

Zimbabwean Novelist, Tsitsi Dangarembga

Leaving a Mark on the Landscape

Helen Fallon

They carved images into the rock face a few miles outside present-day Harare, sometime between two thousand and twenty thousand years ago. Through these drawings, they told the story of their lives and left a record of the fact that they had lived and walked this earth. Stories are as old as mankind and people have always felt a need to tell something of their life.

When I went to Zimbabwe in 1991, I was struck by the beauty and openness of the landscape and understood why people wanted to leave the narrow, overcrowded streets of English towns and the small farms of 19th and early 20th century England. In what was then the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, they could get one thousand acres cheaply, and local labour to work their farms. I'd read about these people in the short stories and novels of Doris Lessing. Lessing brilliantly portrays the life of the settlers – part of the country, but somehow detached and often alienated from it.

A TEENAGE GIRL

However, I hadn't read anything about the black people whose ancestors were buried in this warm African earth, not for just one or two generations, but as far back as the time when they carved images on those rock faces. Back in Harare, I bought *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga. The first novel to be published in English by a black Zimbabwean writer, it is a fictionalised autobiography of the author's teen years, in the 1960s, in what was then Southern Rhodesia.

Tambu, a girl growing up in a poor African family, tells the story. At the start of the novel, Tambu's uncle, Babamukuru, and his wife, Maiguru, have just returned with their two children after five years studying in England. Tambu desperately wants an education but Uncle Babamukuru and her parents feel it is more important to educate her brother Nhamo. Marriage laws govern their thinking to some extent. When Tambu marries – and this is a society where marriage



The complex at Great Zimbabwe, from which the country takes its name, was built between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and may have housed as many as 40,000 people.

and motherhood are seen as the only roles for women – any money she earns will assist the family she married into, rather than her family of birth.

Babamukuru brings Nhamo to the Protestant mission school where he is headmaster. “Nhamo, if given the chance, my uncle said, would distinguish himself academically, at least sufficiently to enter a decent profession. With the money earned in this way, my uncle said, Nhamo would lift our branch of the family out of the squalor in which we were living.”

IN A DIFFERENT WORLD

But Nhamo dies unexpectedly and Babamukuru decides the money that would have been used for his education will be spent to send Tambu to the mission school. Her mother, Mainini, who cannot read or write, regards the education at the mission as an evil, because her son died there and she says to her daughter: “Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother, say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas?” Tambu’s father, the idle Jeremiah, asks: “Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.” Fortunately, he is persuaded to send her to school by his older brother Babamukuru who, by virtue of age and education, is the final authority in the extended family. Tambu will go with Babamukuru’s daughter, Nyasha, to the mission school.

The move to the mission school signifies entry into a whole new life for Tambu. On her arrival at the house of her aunt and uncle she mistakes the garage for her new home. She marvels that flowers “had been planted for joy. What a strange idea that was. It was a liberation, the first of many that followed my transition to the mission.”

Through education and reading, the two cousins, Tambu and Nyasha, begin to question why their society favours men so much and to explore the many problems facing teenage African girls and women. A portrayal of girls and women had been largely absent from previous Zimbabwean literature.

TELLING THE STORY

Indeed, there were few books which explored black people’s lives, and the society they lived in. Dangarembga noted in an interview: “The novels you read were just for improving your language skills. There wasn’t really any literature which your ordinary Zimbabwean child or your ordinary woman could relate to.” This was a feeling echoed by another Zimbabwean writer, Elinor Sisulu. In *The Ordeal of the African Writer*, she tells how the books she read as a child were about the English countryside, about snow, goblins and pixies. Her favourite writers were Charles Dickens and Enid Blyton. The rare time she

came across Africa in a book, it was in reference to missionaries or explorers, and it was depicted as a place of exotic jungles that bore no relationship to her own life. The idea that an African person could be a writer was something she had not thought possible.

Her secondary education completed, Tsitsi Dangarembga studied medicine in Cambridge, England. Feeling alienated and homesick, she returned home a few months before Robert Mugabe’s decisive win in the elections of August 1980, when Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. She began a degree in psychology at the University of Zimbabwe where she joined the drama group and produced a number of plays. In 1988 *Nervous Conditions* was published to wide international acclaim and the following year it won the Commonwealth Writers Prize.

In an interview she expressed the wish that she leave “a real taste of life during the times that I grew up.” Like the early people who carved images to tell of their lives and experiences, Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* has left a unique record of growing up in an African household in a time and place that no longer exists. ■



Through education, these young Zimbabweans will hopefully leave a mark on their cultural and political landscape.

(photos: Martin Smith)

Helen Fallon, who has lectured at the University of Sierra Leone, is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. In future issues, she will explore the writings of other African women. *Nervous Conditions* is published by The Women’s Press, London.