

『영미연구』

제50집 (2020): 105-120

<http://doi.org/10.25093/jbas.2020.50.105>

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: Regaining the Lost Hills

Seung Hyun Hong
Dongguk University

[Abstract]

This paper aims to substantiate the definition of the symbolic hill as the source of one's self or identity. The hill is, in an African context, similar to the root as a metaphor for something shared such as common history or culture. This is an attempt to examine Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* in terms of the implied hill. This project is to compare two mirroring doubles 'Tambu and Nyasha' and 'Avey and Aunt Cuney' in the two novels by following the process in which the two novelists construct the double identities. Each pair in these novels nearly overlaps at some points. Through their mirroring double characters, Tambu and Avey develop their identities. Although Nhamo and Nyasha discarded their hills, Tambu is rooted firmly in background. Avey goes through the process in which she has the conscious mind transcended and the unconscious self emerging. While Tambu recovers her hill, through Nyasha, who represents the unconscious, Avey regains her hill through Aunt Cuney, who

symbolizes the unconscious. The main argument in this essay is that each pair of two double characters intertwining consciousness and the unconscious ultimately comes to be one.

Key Words: Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*, hill

I

Living in modern times, we have a tendency to keep going forward, only to turn away from such fundamental questions as ‘Who am I?’ or ‘Where do I come from?’. It is a Senegalese proverb in Mariama Bâ’s *Scarlet Song* that admonishes us to consider the meaning of ‘one’s own hill’, saying “When one abandons one’s own hill, the next hill which one climbs will crumble” (168). I would substantiate the proverb by holding up this kind of hill as the source of one’s self, or as her or his identity itself in general. We all have our own hills under our feet. While the hill is welded to the characteristic of ‘universality’, in that everyone has their own hill only in a universal term; but the hill also bears ‘particularity’ that can distinguish one, both physically and mentally, from others. The hill also means something similar to this definition that the “roots” represent an “ethnically absolute” form of “cultural kinship,” based in a narrative of shared history and ancestors” (Smith 715).

This essay is an attempt to examine the Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and the American novelist Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) in terms of ‘the hill.’ I hope to demonstrate that, especially, ‘double identity’ as representative mirror self leads to

double characters, 'Tambu and Nyasha' on the one hand and, on the other, to double protagonists, 'Avey and Aunt Cuney.' In a similar vein, each pair nearly comes to be one level. Thus I would like to define each hill by proposing that Tambu and Avey represent consciousness, while Nyasha and Aunt Cuney symbolize the unconscious in psychoanalytical terms. As it transpires, I am reading the Senegalese proverb as follows: When you abandon your unconscious, the consciousness you build up will crumble.

II

To look at us you would have thought we were sisters, which is how I would have arranged matters had I been consulted. I strutted along beside my thoroughbred cousin, imitating her walk and the set of her head so that everyone would see that we were a unit. (*Conditions* 92)

Tambudzai in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, born in poverty on the homestead, has grown to hate her brother, Nhamo, who appears as a male oppressor in a patriarchal society. As Robert Muponde has noted, "The power [Nhamo] begins to exercise over his siblings is that of a bully and tyrant" (390). Responding to Nhamo's unreasonable exertion of power and authority, Tambu, as narrator of the novel declares, "In those days, I felt the injustice of my situation every time" (*Conditions* 12). As one critic has pointed out, "the narrator, Tambu, achieves voice through narration, an act that gives her liberation from her patriarchal-imposed silence and offers hope in the resilience and success of female challenge" (Uwakweh 77). Her nervous inner psychology is further revealed in her dream about her brother when she went to the mission: "He was laughing at me as usual.... Nhamo howled

with vicious glee, telling me that I would come to a bad end,... He spoke with such authority that I was ashamed of deserting this family that I did not have” (*Conditions* 90). In considering the well-known Freudian conception that dream is the reflection of the unconscious, it becomes clear that Tambu’s dream unconsciously reveals the repressed desire and fear of her brother.

Tambu’s brother had been chosen first by Babamukuru, whose name literally means the Big Father, one’s father’s elder brother. Babamukuru chose to educate Nhamo to save Jeremiah’s family from degrading poverty. However, Nhamo had died in his teens. Viewing the death of his brother by associating it with a reward for abandoning his own hill, Tambu reveals Nhamo’s treacherous remark: “So I shall go and live with Babamukuru at the mission. I shall no longer be Jeremiah’s son, he boasted, speaking my father’s name in such derogatory tones” (*Conditions* 48). Like his confession, “Nhamo is lost to his family as soon as he leaves the homestead for Babamukuru’s mission house” (Muponde 390). My contention is that Tambu’s anger in the unconscious, or her wish-fulfilment probably caused him to die. Tambu, unlike her brother, stood firm on her own hill defined by the mixture of homestead and her branch of the family, Shona as her own language. Therefore, Tambu was never willing to forgive her brother who sought to pursue “the Nhamo syndrome (flight from communal responsibility and history)” (Muponde 390) which means the regression from his own hill of identity.

It is apparent that Tambu remained “a paragon of feminine decorum” (*Conditions* 155). Consciously, and superficially, she expresses her gratitude for Babamukuru who vindicates her education. The fact that some resistance and horror are embedded in her unconscious mind is evidenced by her observation that “Babamukuru was taking on ogre-like proportions in my unconscious mind” (*Conditions* 170). Babamukuru, Nyasha’s father is a headmaster of a mission school. Tambu’s cousin, Nyasha sought

to resist, and to undermine paternal forces around her. She states: "He makes me so angry. I can't just shut up when he puts on his God act. I'm just not made that way" (*Conditions* 190). As her act of rebellion against male authority, Tambu covertly covers her stormy and turbulent unconscious mind with her surrogate, Nyasha.

Unlike traditional images of the African woman, Nyasha is overtly presented as a rebel against her father, a hallowed, authoritarian headmaster who represents "a revered patriarch" (*Conditions* 197). When it comes to Nyasha, Pauline Ada Uwakweh argues that "[a]s an iconoclast, she presents the greatest challenge to patriarchy.... Her nervous condition leads to both physical and psychological degeneration because she lacks the necessary nourishment to sustain her growth in society" (82). Above all, her resistance seriously culminates in her madness starting from a nervous breakdown. Despite Nyasha's plight of the physical and mental breakdown, Tambu does not offer support to Nyasha. Although Tambu is greatly influenced by Nyasha, the novel lacks the female bonding between them against common dominant male power.

Overall, Nyasha served as two roles for Tambu: not only did she become an allegorical referent of Tambu who demonstrates the repressed desire, but she played the part of guiding light, like the role of a Muse having a great influence on Tambu's "reincarnation" (*Conditions* 92). Through Nyasha, Tambu gained the wisdom of her nature, and clarity of her vision. As Tambu admits, "Nyasha was something unique and necessary for me. I did not like to spend too long without talking to her about the things that worried me because she would, I knew, pluck out the heart of the problem with her multi-directional mind and present it to me in ways that made sense" (*Conditions* 151). To Tambu, Nyasha is an embodiment of ideal woman, as she reveals that "I thought she was wise too, although I was not sure why. I admired her abundance of spirit even though I could not see where it was

directed: Nyasha had everything, should have been placid and content” (*Conditions* 96). It is through the pivotal figure of Nyasha that Tambu gains a growing awareness in female quest for self-definition in many ways.

Tambu is dedicated to her education as a means of emancipation by colonial power like that of Nyasha. As Tambu comes to live with Big Father, Babamukuru and her cousin, Nyasha, “In his house, she learns of the problems of his autocratic control and comes to admire his rebellious daughter Nyasha” (Shaw 8). Tambu goes through the self-reflective process of growth as “Tambudzai is constantly facing different forms of power and social hierarchies that shape her self-perception” (Lazzari 114). Gabriele Lazzari also maintains that “Her struggle is thus twofold: against the patriarchal society of her indigenous culture — the Shona cultural and linguistic universe — and against a blind acceptance of colonial logic, which would overdetermine her social trajectory” (114-15). As a powerless woman under Shona heritage and a colonized subject in her educational emancipation, Tambu undergoes the self-reflective process by the two conflicting forces.

In contrast, however, Nyasha is always nervous because the Anglicized education is subject to lose the hill which symbolically forms her source of identity. Nyasha’s nervous condition becomes critical, as she develops anorexia nervosa. Carolyn Martin Shaw argues that Nyasha’s nervous breakdown is connected to her sexuality, as Shaw explains, adding that “I believe that in addition to its representing the condition of the native under colonialism, Nyasha’s climatic breakdown represents her fear of the desires of her adolescent body, desires for which her father condemned her” (9). For herself, she is collapsed to her eating disorders because it is hard to become simultaneously an obedient daughter and a sexually mature adult.

In conclusion, it is possible to recognize Nyasha as reduced to a status of the victim, like the case of Nhamo, because of her having “Englishness” (*Conditions*

202), which is related to 'the next hill'. But it is significant in a certain sense that Tambu comes to a resolution to safeguard and reaffirms her self by declaring that "[a]s far as I was concerned, [Nyasha] belonged to Babamukuru and his beliefs, whereas I did not" (*Conditions* 167). Therefore, "Tambu comes to a point where she begins to affirm the truth in her mother's warning about the threat of 'Englishness'. Her escape lies in this awareness and in her status as narrator" (Uwakweh 83). Tambu transcends the limits endowed by society and, then, finds liberation through her voice in her own story and that of Nyasha's.

III

It was when her great-aunt, who had kept her back turned all along, suddenly swung around, and she saw for the first time the face under the wide-brimmed hat. The fury she saw there - fury at being defied - had so distorted the features, it was scarcely the face she remembered from her childhood. (*Praisesong* 43-4)

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, seen as illuminating the deconstructive process of the old, formal, and public self, restores the long-forgotten 'hill' of Avetara Johnson, the sixty two year old widow. It seems appropriate to Avey that 'the hill' stands for her history, the essential African spirit, and cultural tradition. Pascha A. Stevenson articulates that "[Avey] is not a one-dimensional type; she is no performing silhouette but rather a full, complex consciousness" (152). Avey's quest for regaining the hill deeply involves the journey through African myth and ritual. The main story of the novel is that "Avey comes to understand her own identity through a series of journeys, physical and emotional, literal and symbolic, that help

her piece together the elements which contribute to her sense of herself as an African American in the late twentieth century” (Rogers 91-2). As she rearranges her disoriented mind, Avey attempts to regain her lost identity.

The dreams are the conduit that acts as a motivator evoking her past, which propels her into a quest for self. For instance, one of the dreams that Avey dreamt is about a bomb explosion which powerfully indicates the coming events:

Her dreams were a rerun of it all. The bomb that exploded in the Sunday School quiet of Birmingham in ‘63 went off a second time in her sleep several nights later. And searching frantically amid the debris of small limbs strewn around the church basement she had come across those of Sis, Annawilda and Marion. (*Praisesong* 31)

The explosion of the bomb and the image of ‘the debris of small limbs’ in her dream symbolize the redeployment, or the rearrangement of her self in Freudian terms. In the dream that signals Avey’s steps to acknowledging her real roots, she begins to reconstruct her African-American origin.

Above all, it is important to note that Avey’s great Aunt Cuney appeared in her dreams. Aunt Cuney who reminds Avey of the existence of the Ibos, draws up waiting for Avey on the road beside Shad Dawson’s wood. As Carissa Turner Smith maintains, “one central legend dominates the spiritual geography of Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*: the legend of the singing Ibos” (716). Aunt Cuney tells although the Ibos had been captured, they had marched back to Africa, singing all the way. The Ibos’ return to Africa or their mobility is quite a contrast to Avey and her husband Jerome’s attitude, as well as many African American’s way of living in defining black identity. Avey’s life is described as typifying “contemporary Africans’ ostensible mobility through labor in the American economic system as silencing

African American voices, masking African American reality, and replacing meaningful journeys with empty, parodic journeys equivalent to stasis” (DeLamotte 83-4). As Jerome, a slave to the economic system of hard working, advanced toward the material security of white middle-class, Jay and Avey keep alienating themselves from their black roots. Their social identities as Americans, which leads to wear white masks over black faces, bring them eventually to their spiritual entrapment rather than freedom.

It may be argued that Aunt Cuney represents Avey's lost history. My argument again is that Aunt Cuney inhabits the unconscious, repressed and forgotten, in the same way as the mirrored double of Tambu and Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*. As double character, Avey resembles her Aunt physically: “Suddenly Avey Johnson drew herself up to her full height, which equaled that of the tall figure [of Aunt Cuney] up the road” (*Praisesong* 42). Thus Avey's painful tug of war between consciousness and the unconscious is implied in the violent fist fight, creating the desire to awake to her own history and self.

Aunt Cuney became so caught up in the core of Avey's mind, and many odd things started happening. For example, Avey sometimes felt powerful spasms, or sudden shifts: having a peculiar sensation in her stomach following the attempt to eat peach parfait, and when watching the skeleton old man in bikini. The significance of the confrontation with Aunt Cuney in the hotel balcony is revealed when Avey sees “her life passing in swift review, her mind leapfrogging back over the years” (*Praisesong* 143). As a result, Aunt Cuney gives Avey visions and memories that rekindle themselves in her consciousness. Avey is depicted in an innocent, reborn baby image, slaughtering off the old, public self:

She had not seen the hotels vanishing behind her, but as if she had sensed their disappearance, a change came over her. Slowly she felt the caul over her

mind lifting and she began looking around her.

With a child's curiosity and awe Avey Johnson surveyed the familiar elements which made up the still-life of the beach — sand, sea, trees and overarching sky — as if she were seeing their like for the first time.
(*Praisesong* 154)

The annual Carriacou ceremony of the ritual dance at the Big Drum allows Avey to experience 'her own hill' and to reach newly awakened self. As Avey enthusiastically dances, swinging her hips, she feels some bonds between her and these people. Finally, she finds that the answer is not easily deciphered, indicating "[n]ow, suddenly, as if she were that girl again, with her entire life yet to live, she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her in Lebert Joseph's yard" (*Praisesong* 249).

As Pascha A. Stevenson fully explains about this final moving scene of the novel: "It is those connections—those silken threads binding her to this black community, pulling her back to her childhood in Tatem and stretching forward into a future defined by a discourse of fabric, interrelatedness, and infinity ties—that support and maintain kinship. It is those very connections that fill her with a sense of belonging and safety" (153). As the imagery of "those silken threads" invokes a connection to the umbilical cord, Avey takes a step toward the rebirth of her African heritage. In summary, Aunt Cuney's emergence in the novel as "the derisive face [Avey] saw projected there" (*Praisesong* 142) should be seen as Avey's self-portrait with the strange mixture of fury, rage and guilt.

IV

As I have shown above, double characters are to mold both novels in a psychoanalytical view, inviting us to see how each female protagonist develops her identity. It is my opinion that the mutually reflexive relationship between Tambu and Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions* runs parallel to that between Avey and Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong for the Widow*. In *Nervous Conditions*, the results that Nhamo and Nyasha greatly suffered when they discarded their homestead and language, Shona, are reminding us of the warning in the proverb: "When one abandons one's own hill, the next hill which one climbs will crumble." But Tambu is rooted in another firm background as she reveals: "what [Babamukuru] represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position" (*Conditions* 164). In this sentence, 'my own position' here signifies her identity in an attempt to restore 'the hill' she did not give up. The following passage is worth quoting, for 'myself and my family' which Nyasha neglected, can be a 'hill' to Tambu, elucidating the deeper meaning of the proverb above:

But Nyasha's energy, at times stormy and turbulent, at times confidently serene, but always reaching, reaching a little further than I had even thought of reaching, was beginning to indicate that there were other directions to be taken, other struggles to engage in besides the consuming desire to emancipate *myself and my family*. Nyasha gave me the impression of moving, always moving and striving towards some state that she had seen and accepted a long time ago. (*Conditions* 151-52; Emphasis added)

In a similar vein, many critics also has taken up this perspective on *Praisesong*

for the Widow: “one woman’s journey of healing and self-discovery as a metaphor for the African and Caribbean communities’ potential reconnection with African heritage” (Rogers 78-9). *Praisesong for the Widow* engages these issues such as history, roots, and cultural traditions that lie in the unconscious realm.

The story is the process which, summoning up the past, seeks to remove the obstacle, the conscious mind, and to restore the unconscious self as the true one. In this regard, Susan Rogers asserts that “Avey’s body communicates to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore: her disconnection from her own sense of herself and from the African-American and Caribbean heritage which is a crucial part of that self” (77). Avey’s African-American identity is an essential part of her being that has been lost. This renewing process is illustrated as follows:

It was as if a saving numbness had filtered down over her mind while she slept to spare her the aftershock of the ordeal she had undergone last evening. Or that her mind, like her pocketbook outside, had been *emptied* of the contents of the past thirty years during the night, so that she had *awakened* with it like a slate that had been wiped clean, a *tabula rasa* upon which a whole new history could be written. (*Praisesong* 151; Emphasis added)

In conclusion, the two novels convey the message that while Tambu could recover her ‘hill’ through Nyasha who is representing the unconscious, Avey could awaken to regain her ‘hill’ through Aunt Cuney, who holds a reservoir of the unconscious. Therefore, the two novels testify to the fact that each pair of two double intertwining consciousness and the unconscious ultimately comes to be one level. They are going hand in hand, progressing toward their own ‘hills’.

Works Cited

- Bâ, Mariama. *Scarlet Song*. Translated by Dorothy S Blair, Longman, 1986.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Seal Press, 1988.
- DeLamotte, Eugenia C. *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom: The Fiction of Paule Marshall*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1998.
- Lazzari, Gabriele. "Peripheral Realism and the Bildungsroman in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 49, no. 2, Summer 2018, pp. 107-24.
- Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. A Plume Book, 1983.
- Muponde, Robert. "'I am well if you are well': nervous conditions of African philanthropy in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novels." *African Identities*, vol. 9, no. 4, November 2011, pp. 387-400.
- Rogers, Susan. "Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *African American Review*. vol. 34, no. 1, Spring 2000, pp. 77-93.
- Shaw, Carolyn Martin. "'You had a daughter, but I am becoming a woman': Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 38, no. 4, Winter 2007, pp. 7-27.
- Smith, Carissa Turner. "Women's Spiritual Geographies of the African Diaspora: Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*." *African American Review*, vol. 3-4, Fall/Winter 2008, pp. 715-29.
- Stevenson, Pascha A. "Dreaming in Color: Race and the Spectacular in *The Agüero Sisters* and *Praisesong for the Widow*." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2007, pp. 141-59.
- Uwakweh, Pauline Ada. "Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing

in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 26, no. 1, Spring 1995, pp. 75-84.

국문초록

당가렘브가의 『불안한 상황』과 마샬의 『미망인을 위한 찬가』: 잃어버린 언덕 되찾기

홍 승 현

단독 / 동국대

이 논문은 두 소설, 트시트시 당가렘브가의 『불안한 상황』 과 폴 마샬의 『미망인을 위한 찬가』 에서 상징적인 ‘언덕’을 비교 분석하는 데에 기본적인 목적이 있다. 아프리카 전통에서 언덕은 자아와 정체성의 형상화이며 한 개인의 역사와 문화에 기반한 뿌리이자 근원지라고 정의할 수 있다. 두 소설에서 공통적인 양상은 각 주인공이 자신들의 무의식을 대변하는 등장인물들을 통하여 이중적인 정체성을 체현하는 인물들로 구현된다는 것이다. 즉, 『불안한 상황』 에서 탐부는 자신의 무의식적 욕망을 투영하는 나이샤라는 인물을 통하여, 『미망인을 위한 찬가』 에서 아버지는 쿠니를 통해서 그들의 정체성을 되찾게 된다. 나모와 나이샤는 자신들의 고유한 언덕을 버렸지만, 화자인 탐부는 자신의 확고한 배경에 기반하여 자신을 지켜나간다. 아버지는 미국인으로서의 의식적인 자아를 버리고, 무의식적인 본연의 자아인 아프리카인의 정체성을 새롭게 깨닫게 된다. 의식적인 탐부는 무의식을 반영하는 나이샤를 통해서, 의식적인 아버지는 무의식을 대변하는 쿠니를 통해서 각각 욕망을 실현하여 안정적 자아를 형성해간다. 하지만 의식과 무의식이 분리될 수 없듯이 그들이 손을 맞잡고 자신들의 근원지인 ‘언덕’을 향해 전진한다고 볼 때 그들은 여성적 동지의식을 넘어 궁극적으로 일체가 된다고 할 것이다.

주제어: 트시트시 당가렘브가, 『불안한 상황』, 폴 마샬, 『미망인을 위한 찬가』, 언덕

논문접수일: 2020.09.15

심사완료일: 2020.10.21

게재 확정일: 2020.10.26

이름: 홍승현

소속: 동국대학교 영어영문학과

주소: 서울 중구 필동 3가 26번지

이메일: suchong@dongguk.edu