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Patriarchy and the Oppression of women in 21st Century Africa: A conversation with Adichie and Dangarembga.

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Thank you for having me.

It is my pleasure to address you today, especially as this week registers a time when South Africa observes women’s day. I was the keynote speaker at Binghamton University, State University of New York’s first women’s day celebration earlier this year. I am truly honoured and humbled to be your keynote speaker in observance of such an important day at UNISA today. It is my pleasure to be part of the ‘Africa Speaks’ program,
an initiative that is visibly evidences UNISA college of human sciences’ commitment to sustainable, translatable and homegrown academic capacity building. In order to do justice to such a day and program, it is important that we celebrate African women’s achievements as well as take stock of the challenges that they face in the 21st century world of today. In today’s talk, I hope to illustrate how black African female authors are articulating black African women’s reading of patriarchal oppression and how it informs their oppression. This is an issue is of high currency in the narratives of the authors before us today – Nigeria’s Adichie and Zimbabwe’s Dangarembga.

Why those authors?

Self introduction

In case some of you are wondering who I am and how I end up standing before you talking about Patriarchy and female oppression, let me assure you this is a topic that I am not only skilled and vastly experienced in, it is an issue that I am engaged in intimately both in the classroom and outside it, as a university educator, researcher, feminist activist and committed labour unionist. The role of patriarchy in the life the 21st century

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1 The paper is written from an activist-academic perspective, from the position of a scholar who sees the woman question as an urgent struggle and writing as a way of speaking. In ‘Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women’ (1986) bell hooks argues for the importance of feminist literary scholarship that adopts an activist perspective as that is what links the field to the feminist movement, shaping the political character of the feminist struggle and sharpening its liberatory theory (1). Such writing views feminist literary theory as a crucial site of engaging in the female liberation struggle, unearthing its challenges, mapping resistance and contributing to attainment of female self and collective liberation.
African woman is an issue that I have handled as a lecturer at university, representative of the gender desk at the Malawi constitution review, AAUW fellow, consultant for several bodies including GTZ and Oxfam, commissioned presenter for the CODESRIA Gender Symposium since 2003, gender and feminist newspaper columnist - amongst other capacities. I am a Malawian feminist literary activist scholar. I interrogate the oppression of women of Africa at continental and diaspora levels.

Introduction – Patriarchy and the oppression of African women

The source of the oppression of women in 21 century Africa is an issue that has generated a lot of controversy in the scholarship on African women at many levels. This is because it forces Africans to take stock of whatever it is we call Africa, examine how that entity relates with the category woman. This is a contentious issue because it engages the nerve centers of the race, class and gender of power, its creation and distribution. In ‘Beyond Determinism: The Phenomenology of African Female Existence’ Bibi Bakare Yusuf (2001) documents a visibly highly charged debate amongst African feminists on this issue. It is between two camps - the ‘African women and patriarchy’ - Mcfadden, Afonja and Ogundipe versus the ‘Dual Sex Roles’ - Nzegwu, Oyewumi and Surdakasa (Bakare Yusuf 2001: 1, 3).
The debate is so heated that a new scholar like me can easily be confused which theoretical framework to use in African feminist research and analysis. Listening to voices of the actual women themselves, could be of great helpful. Fortunately, African literature provides a channel that directly links one with African women writers. Their work is credible because they are increasingly using the self referentiality technique in their narratives. It is for that reason that this paper engages the narratives of Adichie and Dangarembga. This talk will focus on Purple Hibiscus and Nervous Conditions. I argue that Adichie and Dangarembga portrayal of African female oppression calls for a classed, anti and decolinised reading of the African woman question. Their portrayal of the oppression of the African woman centers on patriarchy, globalizing and glocalising it as a complex and fluid concept, one that mutates and reinvents itself when need be.

Credibility of the voices of African Women Writers

The writers engaged by this paper assert that they draw a lot of their writing from their real life experiences. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson (1993) Tsitsi Dangarembga emphasizes that she not only uses her life experiences, she aims to bring out the reality of women characters in the
context she is dealing with. When Wilkinson asks if the women characters become her careful constructions of reality, she replies ‘exactly’ and goes on to add:

I think it's very difficult to separate constructions from reality and even to understand which way the influences were working, whether the constructions were working on the reality or vice versa. So I think the question which you're asking me, as far as I understand or can interpret it, refers actually to the process of writing. How much of your real experience do you reproduce as real experience, and how much do you mold your experience into a theme or an ideology? To answer that question with respect to *Nervous Conditions*, I would say that the one thing I was very concerned with was to leave a very real taste of life during the times that I grew up (311).

In order to fully appreciate the position that this paper takes, brief synopses\(^2\) of the texts under discussion would be helpful.

**Brief Synopses**

*Nervous Conditions* (1988) (Tsitsi Dangarembga) is set in Rhodesia of the 1960s. Tambudzai, sometimes referred to as Tamba, is a young girl from

\(^2\) All references to these texts made in this paper, refer to the versions stated in the synopses.
the rural areas. She is the daughter of Jeremiah and Mainini. This narrative takes place at the end of UDI times, just when Rhodesia is getting its independence. It chronicles the patriarchal trial and tribulations of five women.

*Purple Hibiscus* (2003) (Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie) is the coming of age story of Kambili, the daughter of Eugene and Beatrice, an African elite family. The reader meets Kambili as a voiceless, petrified young girl who is completely loyal to her father. She then finds voice, grows on the reader as she starts showing signs of sprouting self and sexual identity. Jaja, her brother exhibits a familial and Afrocentric character.

Although the oppression of the primary and secondary characters of these narratives stems from various sources, it is patriarchy and colonialism that form the spine of the sources. These two factors work together in a dialectic relationship that oppresses many female characters from birth into adulthood up to old age, in private and public spaces, at individual and collective levels. These writers pivot their narratives on a young girl’s perspective, tracing her oppression from a young age. Dangarembga’s Tambudzai is a prime example.

*Definition of patriarchy

*Double patriarchy*
Both writers are to the left of African feminism – a Fanonian reading of the woman question, anti-colonial, decolonial and classed reading of the woman question. Centering double patriarchy and its pivotal role in Black African female oppression

Dangarembga – western organized education, urban rural space black African female oppression

Adichie – patriarchy of western organized and African religion and the nationalist project

Both writers
How patriarchy works
Process – law, system of logic of national and gender identity, power and control
- punishment and reward system
- definition of recognized, acceptable personhood
- starts and reinforced at domestic space, spreading outside home and familial environment – to state and official business space
- retrenched by women, efficient gatekeepers are women
- introduced from early age, internalized and performed in public
- Family and marriage

Both show how patriarchy works through
- vertical and horizontal violence – father, mother daughter relationships
- Marriage and family as institution and practice
- Western organized education and religion – as institution and practice
- indigenous education and religion
- buttressed by global capitalism, colonialism and neo-colonialism
- African feminist agency amidst those oppressive spaces

Major differences – Adichie uses a rich educated Black African young girl, Dangarembga steers her interrogation from the stand point of a rural soon to be urbanized Black African girl
Adichie – patriarchy of religion
Dangarembga – education and language
Use of the word feminism, radical feminism in this African setting African context

**Dangarembga’s double patriarchy**

Mainly seen through Tambu - The African Rural Patriarchy how is it constructed?

Source of her oppression

Father

Brother

Uncle

Definition of female and male personhood and authority in her family

Role of women as mothers and wives.

Male privileging in feeding, marriage as an institution and definition of personhood, feeding order.

Familial, from father to daughter, husband to wife, community and family hierarchy with patriarch as low giver

The colonial form of patriarchy - Tambu sees Nyasha and Maiguru

How the two are interwoven, authoring and entrenching female oppression – river Nyamarira.

Who understands how patriarchy works and battles it more sustainably
Lower class, rural woman have more potential – difference between rural and urban Tambu and Lucia

Both writers destroy the discourses that pathologises African men as patriarchal by nature, shows that patriarchy is a social construction that one can outgrow, never believe in and work to destroy – Father Amadi and Mr Matimba.

Women own the cause


The exile.

Potential of rural, illiterate low class women like Lucia and

Woman as a varied category – not a homogenous group, there are educated women, they have challenges.

Main Points

Colonial and African patriarchy – McFadden, Ogundipe versus

Dual Sex Roles – Oyewumi and Nzegwu

Definition of patriarchy

Credibility of African women

Self referentiality

Nervous Conditions

Tambudzai – father, uncle, brother

Colonialism, environment (river nyamarira) and women

Feminization of poverty – local men and colonial men

Nyasha - alienation, space of splitting
A reply to the debate on African patriarchy

Intimate role in female oppression

African women have agency

Process – father and daughter relationship

Adichie – the patriarchy of the African nationalist project
  - western organized religion

Dangarembga – familial patriarchy
  - western organized education
  - urban space

Thank The committee – a team I would like to thank heartily for working diligently to get me here

Professor Moeketsi for inviting me.