



The Gendered Contribution of *Neria* to the Repertoire of African Filmmaking

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Abstract

In an epoch-changing moment in Zimbabwean film history, *Neria* was produced by Media for Development (MFD) in 1991. It was the first locally produced film to portray relatively strong black women as shown by the titular character who resolutely fights her greedy in-law for her late husband's estate. *Neria* remains Zimbabwe's most popular film and has elicited analyses in books, films and reviews among other commentaries. Though they note empowerment of women in the film, most of these studies tend to pit women against men yet male and female characters support *Neria*'s cause. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the contribution made by the *Neria* film in promoting gender equality in an African cultural context. Womanism which asserts that abuse of women is an aberration from African culture provided theoretical grounding to the paper. Research questions that guided the study are: (i) What is the representation of male and female relationships in *Neria*? (ii) To what extent does this reflect Zimbabwean society? (iii) What are the factors that influence this portrayal? The research methodology adopted for this study is qualitative and purposeful sampling since it involves visual analysis of the film that is reported in words. Research findings are discussed thematically using eight themes that emerged from collected visual data that is presented qualitatively. The findings revealed that *Neria* exposes gender inequality in Shona traditional culture and calls for its integration with western culture albeit at times it seems too moralistic. Apparently due to the film's external funding, it fails to link moral decadence to materialism brought by western cultures. This paper recommends concerted efforts from the government, individuals and organizations in training film personnel and funding films without undue interference. Moreover, films like *Neria* ought to increase the usage of indigenous languages such as Shona and Ndebele with English subtitles especially in emotional scenes for them to be more comprehensible.

Keywords: *Culture; Feminist Film Industry; Funding; Language; Neria; Womanism*

Introduction

Films artistically represent society through moving visuals, sound, lighting and subtitles. Male dominance in terms of representation and personnel was a colonial relic in African films for years. White males occupied prominent roles but were gradually replaced by black males. Equally important development is that more women are now involved in key roles like starring, directing, producing, among others. *Neria*, a film that has achieved iconic status in Sub Saharan Africa, portrays aligning Shona traditional culture with other cultures to appeal to changes in lifestyles.

Starring Jesesi Mungosi as the eponymous protagonist, the Godwin Mawuru-directed film is a collaboration between men and women (Tsitsi Dangarembga wrote a story which was adapted for screenplay by Louise Riber who co-produced the film with her husband John with Godwin Mawuru as the director). *Neria* marked “a landmark cinematic production not only in Zimbabwe but the whole of Southern Africa”. As such, it won international accolades and broke office records, beating *Terminator 2* and was beamed in rural areas where there was no access to cinemas (Hungwe, 2006; Pasipanodya, 2020). Mawuru won the OAU award for Best Director at the Carthage Film Festival, Mungoshi received the M-Net best actress award, ahead of the likes of acclaimed United States’ actress Whoopi Goldberg (Hungwe, 2006).

Scholars are divided about classification of films from Africa. Films made between 1910 and 1996 are not African films because they are from “white cinema constructed for a white audience” (Armes cited in Ureke and Tomaselli 2017: 13). Ureke and Tomaselli argue that classifying films based solely on authors’ race or countries of origin is problematic because ‘African films’ are “often done collaboratively with Europeans” (2017: 5). They cite Simon Mabhunu Sabela, whose 14 films were produced by the white South African apartheid government, yet the post-apartheid government leaders appropriated and showered him with accolades. Montle (2022: 207) describes this type of a situation as an indication that colonial remnants are still dominant in modern day African societies that are now under democratic dispensation. Dovey contends that “African Cinema is a myth – it is now generally acknowledged that there are multiple African cinemas” (2012: 18). The term “African cinemas” is preferred to “African cinema” (Aiseng, 2017: 28), a “lazily assumed” reference to “Africa as a country” (Stoneman 2013: 240). Nonetheless, at times, this paper uses the terms “African film” and “African cinema” as metaphors for films from different parts of Africa because they have many similarities.

Paucity of literature and films involving black Africans is well documented (Mboti, 2017). For instance, Dangarembga’s “work has not received enough scholarly literature” (Amaefula, 2021). Dominance of men in the film industry has been a concern even though the likes of Ousmane Sembene, Djibril Diop Mambety, Med Hondo portray women in positive light, critics argue that women should speak for themselves (Dovey, 2012). Most studies on gender and equality in Africa are based on fictional texts that portray events in an African setting rather than films (Seanego, Montle & Mogoboya, 2022). Mekuria (2012) attributes dearth which characterized African films for many years to lack of film education. Initially, only concept originators, scriptwriters, directors and producers studied film. One person was often responsible for multiple roles; African cinema developed “mainly on auteurist lines” with one filmmaker organizing workshops, festivals and running of magazines (Petty, 2012: 3). This would inevitably lead to the film being a portrayal of that one person’s gender or cultural biases especially in a case where men tended to and still dominate the film industry as directors and funders (Pasipanodya, 2020). The bias can be attributed to “varied culture and norms amongst men and women” which can inadvertently influence film makers (Seanego et al., 2022).

Against this background, the paper seeks to address the research dearth in previous analyses of the film *Neria* which have tended to pit women against men without acknowledging the role played by both males and females in support of *Neria*’s cause. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to present the

contribution made by *Neria* in promoting gender equality and African culture in the context of Zimbabwe as a case study. Research questions upon which the study is premised are: (i) What is the representation of male and female relationships in *Neria*? (ii) To what extent does this reflect Zimbabwean society? (iii) What are the factors that influence this portrayal? The paper will present Africana womanism, the theoretical framework upon which the research question hinges then the literature review. This will be followed by research methods that were used to collect and analyse data, presentation of results and a discussion of results to show how they link to the literature will be done together. Finally, we shall present a conclusion drawn from the results and point out areas for further research.

Africana Womanism Theory

In 1983 Alice Walker coined the term womanism for a movement which she felt was more inclusive than black feminism which implied a level of racial discrimination that had split mainstream feminism. Hudson-Weems (2004 :18) says Womanism is more appropriate than Black feminism, so she came up with Africana womanism because “naming something gives it essence”. Obiechina (1975: 13) asserts that names have an “ontological significance” among African people. This view is supported by Fanon (1963) and Achebe (1988) who point out that defining oneself signifies identity and dignity. The only other difference between Womanism and Africana womanism is that the latter does not acknowledge gays due to influence of conservative African cultures. Africana womanism centralizes “race and class and gender” in that order (Hudson-Weems, 2020: 13). Seanego et al., (2022) argue that feminism is not necessarily about gender equity as it is also about gender sameness.

Unlike feminism which is a reaction against patriarchy, Africana womanism embraces relations between men and women: it “is not reactive; it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment” (Nnaemeka, 2004: 376). Nnaemeka adds that “nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second, nego-feminism stands for “no ego” feminism (2004: 376). African proverbs like “the sky is vast enough for all birds to fly without colliding” reflect a philosophy of tolerance between men and women. African culture is not concerned about who controls who but reciprocity between men and women (Armah, 1973); non-western countries have a philosophy of “appositional complementarity”, recognition of men and women as different but equally important (Ani, 1994: 75). Before colonization, African women owned land which earned them income from agricultural produce (Pasipanodya, 2020: 32).

African mythologies and religions reflect gender balance. For instance, Kikuyus from Kenya believe that Gikuyu (male) and Mumbi (female) are creators of mankind (Waita, 2020). Kaguvi (male) and Nehanda (female) are spirit mediums credited with inspiring Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle (Hungwe 2006). According to Amaefula (2021: 290), “powerful warriors, priestesses and queens in traditional African societies nullify the view that women completely existed on the fringes, suffering oppression in the hands of men”.

Literature Review

Cinema emerged in Paris, France in the mid-1890s and arrived in South Africa before 1900, reaching Zimbabwe, British and French West Africa in three years (Pasipanodya, 2020). African films are traceable to colonial times when participation of black people was restricted (Sakarombe 2018; Ureke 2021). Most of these films did not reflect oppression of black people, making them “susceptible to the propagandistic intentions of the state” (Tomaselli, 1989: 81). Michael Raeburn’s *Rhodesian Countdown* (1969), a satire on the Rhodesian regime starring Dominic Kanaventi, a black actor, was an exception. It was inevitably banned, as was Raeburn’s book, *Black Fire*, after which he fled to England where he lived until Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980. Yet, independence has not utterly removed colonial identity in

Africa as the English language, Christianity and Eurocentric tendencies, amongst others, are still valued more than African identities (Montle, 2022).

Kubi Indi was the first black woman to feature in *Live and Let Die* (1973), a James Bond film, albeit as a minor character (Pasipanodya, 2020). After Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, films which were dominated by black characters emerged. In the comedy, *Mhuri yekwaMukadota*, Susan Chenjerai acted as "Amai Rwizi", a submissive wife. This shows that women continued to be stereotypically depicted. To boost tourism, the government facilitated shooting of films by Hollywood actors in Zimbabwe. *King Solomon's Mines* (1985) featured Richard Chamberlain and Sharon Stone among Zimbabwean actors who included Isaac Mabhikwa, Innocent Choga, Brian Kagure, Oliver Tengende and Simon Shumba (Mboti, 2017). Though Mabhikwa, Choga and Kagure, were "silent ones" and Shumba was an extra, such appearances moulded many filmmakers. *Neria's* director, Godwin Mawuru was a trainee cameraperson on *World Apart* (1988); Mabhikwa, who went on to direct *More Time* (1993), played cameo roles in *Cry Freedom* (1987) which starred Denzel Washington as Steve Biko. Despite serving state propaganda, the CFU nurtured black African film practitioners like Simon Mabhunu Sabela, Joe Mafela and Gibson Kente of South Africa and probably the first black African filmmaker, Gadalla Gubara Al-Faki, a Sudanese producer (Ureke & Tomaselli, 2017).

The period from 1990 to 2000, dubbed the "MFD decade", saw MFD funding films which included *Consequences* (1991), *Neria* (1991), *More Time* (1993), *Everyone's Child* (1997) and *Yellow Card* (2000). Although *Jit* and *Flame* were 'independently' produced, they were foreign funded (Mboti, 2017). However, *I am the future* (1994), directed by Mawuru and produced by Indi, was funded by local corporates (Guzha, 2013). MFD moved to Tanzania, ironically, "the birthplace of the colonial film in Africa" during the land reform programme in the early 2000s (Mboti, 2017). Establishment of the Zimbabwe Film Festival (ZIFF) in 1997 assisted upcoming filmmakers especially between 2000 and 2010. In 2002, Tsitsi Dangarembga in conjunction with Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe (WFOZ) launched the International Images Film Festival (IIFF).

In the early 1970s, Hollywood films were accused of "fetishistic scopophilia" and "voyeuristic sadism", excessive portrayal of women as sex objects to satisfy men's eyes (Mulvey, 1975, :735). Mulvey applied Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis as a 'political weapon' (Arif, 2013: 13) to fight patriarchy, claiming that films are presented from a 'male gaze' (Smelik, 2009: 180) meaning viewers adopt the position of heterosexual males.

Films are dominated by men (Pasipanodya, 2020). Females constitute just 2% producers, 19% executive producers, 16% editors, 11% writers, 11% directors and 4% cinematographers (Michallon, 2018). A study conducted in 2018 on five films directed by women and as many films directed by men showed that women enjoyed fair representation in films directed by women (Kunse, 2019). In the same year, International and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media studied 56 top selling films in 20 countries and found that compared to males, female characters in management positions are four times likely to appear in sexually suggestive clothing; almost twice likely to appear partially nude and four times likely to be presented stark naked. Nonetheless, Kiddo from *Kill Bill* is a rare female character who endures years of training and plotting for revenge as a warrior and does not draw attention because of her anatomy (Smelik, 2009). Though portrayal of women as strong is commendable, some critics are of the view that this glorifies violence (Neuendorf et.al., 2010).

African films are "profoundly feminist ... whether colonial, neo-colonial or postcolonial" (Dovey, 2012: 18). Sembene placed women "at the epicenter of his revolutionary ideological dialectic" (Pfaff, 1983: 156). Gender relations are key tropes in Sembene's oeuvre (Mboti, 2017). *Xala* (1975) exposes chauvinistic politicians, *Faat Kine* is about a girl who overcomes traumatic experiences of being raped to become a successful entrepreneur who raises her two children after being dishonored by her

father. *Moulaade* (2004), extols women's brave stance against the risky culture of genital mutilation. Prior to that, in 1992, Cheik Oumar Sissoko produced *Finzan* in which two rural women resist wife inheritance and genital mutilation. When Borom returns home without money in *Borom Sarret*, his wife hands him their child and promises to bring food for the family that evening (Sembene, 1963).

Dangarembga's films are characterized by strong-willed female characters. In *She no longer weeps* (1987), Martha leaves an abusive husband. Tamari in *Everyone's child* (1996) finds for her orphaned sibling through prostitution, her only option. *Kare Kare Zvako, Mother's Day* (2005), is about a woman who rises from the dead after her greedy husband kills her for giving food to their starving children. South African filmmaker, Zola Maseko's *The Return of Sara Baartman* (2003), relives the story of a Khoikhoi woman who was shipped from South Africa and displayed in France and England "as a freak" and was mockingly referred to as "the Hottentot Venus" (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012: 306). In the film, George Cuvier, a naturalist explains how he dissected Baartman's corpse and traced her origins to apes and dogs. Sekiyamah castigates stereotypical depiction of women as witches and corrupt in many Nigerian films (Badoe, Mama & Mekuria, 2012: 4). Sofola describes denigration of women as "dewomanization" (cited in Nnaemeka, 1999: ix).

African directors portray women better than French filmmakers (Dovey in Badoe, Mama & Mekuria, 2012); if African filmmakers fail to produce films, Africa will "continue to be colonized through imported film" (Hondo cited in McLeod, 2011: 79). Aiseng sees film as praxis as he proposes "cinema of Black Consciousness" (2017: 13). Since Africa has low literacy rates, film helps "to teach the masses...the best evening school" (Portis-Winner, 2019: 236) because it is understood by more people than books (Dangarembga cited in Ellerson in Badoe, Mama & Mekuria, 2012). Like Ngugi who prioritizes Gikuyu language in his writings, Sembene's films are in his native Wolof because "Africa is my audience while the West and the rest are only targeted as markets" (Messier, 2011: 5). As stated earlier, *Neria* is a collaborative effort. Godwin Mawuru provided the concept, Dangarembga wrote the initial script which Louise Riber adapted for screenplay. Riber says it was "like a mini novel" with dialogues between characters which she adjusted for filming.

Sponsorship is the lifeblood of every industry. Film requires cast, equipment, wardrobes, filming sites and transport among others. Mhiripiri (2000: 24) says "the film industry is arguably the most capital intensive of all media, considering the origination and processing material as well as basic resources to shoot a single film". Mass exodus of whites at the turn of the century during Zimbabwe's land reform exercise brought economic challenges. MFD which sponsored arguably the country's best films, relocated to Tanzania (Mboti, 2017). Due to cash constraints, *Sinners*, a 2013 film, was made from Sony HVR-ZI High-Definition Video camera which is inferior to the 35mm on which *Neria*, a 1991 production was shot (Pasipanodya, 2020: 19).

Much as they assist in film production, donors are accused of imposing formulaic messages. Pasipanodya (2020: 18) calls them a "repeat mantra" turning film into a "culture industry" (Adorno and Hockheimer cited in Mboti, 2017: 17). They seem to prefer films that criticize Zimbabwean cultures instead of promoting cultural integration. Promiscuity, HIV and AIDS contraction, teenage parenthood are the threads which unite MFD funded movies like *Consequences* (1988), *More Time* (1993), *Everyone's Child* (1997), *Yellow Card* (2000). *Everyone's Child* and *Neria* (1991) create the impression that traditional culture has no compassion towards orphans. Though these films educate and inform, their representation "mimics in a way the use of film as a medium of political indoctrination" in colonial times (Dangarembga cited in Schuhmann, 1999). Hungwe states that "the rights-based agenda is political and ideological even though filmmakers have not acknowledged this" (cited in Tarindwa, 2008: 11). Mhiripiri (2003: 3) calls for "reflexivity" whereby filmmakers provide footage of the filming processes.

Commenting on her directorial debut in *Everyone's Child*, Dangarembga says it was a typical “NGO, ‘teach the people how to behave’ –type things, and I needed work, and I needed to graduate, so I did it. But it’s not the kind of thing I like to do” (cited in Splawn 2019: 135). Sembène was forced to convert his film, *Xala* into a novel for him to get funding (Gugler and Diop cited in Messier, 2011: 152). African governments and institutions should pool resources to promote the creative industry. Sembene’s Camp de Thiraoye, was facilitated by donations from Tunisia, Algeria and Senegal (Pasipanodya 2020). Governments through arts and culture ministries should provide moral and financial support.

Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative methodology to analyse data visualised from the film shot in Africa in Zimbabwe about a Zimbabwean woman who plays the leading role. In taking this approach, the paper is informed by Neuman and Kreuger (2003) who state that qualitative research relies on soft data that can be in the form of impressions, words, sentences, photos and symbols. Similarly, this study analyses the film to understand the role it plays in gender equality through photos, symbols and words used by characters to create a particular impression about the society presented in the film.

Research Design

Yin (2014) states that a case study research technique serves to answer the “what” and “how” questions. In the same fashion, the paper uses the *Neria* film context as a case study to analyse how and what it portrays about gender equality. The Zimbabwe culture also comes in as a lens through which the film is analysed. The particular case study found suitable for this study is descriptive case study because the paper describes the visualised film’s portrayal of its content (Yin, 2014).

Data Collection

The study uses the film *Neria* as the main source of data collection. In addition, available literature supplements the impressions presented by the film.

Sampling Method

The sampling technique adopted is purposive since the *Neria* film has deliberately been selected as a source of data analysis. Purposive sampling is recommended because of its rich data that contribute to well-informed findings (Sibona et al., 2020). Non-probability purposeful sampling is ideal in a situation where the data source meets the requirements of the study’s purpose (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). Likewise, *Neria* with its African and Zimbabwean setting qualified it for a purposeful selection in this paper that focusses on the film industry in Africa.

Data Analysis

The collected data are analysed thematically in keeping with the purpose of the study. In this instance, seven themes are generated through visualisation as presented in the findings and discussion section below. The approach is informed by Braun and Clarke (2022) who describe the process of thematically analysing data to involve a system in which the researcher locates, organises and provides their impressions on patterns that emerge from data. The authors further recommend the thematic approach because of its popularity as an accessible and flexible qualitative data analysis method.

Findings and Discussion

Based on an analysis of *Neria*, the following eight themes were observed and are discussed together with relevant literature.

Story within a Story

Story-telling is as old as African civilization (Mboti, 2017; Pasipanodya, 2020). Filmmakers often describe themselves as storytellers (Mistry & Schuhmann, 2005). The storyteller resembles a griot in West African countries who “has mastered the art of circumlocution”. This means (s)he uses creativity to determine how to tell the story. Dangarembga replaces the formulaic opening line “paivepo” (Once upon a time) for “Kare kare hako” in her 2005 film of the same name (Velt Wilde 2005). In “Jari Mukaranga”, Mbuya employs the formulaic opening line, ‘Once upon a time’ to provide context. Though the actual time and place are not mentioned, the lesson is more important contrary to claims that African folktales are “naïve and sentimental (Kahari, 1990: p.ix). The folktale bears parallels with *Neria*. Mbuya says wives are not appreciated for their sacrifices, the same thing that Jethro sings in “*Neria*”. As a good storyteller, Mbuya concludes with stating the moral, that women should be “treated well” or one goes broke. Patrick says “*Neria* has made me” and warns Phineas to respect her or he will lose a brother which shocks Phineas. “*Jari Mukaranga*” is melodramatic as it has a dutiful wife and a lazy husband just as in *Neria* where *Neria* embodies courtesy whilst her brother-in-law, Phineas is disrespectful.

Camera Effects

A close up, ‘zooming’ of the camera towards a character enables viewers to read their facial expressions and body language. When Phineas mentions *Neria*’s name as they travel to Domboshava, the camera focuses on her face which reveals a worrying countenance. *Neria*’s silence here is a bit worrying if not unrealistic. Gaidzanwa says behaviour such as *Neria*’s quietness in this case smacks of “female masochism than virtue” (1985: 13). Mbuya’s face is not shown as she restrains Phineas, probably because her voice is emphatic so there is no need for viewers to see her facial expression. However, viewers get a clearer view of Mbuya dozing whilst seated on a chair. Connie shakes her head after she waves at Patrick just before his death and at her workplace as does *Neria* when Mbuya sweeps the yard early in the morning. The viewer can see that the characters are worried in each case.

Long shots are used to give pictorial views of Domboshava (countryside) the city (Harare). Short, medium and long shots are also used to show proceedings in the courtroom followed by the ceremony in Domboshava in which *Neria* gets a chance to choose a husband. *Mise-en-scene* such as a more rustic landscape in Domboshava and a well-maintained Harare city centre which is now a far cry and haziness of visuals at times shows that *Neria* is a film of bygone years.

Dreams

Dreams are significant among Shona people. Connie has several weird dreams which give her an uneasy feeling. *Neria* also has a nightmare and with hindsight, these were ominous signs as Connie complains at the scene of Patrick’s fatal accident. Despite being a strong woman as Francisca notes, Connie remains rooted in traditional spiritual beliefs. Mhiripiri (2003) says African people believe in phenomenon which involves extraterritorial forces therefore it is scientifically unexplainable, like religion it is a matter of faith.

Fate

The African world is “an arena for the interplay of forces” (Achebe, 1988: 13), the line between the living and the dead is strenuous unlike in western cultures where a dead person is considered lifeless.

Similarly, Raeburn says, “in the great tradition of African culture in which real and unreal are merely two sides of the same coin”. When Phineas ‘warns’ Neria for angering “the ones who guard this place. You are asking for curse a on yourself”, her facial expression and voice shows her remorse though she is within her rights to demand her children. In court, she says she initially did not want to fight Phineas fearing that she would anger “the departed”. To debunk the perception that ancestors are inherently vengeful, Connie says “those who are in the wind” guided Neria to victory. This debunks allegations that, “when it came to controlling women, the various patriarchies (colonial, rural, missionary, indigenous) often collaborated across racial lines (Hungwe, 2006: 37). Ambuya says Phineas’ greed will anger the ancestors. Neria asks Connie, “How can I fight my children’s own blood?” and tells Mr Chigwanzi, Phineas’ lawyer that she initially did not challenge him when he took her furniture to avoid angering “those who have departed”. During deliberations about distribution of the deceased’s property, Ambuya says tradition sets aside a year to ensure that the deceased “travels happily”.

Family and Home

Modernity and tradition have similar and contrasting perspectives. Unlike in western cultures, family in the African context includes members of ‘the extended family’. Phineas says he paid for Neria’s bride price. When he asks Patrick to buy a bull for the cow that Patrick bought in the previous year and he promises to consult Neria, Phineas says she should say her thoughts since she is present. When Phineas reminds Patrick at the kraal and he reiterates that he will consult Neria, Phineas says, “She is your wife, our wife” and tells him that if he always consults Neria, “the home suffers, your home suffers”. When a woman is married, she assumes her husband’s family identity just as many take up the surname of the husband. In “Zimbabwean cultures, women are referred to as *mutorwa* meaning stranger” (Mushore, 2016: 85). Schmidt (1992: 198) asserts that subordination of African women occurred because, “indigenous and European structures of patriarchal control reinforced and transformed one another evolving into new structures and forms of domination”. Neria tells Francisca, “A visit home [Domboshava] would be nice”.

Jethro provides moral and financial support to his sister Neria. He promises to pay school fees for her children after his upcoming show and travels to Domboshava where he bribes a boy to call his nephew who he takes to Neria. He ferries provisions from Phineas’ store to Neria’s house and Phineas calls him ‘family’ during one of his performances. Ambuya complains that her family “is falling apart” because Joel lives in another country and Patrick has just died in the city.

Patrick tries to spread his love equally between his family and extended families. Despite Phineas’ undesirable behaviour, he refers to him as “mukoma” and “uncle” and though he defends Neria to him, Patrick suggests that they buy him the bull to please Ambuya. Neria agrees because she is desperate to stop Ambuya who she affectionately calls Amai (mother) “to stop blaming me for everything”. Before making this request, Patrick expresses his gratitude to Neria for being a hardworking wife. Patrick tells Phineas that “Neria has made me” so if he “crosses” her, he will lose a brother which leaves Phineas baffled.

African people have spiritual attachment to home because that is where one traces one’s lineage. Regardless of one’s occupation, one is expected to remain in touch that is why when Patrick dies in the city, he is buried in Domboshava. Ambuya and Phineas tell Patrick to return home but he tells Amai that they have made friends and a ‘home’ in the city. Conservative people feel that that the city ‘corrupts’ or ‘swallows’ people. Phineas says Patrick “never comes home where he belongs” because Neria ‘controls’ him since they moved to the city. Patrick and his family, however, often travel to Domboshava which shows differences in conceptualization of time between village and urban dwellers.

Jethro, Neria’s brother promises to buy Shingirayi new shoes if he passes to which the latter says he prefers singing with him. Jethro supports his sister morally and financially. He gives Phineas a lift to

Neria's house so that he can deliver provisions from the shop. Embarrassingly, Phineas steals Patrick's bank book resulting in Mavis and Shingirayi's expulsion from school for non-payment of school fees. These examples further indicate the dominance of Eurocentric attitudes post colonialism in Africa (Montle, 2022).

Position of Women

Female mourners cry especially when the casket is brought outside, and pallbearers take it to the graveside. Dancing and singing of gospel and folk songs reveals the hybridity of Zimbabweans' beliefs. Sitting arrangement during distribution of Patrick's clothes and a ceremony held to enable Neria to choose a husband reflect subordination of women to men as the former seat on cloths on the ground whilst the latter, on stools. Neria and Ambuya wear black clothes to reflect their mourning, but no male character does that. This aspect of the film does not contribute to womanism and its associated feminism concept that promote gender equity and sameness (Hudson-Weems, 2020; Seanego et al., 2022).

Relationship between Women

Neria's workmates offer her moral support in her case against Phineas. Therida says "When you walk into that court, I know you are going to stand like a lioness which is protecting its cubs." Connie facilitates Neria's meeting with Mr Machacha, a lawyer who successfully wins back her estate from Phineas. Connie slaps Maria after she calls Neria's house hers. Ambuya lends credence to Neria's claims that she always blames her. Patrick leaves without telling a dozing Ambuya but when she wakes up, she blames Neria for not allowing "him to say goodbye to his own mother". She tells Jethro that she is, "As well as an old women can be under these conditions" insinuating that Neria is not looking after her properly. Before leaving for Domboshava, Ambuya and Phineas lament Neria's delays and when she arrives with shopping for the journey, they do not show any gratitude. When she arrives at Patrick's house for his funeral, Ambuya accuses Neria of being a witch. She, however, restrains Phineas on their way to Domboshava when he pressurizes Neria to comment on the bull issue. As the film wears on, Ambuya mellows. She tells the family gathering that Neria is not in the right frame to decide whether to remarry or not. When Neria apologizes to Ambuya that "it had come to this", when she wins her court case, she says she understands because "Our tradition says that the family must be cared for" and acknowledges that Neria is a strong woman". She says, sometimes tradition should be bent to fit changing times. Ambuya chides Phineas for his "greed", abusing tradition by taking Patrick's property and children instead of looking after the deceased's family as he would have done.

Nonetheless, Mavis is mainly described as a potential wife. Neria says when Mavis marries, she will realize that mothers are responsible for serving the family. Ambuya commends Mavis' cooking and says if she keeps this up, "One day you will be able to get a husband as good as your father". After her visit to Domboshava, Neria tells Connie that Ambuya enjoyed seeing her working all the time whilst Phineas made demands "as usual". Phineas accuses Patrick of putting "too much faith in these women" and shouts "woman!" as he beats Maria, his wife who he threatens to send "back to the jungle where you belong". Though she initially calls Phineas out for seeking to take Neria's property, Maria eventually moves into Neria's house which Phineas dubiously opens with spare keys. This finding is in line with Africana womanism theory which embraces relations between men and women in the African environment (Nnaemeka, 2004).

Tradition and Modernity

Death is regarded as transition to the spiritual world where ancestors reside in the Shona tradition which has mechanisms for handling every situation. For instance, Ambuya says according to Shona culture, the deceased's relatives should look after his family as he would have done for him to travel happily. As her relationship with Neria thaws, Ambuya tells Neria that the court's decision in favour of

her and her children corresponds with tradition which provides for the upkeep of the deceased's dependants. Ambuya learns this after the judge responds to her question on whether "your law" does not recognize the mother of the deceased. When Neria opts not to choose a husband, Ambuya describes her as a "strong woman" who has taught her that at times tradition should be "bent" in line with changing times. Francisca fears that Neria and Patrick's property will be taken by relatives of the deceased, but Connie says that has changed because women are also providing for the family.

To further show that tradition and modernity can complement each other, Patrick's funeral is marked by traditional song and dance as well as a priest and rituals such as distribution of the deceased's clothes and traditional rituals like the ceremony to allow Neria to choose a husband. The judge says Phineas flouted both civil law and customary law which he claimed to follow because it also protects widows as echoing what Ambuya told Phineas. Viewers are taken from the courtroom in Harare directly to the traditional ceremony where Neria is expected to choose a husband in Domboshava. One can also say Neria and Patrick's choice of names for their two children, son Shingirayi (Shona for persevere) and daughter Mavis (English) symbolizes their adoption of modern and traditional lifestyles. Ambuya, grandmother's name reflects her stereotypical behaviour especially in the early stages of the film as she often complains about her old age and nags her children and daughter-in-law for various things. Nonetheless, she also exhibits traits befitting a matriarch as has been shown in her support of Neria on numerous occasions and her criticism of Phineas' abuse of tradition.

Phineas, however, resists change. Though a friend of him and Patrick says "the doctor confirmed" that Caleb died from a heart attack, Phineas says it is a "fishy story" as Caleb had just written a will, insinuating that he was killed by his wife. The other friend says Caleb probably knew of his impending death. Patrick dismisses Phineas' view questioning why the wife would kill the "breadwinner". Like Phineas, Ambuya makes witchcraft allegations when she arrives at Patrick's house for his funeral, accusing Neria of killing her son, "A witch lives here. A witch!" Unlike Ambuya who learns from court proceedings, Phineas walks away each time he does not have his way. He does this to Ambuya after she blames him for Shingirayi's disappearance then in court when he loses to Neria and when she does not choose him to be her husband when a ritual is held in Domboshava.

Apparently, influences of modernity have resulted in culture shock among both rural and urban dwellers. Neria tells Francisca that Ambuya "just doesn't understand city life" which she also concedes to Patrick. Patrick tells his mother not to worry because sometimes she also does not understand. Ambuya is puzzled by the disintegration of her family, Joel lives in Malawi and Patrick has died in Harare. Neria asks her brother Jethro why Phineas is behaving so mean yet when their father died, their uncle looked after them to which Jethro explains that those days they stayed in the village together as a family "Unfortunately, today, there are greedy people who just use our tradition to suit themselves!" attributed to "varied culture and norms amongst men and women" The findings perpetuate different cultural norms for women and men in African societies (Seanego et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Dangarembga has written extensively about how black women suffer from a patriarchal society. *Neria* makes strides in breaking gender, race and class stereotypes as women like Neria cooperate with her husband in everything that they do. Despite being a divorcee, Connie is a dignified woman who facilitates a lawyer for Neria. Neria receives backing from men and women proving that not all men are as sinister as Phineas. MFD facilitated development of film in Zimbabwe though it tended to focus on negatives of Shona culture. Aunty Dorcas, Patrick's sibling makes a brief appearance. Neria's relatives hardly appear which seems to inadvertently perpetuate the notion that only male relatives matter. In addition, characters especially Ambuya, the village elder ought to have spoken in local languages to give

the film a more realistic feel and to promote these languages. Subtitles can be for translations. Politics affects all industries so governments should create a conducive environment for players to contribute to the film industry but donors should not impose content.

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