

**Course Name: The Novel and Change**

**Professor Name: Dr. Avishek Parui**

**Department Name: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Institute Name: IIT Madras**

**Week – 11**

**Lecture 54**

Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* - Part 5

Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course titled *The Novel and Change*. We are looking at Tsitsi Dangaremba's novel *Nervous Conditions*, particularly in relation to the colonial missionary presence in the novel and how it affects different forms of identity iterations, social and personal agency and of course the psychological conditions. Now if you remember where we stopped last time, we looked at the intersections between the enabling narrative offered by the colonial missionary presence and how at the same time it is also collusive as an inspiration to earth-wide forms of patriarchy and patriarchal control. And this intersectionality is really important for us to observe and interpret because it really determines much of the characters plights especially the female subject plights and predicaments in the novel. Now we looked at the particular character Nyasha and how her oppression, how her feeling of marginalization is enabled in many ways by the patriarchal structures which were further consolidated by the colonial you know missionary presence. But at the same time paradoxically the questions that she is asking, the transgressive questions, the transgressive forms that she is trying to embody. It also happened because it also could take place because their exposure was sort of accentuated by her exposure to different forms of education and there is a subtextual reference to D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a transgressive text and how that corresponds to Nyasha's position in *Dengar Ember's* novel. So, we just continue from that point, and this should be on your screen. So Nyasha's problems center on her concern for issues of integrity, identity, and the exposure of hypocrisy. and are contingent upon her marginal and privileged position, right. So again, this really interesting interplay of marginality and privilege, of marginalization and privilege because she is privileged as someone who belongs to

Babamukuru's family, Babamukuru being this absolute success story from the colonial missionary position. At the same time, she is marginal because within that family in an intra-familial way, she is seen as someone transgressive, she is seen as someone who is potentially problematic, right. So, therein lies the dual ambivalence about being both marginalized and privileged.

Tambudzai, though, exists in a double bind configured by a very different set of social circumstances. She cannot dismiss as easily in Nyasha the material weight the poverty that she has known since birth. So again, this legacy of poverty, this spectral presence of poverty is something that Tambudzai is acutely aware of, right, and that is something which keeps haunting her in a very psychological, nervous, almost traumatic reputation kind of way. So, Tambudzai has also suffered acutely from the patriarchal and even misogynist aspects of Shona culture that favor her brother, legitimize his persecution and place firm restrictions on viable options for the future, right. So, again the whole idea of patriarchy and misogyny which are directed against the woman of course Tambudzai and Nyasha. Then the two obvious targets, they do the obvious things which is sort of favouring the male child of the family, legitimising the different forms of oppression enacted by the male child and of course finally restricting many opportunities of growth, professional as well as existential growth for the woman, for the female subjects which get increasingly restricted in quality and scope. So, education at the mission for her is initially an absolute and unquestionable ideal. So, this is where the ambivalence about the colonial mission or the colonial missionary institution really comes into being. So at the outset, at the beginning, at a very superficial level, it seems an absolute mantra, the absolute ticket to emancipation, the shortcut to elevation, the shortcut to social upliftment and as an absolute unquestionable ideal. You cannot question it at any level.

It offers both a means of escape from repetitious labour at home and an opportunity for a more comfortable lifestyle. So, I talked about how the economy of anxiety and aspiration is something which is you know almost recursively present in different forms and different combinations and across post-colonial societies which are new nation states. At the same time they are ancient civilizations, right. So, there is that quality. We talked about this

extensively when we read, for instance, R K Narayan's *The Guide*, right, and how *The Guide* becomes really interesting text which offers this interplay of anxiety and aspiration, right. Now, in a very different context, through very different markers, through very different psychological nervous conditions, we have a similar economy of anxiety and aspirations in Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*, which is at a level of time, the level of historical moment is comparable to the guide, R K Narayan's novel. course a very very very different geopolitical context. This is Zimbabwe which is emerging from Rhodesia and of course the guide is India you know sort of newly liberated aspirational India right. So, but we have structures of anxiety, structures of aspiration entangled with each other in both the novels. So, there is that, you know, emancipatory promise which is often designed and dished out by the missionary presence, you know, some kind of emancipation from the repetitive labour at home and the opportunity to sort of get into a very comfortable lifestyle.

So, though it becomes available but only after the death of her brother, Tambudzai seizes upon the occasion with great joy. So, only when the death of the brother happens, she is seen as the next child in the line. So, she gets access, the opportunity to access the colonial missionary education. While the novel endorses the value of education, it also shows that that Mainini was persient in a maternal ambivalence, prescient sorry, present in a maternal ambivalence about its potential results. So, there is this figure of Mainini who has suffered obviously at the hands of patriarchy, who continues to suffer in the novel and she does not really endorse, she does not really subscribe to an uncritical emancipatory view of the colonial mission, the colonial education. Rather, she has a mistrust, she has a suspicion, she has an ambivalent attitude towards it, which turns out to be quite prophetic in many ways. So, Tambudzai gradually comes to realize that benefaction is blunting the critical faculties so finely developed in her as a child. More self-aware, she begins to think of herself as caught in a debt of gratitude to one that she learns to distrust. So, there is that, this is why you realize why the novel is called *Nervous Conditions* because there is this really asymmetric mix of so many different emotions. The emotional economy in the novel is so confusing and so messy in so many ways. There is gratitude, but it quickly translates into distrust. You are grateful to someone you do not trust. So, who the person you are grateful to is also someone who can potentially harm you, right. So therein lies the

traumatic condition, the nervous condition, the neurotic condition really that a novel is dramatizing. So even the education that her uncle has provided carries its own ideological burden, right? So, education obviously at one level is supposed to be emancipatory, supposed to give her upliftment, perhaps a professional position.

At the same time, it comes with its own ideological burden. It comes with its own ideological clamping in some way. It's both emancipatory as well as confining, imprisoning. This repressed anxiety comes to a head when Baba Mukuru decides that Jeremiah and his wife must be married according to British Christian rites. So, this is a really iconic scene in the novel if you read it, you know there is that image, there is a moment when Baba Mukuru says that well true to Christian traditions, true to the emancipatory educational template that he has received and internalized, he wants to marry off Jeremiah and his wife true Christian rites. So, that would be some kind of a certification that comes from the Christian missionary imperial apparatus. Tambudzai is horrified. The saviour figure that has provided for her so wonderfully is exposed as having feet of clay, right. So, again there is that moment of de-deification that is happening over here and that is the moment of shock, the moment of revelation, the moment of illumination which is actually one of horror really, right. It is interesting to compare this with obviously very different but in a similar sentimental structural way to what happens in Heart of Darkness, the moment of horror that Kurtz realizes that his entire ideal of European enlightenment, entire ideal of European knowledge system is actually completely collusive with the purest forms of brutality, the purest forms of terrorization, the purest forms of exploitation and therein lies the horror in a heart of darkness, that moment of absolute disgust and shock and rejection of something you cannot reject anymore because it's part of who you are.

So, Tambudzai here is also horrified in a very similar way because Babamukuro is someone who is seen as this absolute poster boy, the embodiment really of colonial emancipation and someone who is non-regressive, someone who is progressive in a way that is unthinkable. But at the same time he realized that you know the entire thing comes at a cost and of course the cost is this absolute subservience to other systems of control, other systems of coercion. So, she fears for her own status as a child born out of wedlock.

So again, this is a very interesting moral angle which comes in the story that someone who is born out of wedlock is seen as a fallen child, as someone out of a fallen relationship with a fallen, with fallen human beings as per the, you know, very traditional Christian norms because it's not legalized, it's not solemnized as it were through a Christian ritual. So, born out of wedlock over here becomes obviously a morally relativistic way, a relativistic perspective of looking at this situation. And of course, what happens is she believes that this act is an affront to the dignity of her parents, right. So, Jeremiah and his wife who ought to be solemnized right now, failing which their union is seen as unholy. Of course, their progeny is seen as unholy. And of course, Tambudzai over here, she faces a sense of shame. And of course, what we see in terms of shame is a very relative sentiment. The shame emerges from a certain discursive position. The fact that you are not solemnized, you are not the entire marriage is not seen as sanctimonious enough because it hasn't gone through the vocabulary and the ritual, the template of Christianity as part of the mechanism of the missionary presence is seen as something which causes Tambudzai a great sense of shame. So, unable to articulate these thoughts, her body itself becomes inert, enacting a mute resistance that forms yet another of the nervous conditions that the novel probingly explores. Now, I might have said this before, but I will say it one more time. One of the reasons why this novel is so brilliant and so radical is because it really resists any form of trauma representation through a monumental structure, through a public structure, through a circulatable structure, right.

Instead, the entire trauma model, the entire trauma representation in this novel is interiorized, is inward looking and it is inside the most intimate domestic liminal spaces, right. What happens in this particular passage is when Baba Bukuro makes his grand injunction that, you know, unless this marriage is solemnized, this will be seen as an unholy marriage and of course anyone who is born out of wedlock will be seen as an unholy child. And this sense of shame, at the same time the sense of resentment that intertwines and Tambudzai's mind contributes to a nervous condition. And what it does, you know, as wonderfully as this novel explores and depicts, it makes so the production of passivity, the production of numbness which is created by this really awkward intersection of different sentiments of shame, rejection, resentment is part of the nervous condition in Dangaremba's

novel. Now we find that how the psychology in the novel, the psychological nervous conditions in the novel are a fallout in many ways of the different political material discursive designs that get played out to different forms and intersections and convergences. Right. Her uncle is angry, seeing her illness as a deliberate attack on his own position. So again, illness over here, the quote unquote female illness is seen as a threat over here, as a precarious resistance to male authority because illness is interruptive in quality and the interruption caused by illness, created by illness over here is something which makes the uncle angry. So, anger obviously is partly frustration out of the interruption and interruption is dealt with, interruptions done through this sort of creation of illness, the form of illness. So, in response he plays upon a sense of gratitude that is so potent a factor in her self-understanding and renders her vulnerable, right. So again, look at how vulnerability and precariousness and helplessness in a novel is created by so, normally we see gratitude as a positive emotion, as something which is enabling, something which is life-giving, something which is positivizing and uplifting.

But look how gratitude is weaponized in this novel and the weaponization of gratitude done by Baba Makuru of course is used to put the female subject in her place, right. The spatial metaphor over here is not accidental. In her place obviously is a territorializing of authority, a territorializing of confined identities. The female subject must be confined to a certain site, a certain behavioral paradigm, a certain behavioral grammar, behavioral vocabulary, stepping out of which would be seen as an act of transgression, right. So, transgression becomes important over here. But important the immediate thing over here is how the female is, the female subject is territorialized and terrorized and confined to a particular behavioral site through a weaponization of gratitude, a weaponization and manipulation of the emotion of gratitude. So, she is reminded to be thankful. to the patriarchal figure who enabled her emancipation, right. So that obviously takes away or precludes any possibility of questioning the patriarchal authority. So, the scene reveals Dangaramba's dual agenda in the writing of this novel which separates it from Achebe's depiction of similar issues. And now it really gets to this interesting point where we can compare and contrast the two novels in a very complex way where Dangaramba's is offering a very different take on colonization, a very different take on marginalization,

right. So dual agenda of course is the racial agenda, the colonized political subjugation of one race by another race through different forms of benevolence which are also manipulative in quality and of course the other agenda being the gender angle, right. So how the female subject is doubly marginalized because of a location. So, she's concerned with the emotional and psychological effects of patriarchal as much as colonial power upon individual women, right? So, again, this intersection between patriarchy and colonization is not really an intersection because it's how it works. But what's interesting over here, the real intersection here is how pre-colonial forms of patriarchy, pre-colonial forms of, you know, domination of one gender by another gender, you know, they get Philip, you know, different Philip level of vocabulary, the level of legitimization due to colonization, right.

And even the colonial missionary presence is not innocent in this as well. I mean, they are not innocent at all in many ways. But in this particularly, the colonial missionary presence is seen as something which accentuates and aggravates in many ways the marginalizing process through which the female subject is kept in her place, territorialized, terrorized, exploited and manipulated, right. And this is some kind of a gaslighting over here to put in colloquial terms because she is reminded to be grateful and the psychological manipulation that, you know, that precludes any possibility of questioning or subversion or transgression is also plucked into a moral vocabulary of virtue, a moral vocabulary of, you know, benefaction, of giving, of generosity, right, which makes it even more difficult for the female subject to transgress or even question the constructed quality of that template. However, Achebe is conscious of the religious charge implicit in these moral issues which the theoretical preoccupation with ideology as a tool of those in power seems to drain of any pressing relevance in the context of nervous condition. So, this intersection of ideology, gender, the colonial institutions, they all come together to create this really magnificent template in *Nervous Conditions*. So, the *Nervous Conditions* in Dangaremba's novel of course is how the situated suffering subject is depicted and I use the word situated in a very deliberate way. It is the situatedness of the suffering subject which is grammaticalized, which is foregrounded, right. So, the colonial, political, discursive designs in which the subject is embedded, right, in which the subject enacts herself to different forms of oppression, potential transgression and frustration. The confrontation reactivates

Tambudzai's critical consciousness and dispels her illusions about the benign nature of her uncle's magnanimity, right.

So again, magnanimity here is weaponized, gratitude is weaponized and either used to actually you know do away with any possibility of questioning, any possibility of subversion or even interrogation. Nevertheless, she does not follow the path of resistance exemplified by her cousin, as she considers this self-destructive. So this is where Nyasha and Tambudzai are different, right. So Tambudzai's resistance is more complex because it doesn't really go for an iconoclastic subversion the way that Nyasha does. She determines to take up the scholarship offered by the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, aware that a personal and familial price will be exacted as a result of her choice. So again, she finds herself internalizing the institutionalist, the institutional apparatus which is obviously this college, young lady's college of the sacred heart, an absolute you know perfectly prototypical Christianing mission, imperial Christianing mission, right. And the fact that she chooses that obviously makes her really an interesting character because she goes for that kind of a choice rather than an outright rejection, an outright subversion. The novel makes this painfully clear in this direct critique of the racism that informs the Catholic Ron Mission school when Tambudzai and her uncle visit it, right. So, the again intersection of racism and misogyny are quite clear in a visit to that school by Tambudzai and her uncle. So, this really foregrounds I mean Babamukuru of course is a product of similar institutions but at the same time she, he is not absolutely liberate, or absolutely immune to this kind of racism which is, which is sometimes directed in a very casual way, corporate way as well.

So, but the wry humor that retrospectively colors the entire narrative can be read as an authorial endorsement of Tambudzai's decision within the limited range of options available to her, right. So, again this is why I keep on comparing the character Nyasha and Tambudzai over here because Nyasha's version is more direct, more monolithic. perhaps less complex because it was iconoclastic way, because there is consistent subscription to a rejective you know a model of rejection whereas Tambudzai's decision is more, it is a very interesting interplay of being complicit and subversive right. So, she realizes only subversion option possible for her or you know available for her is the through

institutionalized process, which is why she signs up to be institutionalized in this particular college. So, and she is aware, she is acutely aware of the paucity of options available to her. So, unlike Nyasha whose ultimate fate remains tragically precarious, she survives able to narrate intelligently and critically her story and those of the women she loves. The fact that she chooses to be complicit as well as subversive, the fact that she chooses to be ambivalent rather than purely rejecting the options perhaps helps her survive and helps her tell a story to other women and also about other women. So that really enables a more sustainable subversion, a more sustainable retelling of sorts. She is even able to narrate, to consider sympathetically others who have been placed in a similar condition to herself. So, she also establishes an economy of empathy and sympathy through which she can talk about other people, right, other female subjects who are placed in similar condition such as herself.

Like the children of the white missionaries who confront the same fraught zone of cultural hybridity at school that Nyasha and Tambuzai experience as a result of the parents' decision to share the gospel, right. And this is where I think the racial misogynistic structures begin to really intersect with each other because there is some element of empathy that she can establish with the other white people, the children of the white missionaries who also experience hybridity, who also experience alienation, who also experience discrimination in similar cultural and epistemic institutions. So, we stop at this point today where I think I hope it is beginning to really get clear how this novel *Nervous Conditions* by Dangaremba remains a profound post-colonial novel in its foregrounding of intersectionality, in its foregrounding of different forms of marginalization, of different voices of oppression and how the same really this interesting interplay of complicity and subversion. And how at its core that sort of the heart of the novel in terms of its sentimental structure is deconstructive in quality, right, whereby the dualisms, the borders between the heroic and the shameful, the borders between subversion and you know subscription are now always clear which is what makes the novel so real and so active and so dialogic with so many cultural conditions across the world at different points of diachronic time. So, we stop at this point today and we will continue with the discussion of the novel in the subsequent sessions. Thank you for your attention.