



*Africa Development*, Vol. XXXV, Nos 1 & 2, 2010, pp. 95 – 115  
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(ISSN 0850-3907)

## The African Public Space of Dangarembga's *Neria*: A Site for Autochthonous Feminist Agency

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### Abstract

The public space is a place where anybody has a right to occupy without being excluded for economic or social reasons. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the 'westocentricity' and inapplicability of the term 'public space' to the African context. This term is steeped in the discourse of capital, one that profits from proliferating labels like 'public', 'free', 'open', masquerading in appearances that gloss over the hegemonic forces like global patriarchy, capitalism and neo-colonialism that largely govern twenty-first century Africa. An interrogation of the spaces that can be called the 'commons' in Dangarembga's *Neria* (1986) and *Nervous Conditions* (1988), (Zimbabwe) and Sene Absa's *Madame Brouette* (2002) (Senegal), shows that such spaces are fraught with social constraints that discriminate against access at class and gender levels, just to mention a few. I will illustrate how language constrains poor and illiterate Africans, especially women, from accessing places such as the river, and legal and entertainment public spaces in the literary works outlined above. It is important for scholarship on Africa to emphasize that 'The African public space' is an oxymoron, a fallacy that does not exist. There is no space that can legitimately be called 'public' in Africa, especially for rural, poor, uneducated, non-Christian/Muslim women.

### Résumé

L'espace public est un lieu que chacun a le droit d'occuper, sans être exclus pour des raisons économiques ou sociales. Cet article est une tentative d'illustration de l'« occi-centrisme » et de l'inapplicabilité du terme « espace public » dans le contexte africain. Ce terme est ancré dans le discours du

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capital, qui profite de la prolifération des labels comme « public », « libre », « ouvert », prenant des apparences qui dissimulent les forces hégémoniques comme le patriarcat mondial, le capitalisme et le néo-colonialisme qui gouvernent pratiquement l'Afrique du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Une analyse des espaces qui peuvent être appelés les « communes » dans les œuvres de Dangarembga intitulées *Neria* (1986) et *Nervous Conditions* (1988), (Zimbabwe) et l'œuvre de Sene Absa intitulée *Madame Brouette* (2002) (Sénégal), montre que ces espaces sont pleins de contraintes sociales discriminatoires dans l'accès à l'égard des classes et des sexes, pour ne citer que celles-ci. Je vais illustrer comment la langue empêche les Africains pauvres et analphabètes, en particulier les femmes, d'accéder à des endroits comme la rivière et les espaces publics juridiques et de divertissement dans les œuvres littéraires décrits ci-dessus. Il est important que la recherche sur l'Afrique souligne que l'« espace public africain » est un oxymore, une illusion. Il n'y a pas d'espace qui puisse légitimement être appelé « public » en Afrique, en particulier pour les femmes rurales, pauvres, non instruites non chrétiennes/musulmanes.

### Introduction

Teaching at a university in North America has shown me that one of the most enduring and prevalent stereotypes about African women is not only that they are the most oppressed in the world, but also have no agency whatsoever to confront their so-called ageless and ever present oppression. Many of my students characterise African women as a monolithic, helpless and pitiful group of people. The majority of my class reports illustrate class discussions inundated by calls for African women increasingly to imbibe Western education and civilisation, so that they can be liberated and join the women of the so called 'free world', the West, totally ignoring two possibilities:

- They are and have always been capable of mapping their own, autochthonous ways to address their oppression.
- Western education is one of the major sources of their oppression.

The coverage of Africa and on African women on CNN, BBC, SKY news or any of the major Western broadcasting stations does not help. It often portrays African women as hopeless victims, recipients of whatever white men, African men and white women dish out to them. This was very evident in the coverage of the December 2007-February 2008 Kenya election crisis. The women of Kenya were largely visible as casualties of the problem. Pictures of the Kenyan public space of that time showed them either weeping for the dead, dead, dying or running away from the turmoil. When it came to pictures of the decision-makers, those with the power and political agency to end this political mayhem, African men were the dominant players.

Figure 1: <http://africanpress.wordpress.com/2008/08/10/kibakis-secret-plan-for-2012-succession/>



Figure 2: <http://doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/alert/article.cfm?id=2590&cat=alert-article>



The same goes for the Zimbabwe or the Mugabe/Tsvangirai saga. Zimbabwean women were not in the picture. Zimbabwean women were largely shown to occupy spaces of the victimised and spoken for, for example when it came to spaces featuring the active and those with voice, the ones signing the Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).

Figure 3: <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/mbeki105.18508.html>



Figure 4: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/africa/07/25/zimbabwe.sanctions/>



Such media coverage constructs African women as largely voiceless and lacking in agency. Africa becomes a space where indigenous and colonial patriarchy<sup>1</sup> rules without contestation, uniformly presiding over day-to-day affairs and constructing women's subjectivities.

This paper is an attempt to negate the perception of the helpless, agentless African woman, focusing on one of the most common strategies that patriarchal oppression uses to oppress women globally: the cultural discourses that control what women do, wear and say. Whilst the author of the paper largely questions the legitimacy of a dichotomy between the public and private space in the context of Africa, especially the Habermasian version (1989) and when one reads that dichotomy along gender and feminist lines, this paper takes the African public space as a given, using it as a base, a fluid space where pockets of feminist agency sprout through in the literary text under interrogation: Dangarembga's *Neria* (1993).<sup>2</sup> The paper attempts to show that the public space of Dangarembga's text is a dynamic space, a mobile and fluid ground for male and female feminists to battle patriarchal oppression. This is one space that patriarchy is forced to meet, clash and converse with other categories like identity, nation, race, language, time, class, religion, education, gender and capitalism; just to mention a few, often robbing it of enough time to establish and maintain the male supremacy principle. In this space, patriarchy manifests itself as a practice, not only as an ideology or institution. This enhances its visibility and the public nature of the conversation it finds itself in, forces it to define itself, a position it is not comfortable with as that is what it normally assigns to other categories. This reduces its ability to normalise and mainstream itself because like other hegemonic forces, patriarchy largely depends on controlling the temporal plane, especially the imported form which needs time to stage itself as the safe and sought-after system of logic, thriving on predictability and uniformity. This paper will demonstrate that patriarchy struggles to control the dynamics that derive from it being made a spectacle in public space, having people gazing at it impromptu. The cracks that sometimes develop within and around it, leave room that feminist agency can and is utilising in Africa. This paper uses Dangarembga's portrayal of the public space of *Neria* (1993) to make a literary argument, taking off from the writer's personal experience with patriarchal oppression in Thondwe, a small village in Malawi's southern region town of Zomba.

### **The Thondwe Experience**

That patriarchy is facing challenges in the public space was made evident to me one morning in Zomba, Malawi. I was confronted by an incident that exhibited the male supremacy principle trying to police my dress, and define who I am, in the public space.

In order to supplement my meagre Malawi university lecturer's salary, my family had a market stall manned alternately by the men we employed to take care of our home and garden.<sup>3</sup> One morning, together with my husband, I drove one of them to the market so that they could be there early and make better sales. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on which side of this outcome of the incident you are, I forgot that I was wearing a skirt that would generally be regarded as 'too short' for a 'respectable' Malawian, especially as far as many market sellers of Malawi are concerned (commonly called vendors). In the previous months, women and girls in various parts of Malawi's markets and streets had been stripped, beaten and raped for wearing clothes that market vendors deemed too short or too tight for women. Why the vendors had appointed themselves fashion and cultural policemen, is an issue that warrants research on its own but will not be pursued in this paper. My skirt was slightly above my knees and moreover, it had a slit. I actually dropped the man at the market but he forgot the small bag for change money. I made the mistake of getting out of the car, running after him to hand over the coin bag. I did not have to cover a long distance, since he had just left the car, but the walk back involved passing through at least five stalls. I knew I had made a big mistake in getting out of the car as I approached him and started making my way back to the car. I am also quite a big person and that did not help.

First came the whistles, followed by the usual 'Alendo! Alendo!', meaning 'visitor or alien', in other words, 'No Malawian can dress like that, you must be a foreigner, someone from another country'. The initial verbal insults came from male vendors. I walked on, telling myself just to brave it out and quickly get into the car, all would be well. As I approached my car, a woman who was selling rice a few steps from the car shouted on top of her voice:

'Otsatsa malonda', 'Alibe mamuna ameneyu, akufuna atenge amuna athu' 'Malonda avuta, mwati muvule kuti mube amuna any'. [This woman is advertising her body so she can be bought, she has not husband, she wants to take our husbands, times are hard for her, she is a tough sell so she has decided to strip naked so she can be bought and take other people's husbands.]

I was so infuriated that even though I had reached the car and opened the door, I went back and confronted her. I told her that I was married, pointing to my husband. I also told her that I did not need to get naked in order to seduce and take her husband from her if that is what she was worried about. Dressed or not, if I wanted to seduce her husband or any man and if the man or men in question wanted me too, I could have the man. Adulterous decisions do not require nudity or being half-naked to execute them. She should rather give women's brains a little bit of agency. Women have mental capacities

that they employ at will, we are not just a reduction of our bodies. I went on and on unloading my feminist beliefs on her because I was very angry about the horizontal violence of which I had just been a victim. I was very annoyed that a woman had joined in demeaning another woman. I told her I would have gone away quietly because I expected men to taunt and castigate me for my skirt, but I had not expected a fellow woman to join in this public assault. What is poignant to this paper is what happened next.

### **The Class Rebuttal**

A man came and asked me to leave this crowd: 'These are just a bunch of people who are poor and way beneath you', the strange man shouted, facing me and also addressing the crowd. He went on to apologise on behalf of the people that had insulted and verbally harassed me, saying that the crowd was uneducated; intimidated by a woman who was driving a car and was a college lecturer. He went to say I should not waste my time on them; I should not join in the 'idle chit chat of the poor, uneducated villagers', telling me that if I joined in their acts, people would not tell the difference. After all, he said, he was sure I had bought the clothes (first- or second-hand) with my own money. That was evidenced by the fact that I could afford to buy a car.<sup>4</sup> He went on to tell the people that instead of shouting at me, they should ask for a job from me. What right did any of them have to criticise what I was wearing and prescribe what I should wear, especially if my husband is fine by it, he asked the market crowd. The crowd, which had already been silenced by my audacity in marching back into the market and screaming a tirade of feminist views to one woman, was not only further silenced, some of them then turned against the people who had been hurling abuse at me. Even the male vendors who had been shouting at me joined in shouting at the woman who had abused me, telling her that she should be careful whom she picks to insult. A woman who had been buying vegetables joined in and asked if it made sense for vendors to insult women who wore the short skirts they sold. She went on to ask them if they thought it was clever and economically sound for them to insult and discourage women from wearing these 'short' clothes, given that they are the ones that sold the clothes and they depended on those sales to survive. Nobody answered these questions. I went to my car and drove off.

### **Patriarchy on the Back Pedal**

This incident raises and leaves a lot of questions unanswered. I am not citing it as proof of a community's attitude change against violence against women. Surely, that requires much more than a market shouting match, but this incident does show how the African public space can be a space where

patriarchy is put on the back pedal and struggles to control the very logic it depends on to construct female oppression. The market crowd had witnessed a verbal attempt to control the way I, a woman, dressed and behaved in public. They had seen me being called a prostitute and whore and all sorts of denigrating names. But that crowd also saw four instant rebuttals of such patriarchal views:

- (i) The first was by me, the victim turned survivor.
- (ii) The man who had been a spectator and therefore a legitimate participant in this discourse.
- (iii) The woman buyer.
- (iv) 'Converted' male vendors.

Patriarchy had been confronted by many forces:

- (i) Anti- and de-patriarchy men.
- (ii) A sisterhood.
- (iii) A concoction of categories of capital, class, gender and nation.

This was within a short time and in full view of the public. These questions left patriarchy scrambling to assert itself as a practice, institution and ideology. It had no time to regroup and map a strategy. Instead of patriarchy staging a logical spectacle of how to discipline a woman who transgresses its boundaries, the spectacle had been reversed on patriarchy and now people were gazing at patriarchy in full battle with the numerous resultant categories. I argue that such a reversal weakens the teeth of a hegemonic force, disarming its ability to bite and control the victim. It is like many numbers of animals surprising an ill or injured lion all at once. It struggles to defend its territory and take control, as it always likes to. In this instance, patriarchy did not have a ready answer in this public space when it was confronted by the reality of there being African men who do not subscribe to its dictates and like their wives wearing short clothes. The presence of women like me, who have the muscle of a degree of economic independence and Western education, is an issue that is hard for patriarchy to prepare for and control in public. That needs time in order to deconstruct the right of the woman who not only buys her own clothes but cars, generates employment and business for the vendors. This shows that such a space is not static or fixed; it is an open and malleable space, ideal for contests against patriarchy. What I witnessed in Thondwe is evidenced to a greater extent in Dangarembga's *Neria*. What makes this text ideal for this discussion is that it not only unravels spaces where patriarchy develops cracks, giving way for feminist agency to sprout out, but that this happens in a field long used by patriarchy as a base

and stronghold, that of African culture. Dangarembga eloquently constructs female characters that use their public space to carve out agency that is decidedly home grown, born of local methodology and identity.

### **The Public Space of *Neria***

*Neria* is a 1993 Zimbabwean film that was written by Tsitsi Dangarembga and directed by Godwin Muzuru.<sup>5</sup> It is a story about Neria, a widow whose brother-in-law tries to manipulate the 'kugarwa nhaka',<sup>6</sup> a traditional custom, in order to take control of his brother's family and house property (see Note 5 for a full synopsis of the story). Dangarembga's portrayal of the public space in this story shows that patriarchy can be fruitfully battled in the public space, especially when it exhibits itself as a practice. This is because when it is visible, it is more vulnerable because it is easier to target and confront it, unlike when it is an institution or process.

### **Patrick, the Anti-patriarchy Shona**

Right at the beginning of *Neria*, Patrick is shown to be a loving husband who respects his wife as an equal partner in the marriage. We see the couple discuss the economic hurdles facing Patrick's life and map ways to solve them together. It is important to point out that they never discuss the problems facing Neria's family. However, in at least two incidents, Patrick makes it clear to his brother (Phineas) that he regards his wife Neria as his equal, not an entity and person who is inferior. He states that she has worked equally hard for the assets they own as a family. In a good month, she even makes more than him (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 2),<sup>7</sup> so she needs to be treated as a stake holder in this marriage. Patrick says this when he visits his extended family in the village, together with his family. Phineas calls Patrick aside to discuss 'men's' issues (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 2) that is, to make important decisions for their extended family. When Patrick informs his brother that he has to consult his wife before making necessary decisions, Phineas accuses Patrick of not wearing the pants in his family. Patrick tells Phineas that Neria is his partner and in their marriage, they make decisions together. Whilst coming from a drinking session at the village shops, Patrick reiterates to his brother that should anything happen to him, his extended family, including and especially Phineas, should respect his wife. They should treat her as someone who has worked very hard and selflessly for the assets that are in Patrick's home, their children and his village family. He makes it clear that should something happen to him, they (Phineas, his brothers and mother) should treat Neria as someone whom he loved dearly.

In this way, Dangarembga uses characterisation to construct a critique of indigenous patriarchy. She uses a Shona male character to develop a critic of a Shona cultural trait. The fact that Patrick is a primary character, gives him voice to not only register but emphasise the presences of African, Shona men, who not only believe in gender justice but live by their belief, not making their wives inferior, and verbally stating their hatred for patriarchal, controlling marriages and cataloguing their unfairness to women and wives. The placing of the character of Patrick in the plot of *Neria* is also crucial as it comes early, providing a yardstick by which the spectator measures Phineas. Patrick's early departure, after registering his appreciation for and fair treatment of *Neria*, intensifies his role as a positive character. Since he is a flat character, having him for long in the story can easily make him boring and risks diminishing his value. The shortness of the life of his character intensifies the degree of evil of Phineas's character.

### **Making Public the Feminist Agency of Shona Oral Literature**

It is important to note that Dangarembga uses oral literature, a folktale and song in this case, to challenge the views of men like Phineas who preach that the inferior status of wives in marriage and women in the Shona community is a dictate of the Shona community.

As the brothers are on the road, driving back to their village home, and Patrick is laying out his gender and woman friendly stand of marriage, he leads them to sing a song (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 4) from Shona folklore called 'Jari Mukaranga'. This song tells the story of a wife who is bitter and angry, documenting her complaints for not being appreciated by her husband and his family, yet she toiled to work for the riches that her husband boasts of. This wife is divorced, left in the lurch for a younger trophy wife who did not work for the comforts she is enjoying.

At the same time, back in the village (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 5), their mother is telling the same story to her grandchildren and daughters-in-law. When the children ask her to tell a story by the fire, as grandmothers are traditionally asked and required to, she tells the tale of a woman who came back to haunt a husband who had dumped her after she worked hard to amass wealth for him and his family. This song is sung by both parties in separate scenes, happening at the same time. When the brothers arrive home, they find the children dancing to song around the fire as the grandmother is completing telling the story.

The contents of the folk tale, the song and its being sung in both scenes at the same time, shows that Dangarembga wants to emphasise the unfairness of women and wives not being credited for the hard work they do in marriages.

This song historicises the problem, showing that women have been battling this problem for long. The song also helps women to articulate and own the voice that criticises such a practice, and helps register a problem and make it public. It sets the scene for the audience to question the justice of labelling assets of a family or couple those of a man when wives, women, help accumulate those assets by working in and outside the home. When the brothers arrive home, they join in singing and dancing to the song because they find the children, their mother and wives singing and dancing to it too. This allows Dangarembga to question the oppression women face in marriage from an African and Shona avenue. This avenue is not only publicly owned, it is well known and respected. Folklore, as Mbiti (1989) and Okpewho (1990) have often reminded us, invokes the voice and wisdom of ancestors in Africa. Jari Mukaranga not only labels what happened to the dumped woman wrong, it allows Patrick to make his stand on this issue public and to warn his brother not to mistreat his wife. By having the whole family dance to this song at the end, it puts the questions of widow inheritance and treatment of wives in marriage into the public sphere. It involves the whole family, making it an issue that cuts across gender, age, class, space and time.

### **Neria and *Kugarwa Nhaka***

When Patrick dies, Phineas makes it clear that he is to inherit all of his brother's property as tradition dictates. This includes the wife and children. Neria dislikes this traditional practice and this is evident in her reaction to the process of the distribution of Patrick's clothes. The problem with such a custom and tradition is that it infantilises wives. It treats them as children who do not know what of their husband they want to discard or keep, muting and disregarding their voice in an issue that is dear to them, at a time when they are already experiencing pain, loss and loneliness. This makes them face double pain, loss and abandonment. First they lose a loved one then they do not even have a voice in proceedings concerning him.

Neria is so angered by not being consulted about this process, especially not getting their wedding pictures, she walks out as they are distributing his things and goes straight to the place the two of them loved to sit and talk in the nearby forest. She goes to talk to him and ask the questions that are plaguing her (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 8). This act locates Neria solidly as a product of her culture. According to Okpewho, for many communities in Africa, when a person dies, he is simply assumed to have departed physically from this world but to have joined the company of ancestors who have gone before. Between these ancestors and the living there is an unbroken line of communication and contact (Okpewho 1992:158-9).

As a Shona African woman, it makes sense that she talks to Patrick as if he is alive, telling him what is going on, asking him to help by giving her advice. Phineas follows her and makes the first attempt to take over as her husband, take his brother's position, but the pain and anger he sees on Neria's face makes him walk away in dismay. This is the first time the family sees the pain, neglect and anger Neria is experiencing. As the plot continues, Phineas takes steps to own and control Neria, her children, furniture and house. What emerges is a tale of how Phineas's manipulation of this patriarchal tradition is contested by Neria in both private and public spaces, but it is in public that Neria delivers a telling blow.

### **The Court Public Space**

After a series of abusive and selfish efforts by Phineas to control Neria, her children and property, Neria sees that the only way to stop Phineas from robbing her and her children of their means of livelihood is to take her friend Connie's advice and take him to court. In court, she exposes Phineas's selfish and greedy behaviour. What is crucial for this discussion is how her brother's patriarchal arguments are defeated in the public space.

Her brother-in-law's pivotal argument in court is that Shona culture dictates that the eldest brother of a brother who has passed should inherit the widow, children and property. Phineas emphasises that if the court sees the issue differently, it is disregarding his culture and that is wrong. Some people may argue that Phineas's stand is not patriarchal; it is just a stand of a manipulative person who is greedy and selfish. Mbuya (Patrick's mother) certainly agrees with that and so do most reviews of this film (see Lopez McAlister, July 29, 1995).

### **Phineas, Spokesman and Tool of Patriarchy**

In an interview with Oliver Mtukudzi, a world-renowned Zimbabwean musician who was in the cast of *Neria*, I asked him his views on *kugarwa nhaka*, to interrogate whether he labelled it patriarchal or not. He emphasised that this traditional practice is designed for the wellbeing of the family of the deceased. It is to make the husband's side take responsibility for that family. Mtukudzi reiterates that the character of Phineas in *Neria* represents people who are twisting cultural laws, manipulating them for personal gain:

Many people are taking advantage of the cultural laws, twisting them just to suit themselves. Inheritance does not mean taking over even the wife. It is the taking over of responsibility. When Neria's husband dies, the family turns against the widow. She is not loved but taken advantage of by the family. Whatever she and her husband had worked for is taken away. She and her husband worked so hard but now it is all taken away. That is very unfair (cited in Kabwila Kapasula 2009:1).

Mtukudzi argues that the taking of responsibility does not include taking over the wife:

If you are in love with your brother's wife, then you have to propose afresh. It [the traditional custom of widow inheritance] was a rule that was designed to mean well but because men are twisting it to suit ourselves, we are taking advantage of women (Kabwila Kapasula 2009:1).

I agree that Phineas is manipulating the situation but this does not mean this traditional practice is not patriarchal. If it is mainly about responsibility, then it would also apply to widowers, they would be inherited by the female side too, especially if they are well-to-do financially and can help the family that has remained. But this is not the case. This cultural practice puts the male in charge of the female; it makes maleness responsible for and in control of women and womanhood. The tradition erects a structure that says male is superior and in charge of female, which is inferior. So Phineas is a tool of a patriarchal concept.

### **It is Shona Culture on Trial**

As far as Phineas is concerned, it is Shona culture that is on trial here. To Phineas, if he is wrong, then tradition is wrong. Phineas repeatedly tells Neria about his superiority of power as the brother of her dead husband. He is entitled to all that was Patrick's. It is interesting to note that no one questions that Patrick's sisters or mother need to have a say in this issue. They all know that it is the men of the family who are to decide the issue. On several occasions, Neria points out the unfairness of Phineas's deeds to her and her family, but she fails to convince him. Phineas's brother (the one who stays in Malawi) and the uncle, fail to make him change his mind about Patrick's family and property. However, when this issue goes back into public space, that of the court, Neria defeats him and his patriarchal argument resoundingly.

### **Patriarchy Meets Neria, the Culturally Grounded Woman**

It is important to remember that before the final scene, Dangarembga has already autochthonotised Neria and Patrick. We saw the oral literature foretelling what would befall Neria and Patrick positioning himself within it. When he dies, Neria handles his death in a manner in keeping with Shona culture. So by the time we meet her in court, her Shona identity is not an issue that Phineas can question easily. In fact, throughout the narrative, he does not question that part of her. In court, Neria proves that she is a wife who loves and respects her husband and in-laws. She cares for them and her pursuance for justice in this court does not mean she plans to leave them

unattended financially and otherwise. She explains that she wants to make sure they have a good relationship with her and the children. Her testimony on the stand portrays someone who has great respect for her Shona tradition and culture, someone who respects the ancestors to whom she repeatedly refers as 'the departed' and 'those in the winds' (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 6, 7, 9). This disarms Phineas who had planned to posit her as a modern wife and woman who has no respect for her past. Neria shows that she is culturally grounded. Like the vendors who confronted in the market, Phineas has no time to reorder his attack in the face of a culturally grounded and respectful woman that he meets in his sister-in-law.

### **Patriarchy Meets Patrick, a Non-patriarchal African Man**

Neria explains her husband's stance regarding his wife, which is contrary to Phineas's exploitative acts. This shows that not all Shona men believe wives should lose property when a husband dies or that wives are inferior to husbands, women to men. It shows the court what kind of a man Patrick was and this fortifies Neria's argument, leaving Phineas pursuing a lost cause. This incident shows how patriarchy struggles and becomes helpless when confronted by a man who does not subscribe to it.

In the Thondwe case, when a man spoke at length, attacking patriarchy (even though I did not agree with some of his arguments) it was a blow that the initial vendors needed time to sort out and mount an attack against. When that man pointed to my husband and asked what right they had to question my dress if he (my husband) was fine with it, it was too much to unravel and bring under control at one sitting. Seeing my husband there in flesh silenced the woman and men who had attacked me. He was a living proof that there are men who marry women like me and do not hate skirts that go above the knee. The fact that my husband is Malawian, problematised the culture card that is often played to construct patriarchal discourses. Having such men at the point of patriarchal contact problematises the definition of man, proving that patriarchy is a social construct. It is something that some men are free of, can unlearn and do not believe in. It is like facing an opposition army with someone in their own uniform. It unnerves the opposition and robs them of time to digest all that is going on.

### **Patriarchy Meets a Working Mother who must Pay Fees**

When Phineas cites his right to take over Neria and her children, she points out that what she wants is to be able to take care of her children, paying their school fees, house rent and clothes, and feeding them, as her husband would have wanted her to do.

When one considers Omofolabo Ajayi Soyinka's 'Thoughts on double patriarchy' (1993),<sup>8</sup> you remember that the coming of colonialism to Africa not only brought colonial patriarchy, as Ajayi Soyinka argues, Africa also imported capitalism. With globalisation, capitalism has spread and become more entrenched than ever. It is therefore understandable that in the public space of Africa, patriarchy often collides with capitalism. Sometimes this collision works for patriarchy but the point that this paper is trying to advance is that sometimes it does not, and the space that opens when the two forces meet, is the space that feminist agency actualises.

Many people in Africa treasure the ability of their children to go to Western established schools. People know that if the children are staying in urban spaces, whoever is leaving with them has to pay rent. Maybe Phineas could have come up with an idea of how he could fulfil those obligations but in the court space he does not. He and his patriarchal views are caught unawares.

Just like in the Thondwe market, where the vendors could not deny that they need women who have buying power like me to buy the second-hand clothes they sell, many people in the court case show agreement that Neria needs to have Patrick's assets in order to raise the children. Dangarembga's narrative takes time to illustrate how Neria's children end up thrown out of school because their mother cannot pay school fees. Just like the Thondwe vendors had to confront the reality that my having money to buy my own clothes gave me a say, at least some say, on what I wore, this court audience is shown largely to appreciate that Neria needs to have the custody of the means with which to raise the children.

### **Patriarchy Meets the Temporal Argument**

In *Neria*, Dangarembga uses the film text to demonstrate publicly that tradition is not static. In court, Neria's lawyer also underlines the importance of reading tradition as a text that changes with time, one that has modified itself to suit the different contexts of today's world. Neria does this by repeating that she does not want to anger 'those in the winds', a phrase that is constantly used by her friend Connie.

Connie insists on fighting this practice of widow inheritance but she also makes it clear that she is very proud of her Shona culture. Connie is so well connected with her culture and ancestors that the latter reveal to her what is going to happen before it does – for example, Patrick's death and the attack on Neria by Phineas and his wife. Connie insists that the time of husband's relatives taking over the property of widows ended long ago. Patrick also tells Phineas that the time of wives who do not participate in the decision making process of a marriage is long gone. Connie and Patrick show that

culture changes with time. The way both of them argue forces their listeners to question themselves if time does not really change things in life. Once again, patriarchy is confronted by an argument that is difficult to negate instantly.

The argument of time exposes the dynamic nature of tradition and culture, emphasising that categories like nation, culture and tradition need to and do change, to match the changing times. They are impacted by time. Both court scenes, especially the last one, show that people can see that, today, wives do not only work at home (as if that is would not be enough to warrant them the right to keep their husband's assets), they also work outside home and contribute to what a family owns. In Neria's case, she has taken part not only in the giving birth of the children, she has helped her husband get ready for work and supported him. She also is formally employed herself. In court, people can see that if it is an issue of labelling that which one has worked for, then this woman has worked for family too, she deserves to keep them.

### **Patriarchy Meets Sisterhood**

When Neria is frustrated and about to give up fighting as Phineas says he is going to court for the second time, Connie leads Neria and the women who work with her in a song that says the women of Zimbabwe are going to fight for change in issues that problematise their lives. They sing this song to encourage Neria to fight on but it is obvious that Dangarembga uses the words to make a statement on behalf of other Zimbabwean women facing different kinds of woes. The song is very inspirational and when I translate it from Shona, this is what it says:

It does not matter  
 How heavy the load gets  
 We stand for what is good  
 We are women of Zimbabwe  
 We stand for what is right and good.  
 We women are very strong and tough,  
 Even if things get very tough,  
 We will work to fix and solve them.  
 Changing things is hard,  
 These issues are very heavy and difficult.  
 The level of difficult is so high that only women can deal with such problems  
 Only we women can bring change to such hard things.  
 (My translation, Dangarembga 1993: Scene 6).

This song registers a group of women who are resilient. They are aware of their problems but what is crucial to note is that they are doing something about it and encouraging each other to continue doing so. In this scene, we see the women mount a visible support system for Neria, giving her financial and moral support. Together with Neria, they evaluate their culture, pointing out what is good and bad about it, taking a stand on what must change. It is a scene like this one that inscribes the agency of African women, showing that they are not helpless and defenceless people but very stoic and resilient people who are courageously fighting indigenous and colonial patriarchy.

### **Patriarchy Meets the Western Colonial World**

When the British court rules in favour of Neria both times, Phineas mourns that Neria (and those who subscribe to her views) has won with the help of the white man's system. Phineas believes he has lost because his tradition has no voice and currency in an Africa that has bought and been bought by the Western and colonial way of life. It is easy to agree with Phineas. After all, it is the court that orders Phineas to bring back all the property that he took from Neria's house, leave the children with her and appoint her as the executor of Patrick's estate. When they leave court, one cannot help but feel that the solution to Neria's problem is once again prescribed by the white world. It seems the solution is yet another prescription from the white and colonial powers that be. Moreover, the court is a space that discriminates against people like Patrick's mother, Mbuya, because she cannot speak English fluently and is not conversant with such spaces. Against such a background, it is very telling that Dangarembga brings the feminist agency versus patriarchal control debate into the village public spaces. It is here that Dangarembga sets up a scene for Neria to deliver the most telling punch, not only to the patriarchy of Phineas, but that of the whole community members who construct constructs practices, institution and processes that render women voiceless.

### **Patriarchy Battled in the Village Public Space**

According to tradition, since Patrick has died Neria has to choose a husband to inherit her. Neria hates this practice and she uses the public space not only to register her dislike of this patriarchal practice but to go against it. When patriarchy exhibits itself not only as an ideology but also as a practice, Neria counters it with a practice by dismantling it to a point that her views on this issue are not only clear and owned by her, they make Mbuya change her stance on them too. One of the advantages of attacking patriarchy in public is that once the attack is visible and more so when successful, it can become contagious and bring about a snowball effect, inviting other people and forces to attack it.

This practice of choosing a husband involves Neria giving hunting gear (symbolising husband as warrior and protector) and/or bowl of water (symbolising the water a wife gives to a husband for him to eat after preparing his meal). Neria does not give the bowl of water and hunting gear to any of the older men. She goes through each of them (three in number including Phineas) refusing to hand them over. She gives it to her son, symbolising that she does not want to be remarried, since her son cannot marry her. The men are very angry, especially Phineas, and they walk away very annoyed, complaining that she is a rude woman, she is not a marriage material (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 11).

What is interesting is her mother-in-law's reaction. She not only accepts and respects Neria's stand, she applauds her on taking it, saying that she has learnt a lot from her. She goes on to explain how wrong her son is, how he is manipulating a practice that was not meant to be oppressive to women. She explains that the practice of 'kugara nhaka' (of course, I still disagree with her explanation) is mainly about the husband's side taking responsibility for the family, not taking over the property and leaving the family stranded.

### **Feminist Agency – Twisting Culture**

Mbuya goes on to say she agrees with Neria that culture has to be 'twisted a bit in order to suit times' that are changing. Neria has explained that she wants to take care of herself. She loved her husband and does not want to be married again (Dangarembga 1993: Scene 10). This is very important not only because Neria shows agency in a village space, in an African setting where the Phineas's of this world will not say the white man is the one who has poisoned the Neria's of this world. It is also important because it shows that African women have agency. They are not passive bystanders who just let things happen to them and are then busy picking up the pieces. African, Shona women like Neria can bend culture if need be in order to attain their goals. What is impressive is that Neria does not bend the culture by accident, what she does reveals a well thought out contestation with patriarchy, one that is owned and celebrated.

### **African Public Spaces – Spaces Full of Promise for Feminist Agency**

Dangarembga's *Neria* shows that the African public space is a battleground with patriarchy. When I read my incident at Thondwe market together with Neria's utilisation of the public space in urban and rural settings, I am convinced that the African public space is the space that feminist theorists, writers, those in advocacy and many other professions, should pay a lot of attention to. It is a space that confuses hegemonic forces like patriarchy, leaving it with cracks that allow for resistant feminist agency to utilise. The

public space of Africa is not only a barometer for gender issues; it is also a laboratory for change. It is a place where context-based agency, acts that subvert lived experiences, takes root and grows. Such agency becomes pillars for those subverting society in one way or another to hold on to and participate in, making new meanings of their citizenship. The African public space is a place to confront the present situation in which one can transform one's status from victim to survivor, especially as far as the woman question is concerned.

### Notes

1. This paper defines patriarchy as an ideological and hegemonic force that advocates the creation and perpetuation of male dominance in society, the power that men of any age, race, class, religion and ethnicity use to dominate women.
2. I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to Dangarembga for attending the presentation of this paper in Yaoundé, Cameroon. She asked very poignant questions, was very supportive. The conference presentation was followed by an interview in a forthcoming publication.
3. Usually called 'house' or 'garden boy'. Both are terms that bear a colonially demeaning baggage so I usually called them by their children's names as we do with adults traditionally.
4. Many Malawians, like in many African and third world countries, wear second-hand clothes from Western countries and these can be easily accessed in our markets. One can buy miniskirts and tight dresses from the vendors.
5. Synopsis of *Neria*: (Jesesi Mungoshi) is a 35 year-old woman living in Mbare. She is happily married to Patrick (Emmanuel Mbirimi) and has two children, Mavis (Tsitsi Nyamukapa), aged thirteen, and Shingayi (Manyika Kangai), aged seven. Neria works at a crocheting co-operative. In a good month, she earns as much as her husband. Neria and Patrick are painting their new home, a project to which Neria contributes both financially and physically. Patrick and Neria have been living in the city since their marriage, though they go to the rural home to visit the relatives on occasion. She and her mother-in-law (Violet Ndlovu) get along, but have the basic difference that Neria is a modern woman and Ambuya is a traditional woman. Ambuya doesn't understand their urban lifestyle and wonders why Neria insists on working instead of staying home like a good wife. Neria respects Ambuya's ideas and does her best to please her. As Patrick is returning home one evening, he is hit by a car and killed. Neria is understandably devastated. Her brother-in-law, Phineas (Dominic J Kanaventi), steps in and helps make necessary arrangements. She and her children go to her husband's rural home for the funeral. After a month in the village, Neria realises that she must get back to the city – the children have missed school, she has missed work and they must continue their life.

In the meantime, Phineas is helping himself to Neria and Patrick's things. He takes possession of cash and their joint POSB book, the car, virtually all their furniture, and eventually he takes over her home. She struggles to make ends meet, and though she asks Phineas for money from their savings to help her family, her plea is ignored. In time it is obvious that Phineas is misusing his traditional role as the protector of his brother's family. Neria's best friend and neighbour, Connie (Kubi Indi), advises her to go to a lawyer. But Neria is reluctant as she does not want to offend her husband's family. One day Neria comes home from work to find the locks on her house changed and her children gone. She knows that Phineas has taken them, and goes after them. She arrives in the village to find her daughter very ill and in need of a hospital. Ambuya is away at her sister's village, and only Phineas is around to help her. She pleads with him to take them in her husband's car to the hospital, but he is not willing to help. In desperation Neria carries Mavis to the bus stop and manages to get her to hospital on time. Neria decides that it has come to a point that she must take Connie's advice and seek legal help. After getting the necessary background information, the lawyer advises her of the steps she must follow. With the help of her brother Jethro (Oliver Mtukudzi) Neria goes through the necessary legal channels at the Community Court level and her eldest child is appointed the heir. Phineas is ordered to return the property. Phineas is outraged by the turn of events, as he feels he is entitled to his brother's property. He takes the matter to the High Court, claiming that Neria is not fit to maintain the children, and that in this circumstance it is best to follow Customary Law. After an involved Court hearing which brings to light the exploits of Phineas, the judgement is that Neria will remain the guardian of the heir. Through this process, Ambuya realises that Phineas is twisting tradition to suit himself. She comes to understand that at times tradition must bend with the changing times (<http://www.mith2.umd.edu/WomensStudies/FilmReviews/neria-mcalister>).

6. Part of the inheritance cultural practice, where a brother takes over the family of a brother who has passed away. He takes over the looking after of the family including the assets. Mtukudzi argues that the taking over of the widow is a manipulation of this practice. This practice is not limited to the Shona of Zimbabwe, it is also present in Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*. (Mtukudzi interview, Capital Hotel, Lilongwe, Malawi, 27 May 2007).
7. All references to *Neria* in this paper are to the 1993 production.
8. Ajayi Soyinka argues that colonialism imported the patriarchy that characterised Europe and America of the nineteenth century into the colonised African communities. This colonial patriarchy perpetuated the indigenous patriarchy. This validates the presence of patriarchy before colonialism and proves that it is not monolithic; there are various types of patriarchy. (Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Volume VIII, Number 2, (Kansas: The University of Kansas, 1993), 162.

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