything else. According to Sheila Ruth, "the issue is not only that men perceive women from masculine perspectives, but also that given the nature of socialization all members of society – including women – perceive the female from the prevailing masculine perspective." (80) Ruth articulates the difficulty in the task of self-definition thus: "In a patriarchal environment, hostile as it is to be assertive, self-defined women, the processes of woman identification and growth toward that new identity are perplexing, confusing, and arduous." (82)

The culture or tradition of a people specifies their modes of social interaction, dos and don'ts, who gets what and at what time, etc., and in so doing imbue in them the spirit of adventure or inactivity, boldness or shyness, dominance or subservience. (Ogbujah and Onuoha 47).

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Therefore the source of the domestication and humiliation of women could be found in cultural/traditional norms. It is this suffocating character of tradition and its effects on women that Sandra Bartky alludes to: “All sorts of women have known in their daily lives the lower self-esteem that is attendant upon cultural depreciation, the humiliation of sexual objectification, the troubled relationship to a socially inferiorized body, the confusions and even the anguish that come in the wake of incompatible social definitions of womanhood; women of all kinds and colors have endured not only the overt, but also the disguised and covert attacks of a misogynist society.” (9) Sheila Ruth totally agrees with Bartky when she posits that “All male-identified ideals of women rest on one basic presupposition: that women are and ought to be completely defined and understood within their biological capacities, sexual or reproductive ...” (85)

Throughout history, women have always struggled to gain equality, respect, and the same rights as men. This has been difficult because of patriarchy, an ideology in which men are superior to women and have the right to rule women. This ideology has permeated the social structures of society throughout the world, and as a result, even in the present century, women are still struggling for rights that most men take for granted. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues vehemently against political authority for women on the flimsy reason that “when women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but arbitrary inclinations” (166). This position supports Aristotle’s view that “the woman is cut out to be dominated and ruled by the man” which again gains credence in Sophocles’ stance that “a modest silence is a woman’s crown” (46)

The atavistic views emanating from the aforementioned male chauvinists point to a common conclusion: women have been perpetually sentenced to life under a phallogocentric universe. It is an extraordinary fact of women’s lives that for centuries, across space and time and from culture to culture, women have been consistently treated with ambivalence, misogyny and subordination. They have suffered denigration and subjugation in the hands of their male counterparts in virtually all societies. Eva Figes in her book, *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Nigeria*, posits that women have been largely man made since the cultural meanings given to them are patriarchally determined (15). This point is succinctly articulated by Henrik Ibsen in his notes in *A Doll’s House*:

A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view (qtd in Asen 38)

Julie Okoh is supportive of the above views when she affirms: “Based on patriarchal paradigms, a woman’s personhood is conceptualized in her relationship with others, and not as a person with her own identity and fundamental rights. She is a man’s daughter, wife and mother.” (42) It is therefore these patriarchal norms which denigrate women that feminists seek to redress. Feminism values women as important and worthwhile human beings. It recognizes the need for social change if women are to lead secure and satisfying lives. The core social change that feminists advocate is an end to all forms of domination. Helen Chukwuma totally agrees with this view that feminists must actively be engaged in pulverizing traditional culture. According to her, “negative and nihilistic norms must give way to the pressing winds of change. Culture is dynamic and no society can progress with about half of its population in subjugation” (158). This paper analyzes Tsitsi Dangaremba’s *She No Longer Weeps* as a quintessential feminist play where unbridled patriarchal arrogance is interrogated through the feminist persona, Martha.

Synopsis of *She No Longer Weeps*

The play centres on Martha who is a victim of unrequited love. She is rejected by her lover Freddy whom she wholeheartedly loves. Freddy beats her and throws her out his home when she becomes pregnant, saying he is unprepared to be responsible. His action is at the instigation of one of his many girlfriends. Martha has no other place to turn to but to go back to her father who vehemently refuses to take her in because of his stance against pre-marital sex in church. In the end, Martha is forced to take up the challenge to continue struggling on her own.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that serves as the tapestry against which this work is analyzed is the ideal feminine. The basic precepts of this theory can be summarized in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. To understand the term, ‘ideal feminine’, we need to understand what femininity is. It embodies a constellation of meanings, it generally refers to the attributes, behaviours, interests, mannerisms, appearances, roles, and expectations that we have come to associate with being female during the socialization processes.

Gender role socialization relies on modeling and reinforcement – girls and women learn and internalize socially expected and acceptable feminine traits and behaviours and are rewarded for gender-appropriate behavior.

The ideal feminine has been debated for centuries. Virginia Woolf writes, “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” (64) Woolf describes her as the “Angel of the House”:

“She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel.” (65)

This relates to Simone de Beauvoir’s point that women are the “other.” Beauvoir points out that, “Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees; thus called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that... she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other. (66)

Betty Friedan, in her *The Feminine Mystique* also weighs in on the subject of the ideal feminine. She notes that, “*The Feminine Mystique* permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says they can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘Tom’s wife... Mary’s mother.’ – an American woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be and that women are not considered female if they do not abide by these societal norms and mores. Friedan thinks that “the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity – a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique.” (67)

This is the picture of the ideal feminine that Martha’s mother provides in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *She No Longer Weeps* and schools her daughter not to transgress: “usually a woman feels she must have a man to be something. Her man becomes her life and if she loses him she feels as though she is losing her life ... (243). This paper is an analysis of Dangarembga’s play as the playwright’s interrogation of patriarchal paradigms and especially of men’s definition of the female.

Female Self-Definition and Determination in *She No Longer Weeps*

The story of Martha, the protagonist in Dangarembga’s play is a pathetic one. She was twenty years old, in her third year when she became pregnant. She was driven away from the house by her father. She went to live with her sister but when the father found out, he instructed her that is Martha’s sister to send her away. Left with no other option, she went to Freddy, the man responsible for her pregnancy who pushed her out of his house. Freddy is a dissolute man, an arrogant patriarchal ideologue who shares the Aristotelian belief that women are subservient and defective. For instance, he says to Martha, “... You don’t know your place in this world, which is underneath.” (218) This is a picture of the denigrating and condescending view Freddy and his ‘elder’ patriarchal ideologue, Father, Martha’s father have of women.

Father sees Martha, his daughter as a child and says to her, “Tell me this, my child, what do you think that you a woman can do in life if not take care of a man?” This view recalls Luce Irigaray’s that women are “physical containers which have their value as exchange within patriarchal economic and symbolic structures.” Unfortunately this view is imbibed and practiced by the women in the world of the play, women who have passively interiorized the patriarchal ideology as a result of long years of patriarchal conditioning and have accepted inferiorization. These women, in the words of Sarah Grimke, are taught to regard marriage as the one thing needful, the only avenue to distinction... (48) This view is adumbrated by Mother, Martha’s mother, “Usually a woman feels she must have a man to be something. Her man becomes her life and if she loses him she feels as though she is losing her life... (243). Martha’s mother is an unrepentant conformist to the patriarchal ideology she has internalized and does not consciously make any effort to attain transcendence from her immanent state of docility and resignation to the ideal of a true housewife. This is an attestation that the system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women.

This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining “respectability” and “deviance” according to women’s sexual activities; restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. (Gerda Lerner 217) Patriarchal dominance in the family manifests in different forms: a man’s absolute authority over children; authority over the wife restrained by reciprocal obligations to the wife’s kin; and concubinage. (217)

Martha’s mother’s position on the role of women, especially wives buttresses Helen Chukwuma’s analysis that “marriage becomes a harrowing enclosure imbuing women with docility, passivity and voicelessness.” (135) Martha’s mother’s case is an example of female conformist who is in a schizophrenic setup who has lost identity, self-concept, her sense of autonomy, cohesion and direction. Hers is the tragedy of the female stereotype who has been impelled not only to appear substandard but also to become substandard. In fact, she reminds us of the perpetual unfreedom women are consigned to in a patriarchal setting of unbridled male power as reported by Eurycleia in Homer’s *Odyssey*: “Thou hast fifty women-servants in thy halls that we have taught the ways of housewifery, how to card wool and to bear bondage ...” (75) Like these women-servants, Martha’s mother has thoroughly imbibed the ways of housewifery. She is a victim of psychological oppression as she has whole-heartedly internalized intimations of inferiority. This further resonates Marlene Dixon’s position that “the institution of marriage is the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of the oppression of women; it is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained. In a very real way the role of wife has been the genesis of women’s rebellion throughout history.” (qtd. in O’Beirne 2)

Tsitsi Dangaremba’s *She No Longer Weeps* echoes Marsha Norman’s *Getting Out*, where the overarching theme is a woman’s struggle for self-definition and determination in the face of powerful patriarchal forces. In the play, Martha demonstrates self-assertiveness by defying patriarchal values, beliefs, negative and nihilistic prejudices which conspire to hemline her female gender. She boldly refuses to be cocooned in the maelstrom of patriarchy, in a culture which valorizes male sexual potency as social potency. This she does in obedience to the seeming advice of George Bernard Shaw, “woman must repudiate her womanliness if she is to emancipate herself.” Martha’s consciousness of this fact is not in doubt: “I am becoming a woman, and things are changing. To be a woman is no longer a crime punishable by a life-time of servitude to man ... (243) In another instance she posits that:

Martha: Come on, mum. I’m not so stupid. I have my priorities and I know my limitations. I know I must work hard. I must get my degree and live a productive life. But it will also be a satisfying life. I don’t believe that just because I’m a woman I must sacrifice my potential to looking after some idiotic man and his off-spring: if he hasn’t got the sense to know when the fun ends and the work, the real work, not just going to the office from 8-5, begins, then I haven’t got time to teach him. I mean, if I thought he was a great man who would change the world for the better, well, I guess I could make the sacrifice, but what I loved in Freddy (she shakes her head) certainly wasn’t his greatness. No, not that at all really, he’s too little to satisfy the most undemanding woman. But, it’s not his fault. He can’t help being what his life has made him. But life must change so it doesn’t produce people like him ... (242)

Martha knows the importance of education in woman’s life. Education makes one more critical about her environment, aware of what her rights are and the courage to fight for those rights. It gives one a sense of self-worth and the desire for independence and freedom of expression. Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, says that knowledge is power. Knowledge empowers a woman to be in control of her body, her mind, her life, her destiny and her world. It gives her the capacity to explore her talents, play an active role in family decisions, contribute meaningfully to economic growth, make informed decisions about her life. (49) This view is corroborated by Y.U. Tajiki,

I believe there is no better contraceptive than education. There is indeed a degree of sophistication, elegance and finesse conferred only by education. Education defuses the unfortunate zeal of subordinated women to have “security” babies. It purges them of their culturally endorsed naivete on marital issues and clears their extraordinary delusion of believing childbirth to be their only mission in life. (Retrieved)

It is therefore not surprising that, against all odds, the first thing she does, in her pursuit of self-definition and determination, is to seek intellectual and economic empowerment. She returns to the university to continue from where she stopped and by so doing shaping her destiny authenticating Barbara Berg’s view that “It is the freedom (for a woman) to decide her own destiny:

Freedom from sex determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action ... (24) This view further corroborates Helen Chukwuma's, "The point the women make is that the solution to a problem is not got through passivity and the helpless showing of palms upwards ... Women are encouraged to be arbiters of their destiny, to work hard toward their own emancipation from the shackles of intimidating norms and traditions, of subjugating and negative values." (qtd. in Depo Popoola 294)

In the end, with unswerving determination, she graduates with a degree in Law and is gainfully employed. By so doing, she boldly refuses to internalize pervasive intimations of inferiority. Martha, the new woman is also imbued with a voice, awakened by the call Helene Cixous to: Start speaking, stop saying that she has nothing to say! Stop learning in school that women are created to listen, to believe, to make no discoveries. Dare to speak her piece about giving ... speak of her pleasure and, God knows she has something to say about that, so that she gets to unlock a sexuality that's just as much feminine as masculine, 'de-phallocalize' the body, to relieve man of his phallus, return him to an erogenous field and a libido that isn't stupidly organized round that monument, but appears shifting, diffused, taking on all the others of oneself. (124)

Martha becomes a self-fulfilled, self-defined and determined and economically self-assertive woman, an answer or a soothing consolation to the anguished cry of an Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood*: "God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage." In the end Martha becomes an educationally and economically empowered woman who is no longer an appendage of a man; be he her father or her boyfriend, Freddy. In fact, her self-definition and determination serves as a tool to revise the traditional, implicitly patriarchal dominance and devaluation of her female gender. From the mistakes of her past love relationship with Freddy who had her virginity and love, she is now able to rewrite the terms in her new love relationship with Lovemore, affirming the 'new woman' in her whose consciousness has been raised, who is self-assertive, self-defined and determined: "Martha: The only thing. Don't get ideas, Lovemore. You are something I need from time to time for purposes that you should understand well. After all, you are a man. Ha! We're all the same. In spite of having to say "no," we're all the same, I and you and all the men and women out there. So don't get ideas about owning me. Don't think you can tell me what I can or can't do. And never interfere with me or my daughter. As long as you understand that we'll get on together well enough. Otherwise we'll have to end everything right now ... (246)

By imbuing in Martha, the qualities of self-will, self-definition and self-determination, Dangarembga seeks a transformation of the structures of a primarily male power which presently orders the society of the text and context. Through the medium of her feminist writing, she inarguably corroborates Raymond Williams' view that: "Writing, like other practices, in an important sense is always aligned: that is to say, that it variously expresses, explicitly or implicitly specifically selected experience from a specific point of view... it does not have to be specifically political, or even social in the narrowest sense." (199)

The feminist playwright's goal in interrogating patriarchal paradigms, is to debunk the myth that cultural reality is immutable. This view coheres with Michael Awkwad's that "the most useful measure of an adequately feminist text is its "inscription of struggle-even of pain" – an inscription of a struggle against patriarchy." (90)

Conclusion

Women have for centuries been exploited by retrograde elements in our culture. In a patriarchal culture, men define the female just as they define nearly everything else. The feminist playwright's goal is to debunk the myth that cultural reality is immutable. Tsitsi Dangarembga, through her play, *She No Longer Weeps*, interrogates patriarchal paradigms which tend to hemline women, especially in Africa. In the play, Martha, the feminist persona, is imbued with self-will, self-definition and determination who is able to rise above patriarchal inhibitions and become a self-fulfilled woman both educationally and economically empowered. She serves as the female agency in the deconstruction of atavistic and nihilistic cultural values in society, especially the African society. Dangarembga is a feminist who seeks equality of the sexes by vehemently attacking the relegation of women to a subaltern status.

Martha, in the end, is no more a victim of male subjugation in a patriarchal society but a full woman-being who takes her rightful place in society. she fits Lauretta Ngcobo's description of women who "... should not have to die to win the respect of their societies, ... self-defining image of women who win respect in their own right because they are strong and achieve things in their lives and triumph ... are valued members of their society as bread winners, teachers, farmers, nurses, politicians and whatever else." (151) Self-determination is presented in the play as a tool to revise the traditional, implicitly patriarchal dominance and devaluation of women. Martha is the Kantian subject who uses reason to transcend cultural norms and to discover absolute moral truth.

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