

# Disabling Sexualities: Embodiments of a Colonial Past

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**ABSTRACT:** Disability studies in postcolonial Africa appear circumscribed by two significant paradoxes. First, there is the abysmally low legislative, political and infrastructural support for persons living with disabilities. The second paradox which seems to amplify the first is that there is a palpable silence on disability discourses in African literary debates; a possible indication of some of the prejudices that underwrite the positions of persons with disabilities.

In addition, African identities have been inexorably altered by the imbalances in the power relations of the colonial experience and some fictional representations of the disequilibrium of the Empire/colony interface illustrate how people can be differently constructed and disabled by privileged and normative discourses.

Thus, the emergent patterns of bodily dismemberment in African subjects are, in this essay, read as thematic and, in a paradoxical sense as aesthetic motifs of Empire's systemic deconstruction and disarticulation of the colonised. This essay examines the twin subjects of disability and sexuality as both culturally defined yet individually embodied semiotic representations of postcolonial subjects. Giving examples from the novels of Tsitsi Dangarembga, which are set within the socio-political context of postcolonial Zimbabwe, this essay critically examines the novelist's character portraiture. In our analyses, we largely deploy critical tools from disability studies in an attempt to demonstrate how the political resonances of their lived experiences are inscribed into African bodies and how these historically differentiated bodies become fractured and simultaneously reconstructed.

**KEYWORDS:** Sexuality, disability, African fiction, reconstructing bodies, Tsitsi Dangarembga



*The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it. And that was the problem. (Tsitsi Dangarembga, 1988, 118)*

This study originates from an observable dearth of critical discourse on the twin problematic of African sexuality and disability in African literary debates. So far, critical debates on these twin issues have been visibly dominated by international research/studies thus, mostly excluding the critical voices of African scholars. Yet, even in a cursory, most rudimentary examination of African literary representations, there is indisputable evidence that complex issues pertaining to disability, sexuality, gender roles and functions are often foregrounded in the midst of other profoundly engaging thematic preoccupations. For instance, Soyinka's depiction of Eleshin Oba's piquant sexual appetites just before his ominous encounter with death in the play, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) has portentous personal and communal reverberations. Similarly, Aminata Sow-Fall, in her slim but revolutionary novel: *The Beggars' Strike or the Dregs of Society* (1981) foregrounds profound conflicts between the talibés or the dregs of the society: the disabled beggars who in a neoliberal capitalist state eager to attract foreign tourists, now constitute a public nuisance. Although that novel interrogates disability issues as it intersects with foundational aspects of the ethics and theology of Islam on the one hand, as well as environmental health issues on the other, it has often been traditionally viewed as a vigorous engagement with Feminist or Marxist ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Also, numerous other African writers imaginatively create disability and sexuality as intertwined discourses yet, in spite of their centrality in both human existence and experience; these discourses are only beginning to emerge from shrouds of superstition and mythology in need of theorisation from the perspectives of African realities, histories, and imaginaries.

In following Bolt (2012, 287) this article attempts to negotiate the palpable 'critical avoidance' that appear to dodge the issues of disability and sexuality in African literary debates. Also, by centralising a specific African locus in a temporal postcolonial moment, the essay calls attention to the disabling politics of particular African, historical and cultural experiences and their impact on the construction of African subjectivities in literary representations. Therefore, in the subsequent

conflation of bodies emerging from such experiences, it becomes pertinent to investigate how the varied interactions of bodies—white/black/brown, male/female, and able/disabled (visible/invisible) are counterpoised and constructed. This then helps us to reconsider the interconnections between identity, embodiment, sexuality and oppression. Moreover, it corroborates Garland-Thomson's position in an early yet important study on disability studies, in which she submits that 'disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body: a system that produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies' (2001, 1). And an important critical question that evolves from this position is: what are the indices for differentiation and how are these powerfully inscribed into people's anatomy within and across cultures? In an attempt to understand these issues, it is instructive to expand the base understanding of disability which extends beyond the mere personal/individual, medical pathologies of human incapacities and limitations. Indeed, there is every indication that suggests that African identities and their embodiments have been inexorably altered by the imbalances in the power relations of the colonial experience. And the fictional representations of some African writers, including Tsitsi Dangarembga, who capture the disequilibrium of the Empire/colony interaction, illustrate how people can be differently constructed and disabled by privileged and normative discourses.

Consequently, this essay calls attention to the intense processes of exclusionary and oppressive marginalisation endemic in colonised societies which are significantly relevant to the processes of creating disabled bodies within the African experience. Thus, the inclusion of conversations or perspectives from other cultural locations of the world invites us to more profound and incisive ways of understanding disability issues. Such cultural narratives underscore the call of cultural theorists such as Whyte and Ingstad (1995) who emphasize the need to culturally localise perceptions of disability. Thus, disability studies helps in understanding our cultures and vice-versa.

In the animated discourses of both sexuality and disability, the body remains the central focal point and this is starkly stated in Snyder and Mitchell's (2011, 10) argument that 'embodiment is a potentially meaningful materiality, a locus of identification'. Following this position in the context of the present discussion means that various bodies depending on which side of the power divide they belong, can be read as scripts which articulate different stories because underlying

the Snyder/Mitchell argument are assumptive paradigms implicit in the definitions of personhood, the politics of identity formation and construction, and the valuational bases of appearances. How then are certain bodies constructed as normative and others which fall outside this norm are the 'Other' and how do disabled bodies navigate normativity? Also, how is sexuality redefined by disability and vice-versa? The example of several homophobic African societies and their pervasive normative masculinist ideologies, which have often been used to police and oppress aspects of women's lives and sexuality are culpable in this regard. Essentially, such societies use the male-equals-power logic in which hegemonic masculinity authorises, transcends and significantly sign-posts all others. Thus, while female African bodies and sexuality are often, sites for the contestation, articulation and negotiation of power, male bodies are politically, socially, and culturally authorised by their ascendant position as the defining powers evolving into what has been profoundly described as 'a national-masculine tradition which provided the pivotal signposts of identity formation ...' (Jeyifo, 2004, xvii).

However, In spite of this masculine ethos, African women signal their agency by exploiting various aspects of their sexuality to their advantage and this is expressed in the counter-narratives they produce in which they challenge and destabilise social and sexual stereotypes especially about women. This has been most powerfully inscribed into the growing corpus of writings by female African writers since the close of the twentieth century and continuing into the present time. As journalists, activists, novelists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, children's literature writers from all over the continent, these women poignantly narrate their agency as illustrated in the prose fiction tradition of female Nigerian writers including Lola Shoneyin and Chika Unigwe, Cameroonian, Calixthe Beyala, Zimbabwean writers Petina Gappah and Tsitsi Dangarembga among several others.

## Framing the African experience

Although several studies already subsist on Dangarembga's novels and her preoccupation with postcolonial (Boehmer, 2005, 222) and gender debates, it is only recently that disability discourse in her work began to gain ground. One of the most recent studies in this regard is Barker's (2011) seminal study which examines the concept of the 'exceptional' child-protagonist in several postcolonial fictive narra-

tions including *Nervous Conditions*. And whereas Barker's study concentrates on the important element of the child-protagonist, this essay takes a more expansive critical standpoint by centralising both disability and sexuality issues in the young and adult characters in Dangarembga's novels. Also, applying one of Quayson's (2007) nine typologies in his landmark work to their study, Gorman and Udegbe forcibly argue that through the use of disabled women's' bodies as tropes in post-colonial African writing, there is the creation of 'catharsis' which serves to 'erase' or 'suppress' the knowledge of the violence of (neo) colonial relations (Gorman and Udegbe, 2010, 310). However, the trajectory of this essay pays critical attention to both male and female characters in the novels in an attempt to come to a fuller understanding of African identities as altered/reconstructed by colonialism. Also, rather than erasure or suppression as seen in the Gorman-Udegbe work, this paper further demonstrates the graphic foregrounding of the violence engendered by the coloniser/colonised relations and as the bodies of the characters are systematically dismembered, their sense of wholeness and wellness become proportionally diminished. This furthers Quayson's position as he observes in his study that, "it is the body itself in its naked corporeality that is at the heart of social and political nervousness in real life" (Quayson, 2007, 204). In other words, the body is a central or critical nodal point in the wide spectrum of discourses on disability. However, people do not exist in isolation. Disability issues within the coloniser/colonised structure also provoke profound ethical contestations some of which Meekosha (2008) in a materialist reading of these relations calls attention to. Meekosha notes for instance, the fact that the processes of colonialism, neo-colonialism, postcolonialism evoked by the north (metropole) have resulted in vast numbers of impaired people in the global south. She insists that the material figuration of this disjuncture are directly or indirectly the aftermath of the struggle for resource control; mineral, oil and economic resources therefore, calling for a paradigmatic shift in the discourses emanating from the north in order to arrest the form of "scholarly colonialism" it is provoking (Meekosha, 2008, 3). Thus, disability seems accentuated in both novels considered in this essay as they are read within the material figuration of skewed power structures.

All of these taken together inform our considerations of *Nervous Conditions* (1988), and *The Book of Not* (2006). The first novel is a young girl's story, Tambudzai's – of the adult world she keenly observes. From the sensibilities of the

child protagonist, we encounter a plurality of experiences of several other kinswomen and their struggles to redefine themselves within the context of the overwhelming masculinist Shona culture. As the plot unfolds, the colonial experience seems to disrupt and remap all the characters—male and female—in economic, material and psychological terms. In the sequel, *The Book of Not*, Tambu begins to confront, first-hand, the complexities of life in post-independent Rhodesia. As a young student in the prestigious Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, she begins to feel more acutely the contradictions she had always felt in the first novel, but which she learns to suppress in order not to incur the ire of her uncle and benefactor, Babamukuru. Taken together both novels engage with the destabilising resonances in the body and psyche of colonised people as the author interrogates the problematic constructions of bodily and psychological disabilities and sexualities in a racialised situation.

## Idioms figuring sexuality and disability in Dangarembga's novels

As noted earlier, disability is not necessarily, Dangarembga's immediate or direct preoccupation in both novels. Yet, her novels convulse with characters who suffer various physical, material, emotional and psychological trauma. Immediately striking in the titles of both novels is the highly suggestive, overriding tropes of illness, dis-ease, amputation or disfigurement in physical as well as in psychological terms through which the author creates the tableau for reading disability in the novels. For instance, the title, *Nervous Conditions*, seem to conjure the dis-ease and discomfiture that overrides the experiences of most of the characters in that novel, while *The Book of Not* point to the material and physical deficits encountered as the novel opens.

More than in her first novel, the author situates her second story within even more nightmarish, bloodcurdling violence of a newly independent Rhodesia caught in the vicious struggles of decolonisation. Not only does the second novel open with the bloody dismembering of bodies, Netsai, Tambu's younger sister, in particular, bears in her body the pernicious inscriptions of the guerilla wars that plagued her country as she searches for a national ethos. Much like the first novel, *The Book of Not* opens with a subtraction, this time, the bloody dismembering of

Netsai's leg. With the blowing away of one of her limbs, Netsai is not only disabled, she becomes sexually undesirable. Thus, in spite of her inspiring participation in the freedom effort, Netsai's beautiful and youthful body is sadly misshapen by the violence of the *Chimurenga*. With a body misshapen, Netsai's sexuality is deconstructed and she suffers emotional rejection by her lover, the un-named soldier. At this point of disillusion and with her star-spangled dreams completely evaporated, Netsai finally seeks the reconstruction of her body, perhaps hopeful it may become once again attractive. Dangarembga thus, deftly locks Netsai's experience as thematic and aesthetic trope with that of her nation as both limp on in a delusional walk to freedom.

The Chimurenga wars of Zimbabwe tragically interrupt and deeply wound other characters and as Tambu recalls in *The Book of Not*: 'To the scars of war were added the complications of Independence', (2006, 198). Caught in the traumas of these bloody armed conflicts, Tambu is forced to pick her way through the human debris of her family members in an attempt to make a head way with her own life. The memories of their twisted bodies causes deep psychological trauma for her and she keeps perseverating on this scene not only as she returns to the second year at the Convent, but also later in her adult life. For Tambu, her own disability is both intellectual and emotional; and ultimately material. Unable to surpass the initial brilliance and potential of her O-level grades, she is not able to distinguish herself in any career path, a position she finds both disturbing and disconcerting.

Both novels demonstrate the abject disfigurement of the characters and readers are confronted with an acute sense of the profoundly enervating political processes that alter the identities and sexualities of once colonised people. Thus, disability is not only centralised as thematic motif, it works also as paradoxical aesthetic motif in Dangarembga's novels. These motifs then become counter-normative dialectic which animates the thematisation, symbolisation and setting of the two novels. In very subtle but clear terms, Dangarembga points to the physical and psychological boundaries as well as to the inherent politics embedded within the expropriatory processes of colonialism. Thus, while the lives of her characters seem to be confined to the dusty, rustic village of Umtali, they all experience in varying degrees of intensity, the divisive spatial and racial nuances of the colonial experience. This creates several forms of mutilation or fragmentation, and as the bodies and minds of her characters are scarred and maimed, their sexuali-

ties and identities are irrevocably altered. And the incisive studies of Fanon (1965)<sup>2</sup> and Scarry (1985) provide incontrovertible evidence of the systematic processes of disabling African subjects in the colonial project. The novels thus illustrate the links that exist between the scarred bodies of colonised people and their sexuality, which result from the characters' perilous navigations of the backdrop between colonial domination, Shona patriarchy and other socio-economic burdens of the newly-independent Zimbabwean nation. This is particularly so when situated within the 2004 World Health Organization's definition that sexuality 'is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social economic, political, historical factors' (quoted in Ilkkaracan and Jolly, 2007, 3).

Scholars, in particular—Dunton (1989), Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), and Chanter (2006)—remark that African women's sexuality has been under-researched and therefore poorly understood, especially because it is under-textualised. Chanter observes, for instance, that following the perpetuation of hyperbolic Eurocentric myths about African women's sexuality, the latter have responded with marked reticence. However, the more recent insightful studies on African sexuality by Azodo and Eke (2007), Falola and House-Soremekun (2011) Tamale (2011) clearly indicate scholarly progression on the subject. Arnfred's (2005) seminal study on African sexualities announce the need to rethink African sexualities beyond the imperium of European/Western racialised imaginaries, which have constructed African sexuality as the curiously 'exotic', the noble and the depraved savage' (Arnfred, 2005, 7). While these images are consistent with the colonialist identification of the African as the 'other', there are other diverse factors including socio-cultural institutions, economic structures, and religious ideologies, which invariably imbri- cate the expression of intimacy as exemplified in Dangarembga's novels.

For instance, Dangarembga's characters seem to relentlessly embody conflictual tensions as they tentatively embrace a newly independent nation state at the initial stages of defining a new national ethos on one hand, and on the other, a significantly different traditional life defined by prejudicial Shona practices. With bodies seemingly torn between these two defining poles, all the characters; male and female, young or old, educated or not are compelled to negotiate these conflicts. In this process, their bodies and psyche become marked and even if they appear mundanely concerned with the routinised exegeses of daily living, their private individual lives connect with larger political, economic and social burdens



as they live in a bind of domination or subordination, presence or absence, escape or entrapment. This corroborates Willey and Treiber's (2002) observations that:

Dangarembga not only demonstrates that nationalism and colonialism collude with patriarchy in particularly damaging ways for women, but also insists that African theories of nationalism need to be rethought from the perspective of gender (Willey and Treiber, 2002, xiii).

It is precisely within the framework of their interactions within socially prescribed gender roles and functions that we encounter the process of disabling sexualities in Dangarembga's characters which informs Tambu's innermost turmoil captured in the reflective statement in the epitaph to this essay.

Tambudzai embarks on telling several interconnected stories that imbricate with her own personal life-story in the two novels. Thus, the reader encounters a collage of stories of several individual life stories of women, often set in contrastive relief to accentuate the oppositional differences they embody. This often results in a plurality of standpoints which is *de rigueur* in postmodern feminist narrative tradition. For example, the lives of all the women seem to oscillate around the central figure of Babamukuru, the embodiment of Shona tradition and patriarchy. As the central unifying figure in the novels, Baba totally conforms to the image of the 'good boy' that the colonisers have of him (*Nervous Conditions* 19). But Dangarembga parodies Baba's complete, unquestioning acceptance of the missionaries' teachings. In his total conformity, Baba's mind seems disabled. He becomes robotic, not challenging the racist ideology of the colonisers thus, remaining benign even when he perceives their oppression. Take, for instance, his insistence that his brother, Jeremiah, should 'properly' marry Mainini in the Christian tradition of the missionaries, a proposition that not only draws the fatal ire of Mainini; it also sends her health spiraling downwards.

In her narrations, except for the visibly, physically marked bodies of Nyasha and Netsai, all the other characters seem (at least, initially) able-bodied yet, they all seem to be crucially disabled at defining points in their development. In *Nervous Conditions*, for instance, Tambudzai's existence, education, destiny and even sexuality are predetermined and almost entirely contingent upon Nhamo's, her privileged brother's life within Shona cultural mores. No wonder as Yvonne Vera

notes, Tambu opens the narration with a taboo in her mouth because right from the onset, Tambu's life seems to be disabled by Nhamo's existence. This somewhat substantiates Garland-Thomson's (2001) observation that previous conceptual traditions see the woman's body in terms of a negation or subtraction of the man's. Thus the author's two novels dramatise the various experiences of different women in a society in which women's 'needs and sensibilities' are neither a 'priority nor even legitimate' (NC: 12). Therefore, beyond the sexism that circumscribes the lives of the women, there is, additionally, the ontological contestation for legitimisation and recognition by Dangarembga's women which graphically unfolds in Tambu's mind.

All the female characters in both novels suffer various kinds of sexual mutilations. Thus, unable to find full sexual expression and satisfaction in their relationships; they seem to live incomplete lives. For example, Mainini appears sex-less, unable to shed the enervating threefold yoke of poverty, racism and gender discrimination throughout her life. Mainini's portraiture contrasts with that of Maiguru, her educated and sophisticated sister-in-law, who, despite the advantage of her education and sophistication, is unable to sexually attract and sustain the attention of her husband, Babamukuru, who is now enraptured in a banal, routinised life of head at the mission school in Umtali. Her education does not elevate Maiguru beyond the dilapidated confines of Mainini's decrepit kitchen where she laboriously ensures that the food her husband provides last throughout the festive season in Umtali. Maiguru sacrifices everything she has worked for to satisfy sexist cultural traditions, taking the back seat where her society expects her to be. In a complexly sustained relationship with her husband, Maiguru's self-erasure is substantial; possibly leading to her atrophic existence. It is therefore little wonder that she often finds herself at the edge of collapse, but rather than collapse as Mainini does, she walks away.

Set in contrast to these older women is Aunt Lucia, Mainini's younger sister, who seems to have a lusty sensuality and sexuality that notoriously oscillates between Jeremiah and Tekesure. Lucia remains one of the bravest women in the *Nervous Conditions* by openly confronting patriarchy. This occurs at the *dare*, the council of men [which include Aunty Gladys on account of her age]<sup>1</sup> who gather to discuss their concerns for Lucia's rambunctious flirtations with two men in the family. However, underlying the surreptitious agenda of the *dare* is an attempt to

control or police what they consider as Lucia's transgressive sexual appetites from their own normative perspective. Unlike the other *maininis* who keep a safe distance from the *dare*, Lucia singularly and openly confronts and defies the authority and diktat of the patriarchs who seek to restrain and therefore 'normalize' her sexuality precisely because Lucia's sexual agency is seen as potentially disruptive. But by disrupting the normalising script of traditionalism the *dare* seeks to impose on her sexuality, Lucia is able to negotiate for herself liberation. Lucia's constestatory disposition connects her with her niece, Tambu, whose posture sets her in sharp contrast with her uncle. Unlike Babamukuru who is a conformist, Tambu and Aunt Lucia are both deviants; they reject the fatal atavism of their foremothers and defy the cultural structures and ideologies which privilege maleness and proscribe women's lives to minimalist spaces. In their relationships and interactions, both the protagonist and Aunt Lucia are distinctively, thematically and symbolically, in opposition to the other women who appear resigned to the prescriptions of an overbearing patriarchal society.

The riveting story of *The Book of Not* is on the boarding house experiences of young African girls at the prestigious Convent. At the Convent, the physical separation of the dormitories as well as the unspoken actions and attitudes of the nuns; their benign generosity clearly delimits the boundaries of the young black girls. In this atmosphere, Tambu is unable to distinguish herself. She is disturbed that in spite of the opportunity and the promise of her brilliant O-level results, she fails, dismally, to surpass that initial potential. The overwhelming experience of racism is for the young Tambu too profound, almost surreal. She therefore survives by recalling and trying to abide by the *Unhu* philosophy as a personal strategy to cope with life on the fringes. The agonizing experience with the white, elderly matron-in-charge at the Twiss Hotel, Mrs. May, is another example. Curiously misnaming Tambu, persistently calling her Isabel poignantly signals for Tambu, a negation of her personal identity which is unbearable. It seems that in the imagination of Mrs. May, Tambu is no more than 'an undifferentiated lump of flesh' (a non-being) which is perhaps more grievous to Tambu than the misnaming. Mrs. May's thoughts about Tambu, therefore, force a voyeuristic contemplation of the young girl's vibrant adolescent body as a site of negation and embarrassment. And this is bizarre as it incredulously signals Tambu's inferiorisation and defeminisation on account of her race, class and gender. At this point in her young adolescence,

Tambu experiences the intensity of a life at the centre of exclusion in which she becomes soldered to scenarios, a part of undistinguished humanity. Like sister Emanuel at the Convent, Mrs. May completely erases Tambu's humanity and personhood as she is considered no more than a piece of flesh; pointing to the devaluation and dehumanisation of the colonised female subject.

## Castrated masculinities

Possibly because of her woman-centered agenda, in her two novels, Dangarembga's portraiture of her male characters is not as elaborate as those of her female characters. Rather, the author presents images of men who are deeply scarred and this is possibly, symptomatic of the crises of the strong autochthonous masculinist tradition that pervades African culture and literary texts. Dangarembga's male characters appear ineffectual and ultimately incapacitated in the face of compelling socio-political and sometimes economic forces they have to contend with. Other female African writers including Emecheta, Darko, and El Saadawi, create tropes of disabled masculinities to represent their radical, ideological and aesthetic departure from a failed masculine ethos. These authors therefore repeatedly represent images of men as weaklings, often emasculated caricatures. The import of this representation is, thus, more clearly understood when considered within a conceptual milieu where men's bodily or physical performance is crucial. Thus, while disability may point up one's vulnerability and dependence, masculinity is associated with power, prowess and being in control. Dangarembga's portrayal of disabled masculinities illustrates a contradiction that creates what Shakespeare (1999, 57) describes as "symbolic castration" both a lived and embodied dilemma for disabled men.

It is important, however, to note Barrett's (2014, 39) suggestion that it has become orthodoxy to decenter a single, static masculinity in which there is no fixed, essential masculine identity. This suggests that there are varied forms of masculinities and that men would generally variously negotiate their gendered identities in an intensely personal/individual and private level. For instance, the young boys, Nhamo and Chido, in the novels, appear only very briefly in Dangarembga's narration; appearing as mere silhouettes in contrast to the strong character representation of their sisters. Nhamo, for instance, is quickly deleted from the first

narrative while Chido, Nyasha's older brother, appears completely overshadowed by his father's strong mien and high aspirations for his son who is expected to carry on family (or perhaps more accurately, Shona traditions. Chido's pallor is further accentuated as he is intellectually unable to engage with the strong currents of his sister, Nyasha's vibrant mind. Thus, the early textual absence of these young boys signals their inability to generate an alternative discourse to counter the failed, masculinist master-narrative of contemporary African societies of the older generation represented by their father or uncle..

The other men in the novels also appear to reinforce the slight portraiture of the young boys. For instance, there is the insignificant, un-named soldier, Netsai's lover in *The Book of Not*. There is also Jeremiah, and his brigand companion, Tekesure, who are both pitiable caricatures. Their image is structured as thematic and aesthetic opposition to Babamukuru's, the avatar of Shona values and patriarchal culture. The ableist script Baba represents and his normalising symbol and image of resilience, strength, achievement and staid demeanor is however completely overturned by the end of the second novel.

In a final twist of irony, Babamukuru is charged with being a "collaborator" at the *morari*—a village political rally. This takes place in the full glare of his entire family to drive home the humiliation. Here, Baba is physically assaulted and publicly stripped of his revered invincibility. In this scene, Mainini seizes the opportunity of the debacle and vents her seething anger and suspicion on the family head who represents to her the image of the colonial oppressor. In its figural sense, this experience is for Babamukuru, a process of castration from which he never fully recovers physically and psychologically. His personal, tragic emasculation suggestively occurs on the eve of Rhodesia's political independence. Baba's subsequent confinement to the wheelchair, in a supine position operates symbolically to effectively disable him from emerging as a new national icon in the new Zimbabwe.

## Conclusion

The above discussions demonstrate that disability inevitably cuts across the many boundaries of gender, sex, class, race, and age as illustrated in the two novels considered here. Particularly in African postcolonial literature, there are discursive links between gender, disability and national identity. It is therefore important to

read disability as integral to the theorisation of the colonised body. Within this conceptual frame, we see how the veridical processes of the event differently mark postcolonial subjectivities. Dangarembga's African characters irredeemably embody various vulnerabilities and disabilities as a result of the virulent interracial relations inflicted upon them by the event of colonialism and in their national and familial relations, these characters are left with transmogrified bodies. Interestingly, Dangarembga does not merely explore the pathologization of colonial subjectivities; she explores in and through them the psycho-emotional impact of various disabilities resulting from that experience as most virulently seen in the deformed bodies of Netsai, Nyasha, Maiguru and Babamukuru.

Also, in centralising the politics of their existence and politicizing the physical and psychological disfigurement of her characters, Dangarembga translates their nightmarish experience of the colonial past into their present, equally traumatic state. In other words, inscribed into the physical bodies of the characters are the ghoulish scars as memorabilia of the colonial experience and its narrative tropes of violence. Additionally, by focusing on the sexualities of her characters, we see how their lives are materially and psychologically inscribed with negations or fragmentations often resulting in the loss of their sexual appetites and identities.

As consistently depicted in her two novels, Dangarembga's African women appear defeminised by severe socio-cultural, political, economic and patriarchal prejudices. To this extent, as they lose their sexuality they also lose their self-defining potential and they are in constant struggle between self-effacement and self-definition. It however seems that Aunt Lucia is the one exception who does not allow Shona traditional prejudices redefine her. Lucia thus embodies a free spirit and is able to finally make some progression however marginal. She emerges unscathed; insulated from the problematics of a nascent, post-independence life in a tottering nation. Appearing as a beacon on the horizon having gained at least a basic education, it would seem that the author points to the latent potential in Lucia as key to the process of recovery at both national and individual levels.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See for instance Nwabueze Joe Obianuju in 'Human Rights Echoes in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars Strike* 1995 *Neohelicon*.22:1, 295–310 And more recently, Chioma C Opara 'Drama of Power: Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars Strike* in (Eds.) Chikwenye Okonjo

Ogunyemi and Tuzyline Jita Allan *Twelve Best Books by African women: critical readings* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2009) 161–176.

- <sup>2</sup> Fanon's well documented treatise on the subject of the disorders in the psyche of the colonised subject as the victim of colonialism especially in his Chapter 5 of *The Wretched of the Earth* provides substantial evidence of crippling monstrosities of that tragic event.

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