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Nervous Conditions

by
Tsitsi Dangarembga

Born on February 14, 1959, in Mutoko, Rhodesia, Tsitsi Dangarembga spent her early childhood in England, where her parents pursued their academic education. She and her brother completely forgot their native language, but in 1965 she returned with her family to Rhodesia and relearned Shona. As an adult Dangarembga attended Marymount Mission School in Mutare (formerly Umtali), and later completed her education at an American convent school in Salisbury (now Harare). She taught for a while in Rhodesia, then moved to England again to study at Cambridge University. But homesickness and the racism she confronted in England drove her back to her own country just a few months before it was transformed as the result of a bitter civil war. White-dominated Southern Rhodesia became the politically black-dominated republic of Zimbabwe. Dangarembga enrolled in the psychology department at the University of Zimbabwe; the university Drama Group produced three of her plays—*She No Longer Weeps*, *The Lost of the Soil*, and *The Third One*. But it was her debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*, that won her international acclaim. She finished the novel three years before its release, but was unable to publish it sooner in Zimbabwe because of the antagonistic reception of male reviewers. Demanding a full indictment of colonialism from literature, they objected to the novel's focus on gender issues in African society.

THE LITERARY WORK

A novel set mainly on an impoverished homestead and at the Umtali mission in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the 1960s and early 1970s; published in English in 1988.

SYNOPSIS

A young Shona woman recounts her struggles to receive an education in colonial Rhodesia, and the experiences of four women she loves.

Events in History at the Time the Novel Takes Place

Shifting status of Shona women. Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) has an overwhelmingly indigenous African population—some 79 percent are Shona, and the remainder are mostly Ndebele. The Shona cultivate crops such as maize, millet, yams, beans, and pumpkins, often on communal lands, as Tambudzai's (or Tambu's) nuclear family does in the novel. Most Shona have adopted Christianity but continue to subscribe to their native faith, centered on a high god and hierarchy of spirits with whom humans communicate through a medium. There is still among the Shona a very widespread belief in witches, who are blamed for illness, death, and other misfortune.

The most important unit in society is the patrilineage, or family line descending from a common male ancestor. At the time of the novel,

adult males and their wives and unmarried children often lived in the same homestead or cluster of homesteads. The extended family was a tightly knit unit; in the novel Tambu's uncle and aunt call her "daughter" and plainly regard her as such. Her uncle, Babamukuru, patriarch of the extended family, and also a school headmaster, exerts a godlike authority over his relatives. In Tambu's nuclear family, her mother, siblings, and any property they have belong to her father, a shiftless man who fawns over Babamukuru for the handouts he gets from his more successful brother. Yet Tambu's father wields authority in his own nuclear household.

According to Shona tradition, at marriage a man gives to his prospective wife's family a *roora*, or bride-wealth, usually a mix of cash and cattle. The roora legitimizes the husband's right to his wife's labor and to sexual access to her body. He also gains authority over her reproductive powers—the right to possess all children born to her.

In the past, the wife's subordinate status manifested itself in daily customs. At the center of the traditional homestead was the hearth, three stones that supported cooking pots, above which sat a horizontal bar on which fish, meat, and maize cobs were dried. If there was a gathering there, the women would sit on the ground, perhaps on reed mats, while men sat above them on a mud ledge. These customs had begun to change by time of the novel, as reflected in the chairs and couches with which Babamukuru's home is furnished. And despite the sexist customs, women appeared to have exerted some leverage even in the traditional household. "Despite their subordinate status," notes one historian, "many observers [have] concurred that any given Shona woman was not, as one colonial official phrased it, 'the downtrodden timid individual she is often supposed to be'" (Schmidt, p. 19). In keeping with this perception, various female characters in *Nervous Conditions* stand up for themselves, making their suffering and opinions known.

The status of Shona women deteriorated under colonial rule. Before the colonial period, women served as mediums, mediators in local disputes, and even heads of communities. However, by the late 1930s very few headwomen remained in power, and the division of labor in agriculture had begun to change. Suddenly women took on tasks formerly reserved for men—threshing, for example, in addition to the planting, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting. Meanwhile, colonial railways took the men away from the homesteads to copper mines and farming enterprises to make money for the Europeans, leaving the women behind to raise the crops that would feed the family. Men's status, given the wages they earned as migrant laborers, increased, while the role of women deteriorated as their workload mounted. By 1944, 80 percent of Rhodesia's subsistence agriculture was conducted by women (Schmidt, p. 83).

A typical day began before sunrise; women and girls started the fire, fetched water from a well, swept, and prepared the morning meal of *sadza* and relish. (The dietary staple, sadza is a stiff porridge, often made of maize and almost always accompanied by relish—a paste of stamped groundnuts mixed with greens.) By 7:00 A.M. mothers would leave to labor in the fields, perhaps returning to prepare lunch for their children, or if the fields were too far, arriving home only between 4:00 and 6:00 P.M. After school children helped by tending the garden or caring for younger family members. Boys were supposed to herd cattle and help plow while girls busied themselves with domestic work, but if sons were not around, as happens in the novel, daughters took on their work.

Women who sought escape from these conditions had few options. They could flee to a Christian mission, in which case they would be exchanging the patriarchal control at home for that of the missionaries. Or they could escape to a town, where they would have to find a male patron, whose domestic and/or sexual needs they could satisfy in exchange for shelter. Or they might find work as a servant, teacher, or nurse, as a very few managed to do. In the novel, Tambu's independent aunt, Lucia, consorts with two men and relies on a third, Babamukuru, to find her a job. Tambu's other aunt, Maiguru, in a show of defiance, runs away from her husband's home for a brief interval—but only to her brother's house, substituting one male authority for another.

Education. Under colonial rule, the Shona showed an almost passionate interest in education. Determined to attain it, whole families would strive to send at least one of their offspring to school, convinced that education led to money and the betterment of the family. Even children in their spare time would go around townships trying to sell items sewn by their mothers or vegetables raised in the family garden to pay their school fees, which is why Tambu attempts to raise and sell her own maize in the novel.

Education in Rhodesia was patently unequal. Until 1979 the country operated two school systems, one for the Africans, and a second, infinitely better financed one for the non-Africans. The Compulsory Education Act of 1939 required all whites aged 7 to 15 to attend school, for free if they so chose; in contrast, there was no such requirement for Africans, and those who did attend often paid their own fees. Missions and other private groups ran 83 percent of the schools that catered to the African majority. By the early 1970s, during the time of the novel, half the primary-school-age African population was enrolled. Far fewer, only 4 percent, proceeded to a secondary school for Africans, as Tambu does in the novel, and just a tiny fraction completed the full six years required here before becoming eligible for university study. Again only a minority of these schools were government-run, but the government went so far as to introduce an abbreviated option at this level, the junior secondary school, a Grades 8-9 program only, in which at least one third of the time was to be spent on vocational training. In fact, there was disagreement between white officials and businessmen on the one hand and missionaries on the other hand over the best kind of secondary education for Africans. Whereas the officials and businessmen focused on vocational education, the missionaries stressed academic education, although not to the exclusion of vocational subjects. It is this latter, missionary viewpoint that directs the schooling of the protagonist in *Nervous Conditions.*

The education of boys took precedence over that of girls, for economic as well as other reasons. Given the custom whereby a woman joined her husband's family after marriage, the better economic investment was to educate a son, since the money he earned would stay in the family. "Have you ever heard," rants Tambu's father when considering sending his daughter to school, "of a woman who remains in her father's house? . . . She will meet a young man and I will have lost everything" (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions,* p. 30). He dismisses her intellectual aptitude as of little use to him. Undaunted, Tambu resolves to be educated and learns later that her Aunt Maiguru had shown the same resolve: "I . . . studied for that [Master's] degree and got it in spite of all of them—your uncle, your grandparents, and the rest of your family"(*Nervous Conditions,* p. 101). Returning to Rhodesia with her degree, Maiguru pursues teaching, almost the only profession open to African women outside domestic service. Men too had a very limited range of options:

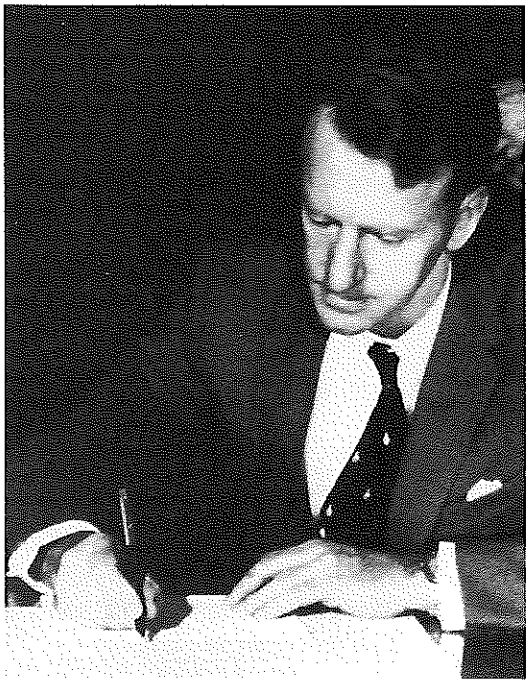
> To sum up the situation of the African people by mid-century . . . they were excluded from nearly every possible route to advancement . . . from the lands beyond the [overcrowded, soil depleted] reserve and from skilled jobs in government, mining, and business.
>
> (Beach, pp. 178-80)

Girls who attended school in Rhodesia studied reading, writing, and arithmetic, but the curriculum was largely directed toward training them to become good Christian wives of African men. They received daily lessons in hygiene and Bible study. At the secondary level, needlework and cookery appeared alongside other subjects. This type of gender conditioning was not limited to Rhodesia or, for that matter, to Africa. During the 1960s such conditioning occurred outside the continent, in countries like England too.

England in the 1960s. Tambu's uncle spends five years (1960-65) with his nuclear family in England. His daughter, Nyasha, returns to Rhodesia transformed, as does her brother, Chido. What type of events had characterized England during the family's stay?

The 1960s were a volatile decade in England. Teenagers had just become an identifiable market for the fashion industry and for popular music. Groups like the Beatles were achieving success with lyrics that reflected a search for new values, a drive to reject the past and reshape the world into a finer place. It was a time of optimism, of hope that life could be improved. England was replete with pop-music festivals, psychedelic drugs, protest movements, and the stirrings of a women's rights movement. "The social and cultural tone of the period, at least among some groups of the young and the well educated and particularly among the cultural avant-garde, was unconventional, anti-authority and experimental" (Williamson, p. 157). In this light, Nyasha's rebellious unconventionality in the novel becomes almost ordinary for her times and for her partly English upbringing.

In 1966 England saw the publication of *The Captive Wife,* a book by Hannah Gavron that spoke of the feeling of entrapment shared by young married women in England. "Is your wife just a bird in a plastic cage?" asked a newspaper that spoke of the book (Williamson, p. 154). Yet in England too public opinion "was still dominated . . . by the assumption that the appropriate role for women was in the home. . . . There



Cutting British ties, Ian Smith signs the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Salisbury, Rhodesia, 1965.

may have been voices of dissent, but what [these discontented women] were dissenting about was a problem they couldn't [yet] name, . . . 'a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning'; guilt, anger, loneliness, frustration, the dehumanization of women, their forfeited selves"—a description that applies as well to Tambu and her female kin in faraway Rhodesia (Oakley in Williamson, p. 185).

Second Chimurenga. Southern Rhodesia's colonial history and the dispossession of the Shona people by Europeans provide the background for the events in *Nervous Conditions*. For nine decades (1890s-1979) the Europeans remained in control of what is now Zimbabwe. Their rule began visibly to unravel during the 1960s, the first decade in which *Nervous Conditions* takes place. The War of Liberation, or the Second Chimurenga, is raging in Rhodesia at the time. Dangarembga keeps the Second Chimurenga in the background of her narrative, referring to the war vaguely only twice.

In the early 1960s the British empire began to abandon its colonial possessions in Africa, turning over power to the local African peoples. However, in Southern Rhodesia, the transfer of power did not go smoothly; white settler rule had become entrenched through decades of self-government. Under pressure from the global decolonization movement, a white backlash formed their own block, the Rhodesian Front (RF), and won the 1962 elections overwhelmingly, intending to prevent the transfer of power. In 1964 Ian Smith came to power as the RF's second prime minister. An ardent advocate of Rhodesia's independence under minority white rule, Smith's first official act was to consolidate white political power by detaining and banishing four black African nationalists. Riots erupted everywhere, but the police managed to suppress them, and Smith refused to discuss a new constitution that would lead to eventual black-majority rule. On November 11, 1965, Smith cut the umbilical cord to Britain, proclaiming the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (popularly known as the UDI). Although guerrilla warfare flared in 1965, it was the 1966 Battle of Sinoia (or Chinoyi) that marked the beginning of the Second Chimurenga.

Combat for the first few years amounted to little more than raids of several days. Finally, in 1972 African fighters based in Zambia and Mozambique started waging a sustained guerilla war against white Rhodesia's forces in the far north. It was not until 1976 that the war spread to other areas. So, despite the fact that it went on for more than a decade, for most of the country the war raged for only four years, in the latter half of the 1970s, just after the novel takes place. And even then, people went about their daily lives: "Historians of wars, and not just those of the . . . 1960s-1980s here in Zimbabwe, sometimes underplay the point that the great majority of the population were trying to carry on the unheroic and mundane but essential task of making a living" (Beach, pp. 179-80). This task was anything but easy under the control of the whites, given laws such as the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, which had divided the territory between whites and blacks, with the latter receiving the "grey, sand soil" that was "so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it" (*Nervous Conditions*, p. 18). And the Land Apportionment Act made no provision for blacks who chose an urban life; towns were designated as white areas. Hence, blacks lived in rented homes in townships located some miles from the prosperous white cities.

The Novel in Focus

Plot summary. In *Nervous Conditions* the narrator, Tambu, tells not only her own story but also

"the story of four women whom I loved, and our men" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 204). Tambu's struggles to receive an education serve as the main plot, which unfolds in a variety of settings, separated here into three major parts, which trace Tambu's development in different locations—the rural Siguake homestead, the Umtali mission, and the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart.

The rural Siguake homestead. As the novel opens, Tambu describes how she got her chance to pursue her education at the Umtali mission school, where her uncle Babamukuru, the head of the Siguake family, was headmaster and Academic Director of the Church's Manicaland Region. This happened in 1968 after the death of her brother, Nhamo, who had first joined the uncle and his family to study at the mission. Following his 1965 return with his wife and two children from England, Babamukuru visited the homestead and convinced his brother, Jeremiah, to send Nhamo to the mission. Nhamo had been at the top of the class in his first two years of primary school, which excited the uncle very much. At the mission his habits and attitudes towards his nuclear family and their ancestral homestead changed drastically: he would return to his rural home only when he was forced to help with the harvest. When he did come, Nhamo bullied his sisters, Tambu and Netsai. If Netsai did not heed him, Nhamo would take a stick to her. Tambu states flatly, "I was not sorry when my brother died," but fears she is too harsh in her judgment of him (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 1). She ponders whether he was a victim of sexist ideology, which did not consider "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family . . . a priority, or even legitimate" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 12).

Next Tambu recalls the time before her uncle's return from England, and relates how her relationship with her brother deteriorated when he tried to stop her from attending the local school. Tambu's family wanted to send Nhamo and Tambu to school; however, the family was poor and could not afford tuition fees for both children. When Tambu complains that she loves school, her father assures her that since a woman can not cook books and feed them to her husband, she is much better off staying home and learning to cook and clean. Undaunted, Tambu decides to earn the fees herself by growing maize for sale. Her crop is nearly ripe when it begins mysteriously to disappear. When she learns that Nhamo is the guilty party, she gives him his just desserts: "I sat on top of him, banged his head into the ground, screamed and spat and cursed" (*Nervous Conditions,* pp. 22-23). Mr. Matimba, the local teacher, breaks up the fight, and helps Tambu sell her crop in the city, where—out of pity and indignation at what she thinks of as "child labor" and "slavery"—a white woman contributes ten pounds for Tambu's school fees.

The narrative next describes Babamukuru's homecoming with his wife and children from England, and the extended family's reception of them at the ancestral Siguake homestead. Tambu captures not only the excitement of the family at the arrival of their head, but also her disappointment with her cousins, Nyasha and Chido, who speak only English and have forgotten the Shona language. Babamukuru, together with the rest of the Siguake patriarchy, decides to send Nhamo to the mission school, to help improve the miserable economic conditions on the homestead. Tambu is jealous, but concludes that Babamukuru knows better; his decision must be wise and justifiable. She recounts more of her brother's behavior changes during his three-year residence at the mission; to the pain of his mother but the delight of his father, he forgets the Shona language and becomes estranged from his nuclear family.

In November 1968 the family expects Nhamo at the homestead, but he never appears. Late that

COLONIAL EDUCATION AND ALIENATION

The way in which colonial education estranged African children from their own families and cultures has been discussed by Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Decolonizing the Mind.* Ngugi explains that imposing English as *the* language of communication caused African children to suppress their authentic selves and assimilate into a colonial identity. "Language and literature were taking us further and further from our selves to other selves, from our worlds to other worlds" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, p. 28). Colonial education began "with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a large social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, p. 28).

evening Babamukuru drives up and announces that Nhamo has died after catching the mumps. Babamukuru laments the fact that there is no other male child in the family to assume Nhamo's duty, but suggests that Tambu, now 13, "be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family before she goes into her husband's home" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 56). After some resistance from her mother, Mainini, Tambu is allowed to attend school at the mission and live in Babamukuru's modern home with her cousin Nyasha.

The Umtali mission. The second part of the novel intertwines Tambu's story with events in the lives of other characters, especially her cousin, Nyasha, her uncle's wife, Maiguru, and her Aunt Lucia. After her brother's death, Tambu moves into her uncle's house near Umtali to attend the protestant mission school for Africans. Tambu describes her relocation in a spiritual vocabulary, describing it as an experience of reincarnation. "Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven. I was in danger of becoming an angel, or at the very least a saint, and forgetting how ordinary humans existed—from minute to minute and from hand to mouth" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 70). Trusting in Babamukuru's wisdom and thirsting for education, Tambu feels her transfer to this new place is the right step in her development. Nyasha is excited to see her cousin. Tambu, on the other hand, frowns on Nyasha's disrespectful attitude to her mother, Maiguru, whom Tambu considers "the embodiment of courtesy and good breeding" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 74). When she knows that she will share a room with Nyasha, Tambu expresses mixed feelings. In the end, however, she comes to love Nyasha deeply.

Tambu experiences success in academics, social relations, and English language skills. But at her new home the atmosphere is less than peaceful. Tambu recounts the first crisis in the relationship between her uncle and Nyasha: Nyasha's parents object to her reading D. H. Lawrence's "indecent" novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* which she brings to the dining room.

A friendly, loving relationship develops between Tambu and Nyasha, who begins to disillusion Tambu about the power structures of their society and to shake Tambu's naive convictions about right and wrong. Nyasha points out the complexities of Babamukuru and Maiguru's behavior as well as those events shaping the history of Rhodesia and the world. Tambu feels sorry for Maiguru, who has made sacrifices in her academic career (she has a master's degree) to attend to her duties as a mother and wife, and who has no control over the money she earns from teaching.

The crisis between Nyasha and her father escalates, reaching a climax after the school Christmas party. On the teenagers' way home from the party, Nyasha lags behind with her brother's friend, Andy Baker, who wants to teach her a new dance. Demanding to know why his daughter is late, Babamukuru spies on her and then questions her about her tardiness, growing infuriated because she talks back to him. When he calls his daughter a "whore" and slaps her, she punches him back, at which point her father threatens to kill her, because there cannot be "two men in this house" (*Nervous Conditions,* p.

LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER

Disenchanted with much of the fiction in her day, the adolescent Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions* finds D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* compelling, as did many young people in England around this time. When Nyasha's family is said to have arrived there in 1960, the novel—about to be released in England in its final, unexpurgated version—was the subject of a controversial obscenity trial (*Regina* v. *Penguin Books Limited*). Lady Chatterley is an Englishwoman whose husband returns from World War I paralyzed from the waist down. The sexually explicit novel describes how Lady Chatterley satisfies her desires with a gamekeeper on her husband's estate. Adults hotly disputed the propriety of the novel in the 1960s; the author's own nephew, Ernest Lawrence, pronounced it unsuitable for teenagers. Others, however, found redeeming value in the novel. At the trial Jack Walter Lambert, an editor of London's *Sunday Times,* was asked about the quality of the book—did it make him realize anything new?

> Yes, naturally. One thing which it made me realise was that this [lovemaking] was a mutual process in which, shall we say, the woman had as much right to consideration as the man, that the thing was not in fact simply two people doing a certain thing as separate entities but a mutual process. He makes this very clear in the book and I do remember that this struck me very strongly at the time.
>
> (Lambert in *The Lady Chatterley's Lover Trial,* p. 218)

Lasting for six days, the obscenity trial ended with a "not guilty" verdict, allowing Penguin Books to proceed with its release of the novel to the general public.

115). Tambu realizes then just how universal gender oppression is:

> The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition.... Men took it everywhere with them. ... You couldn't ignore the fact that [Nyasha] had no respect for Babamukuru when she ought to have had lots of it. But what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness.
>
> (*Nervous Conditions,* pp. 115-16)

After this incident, Nyasha grows isolated and detached, retreating into a private world that nobody else can reach.

Babamukuru, his family, and Tambu return to the ancestral homestead for the Christmas holiday in 1969. All the members of the extended family gather for an annual reunion, during which they hold a *dare,* a patriarchal convention about family business. This year the Siguake patriarchy has to discuss the relationship between Lucia, Tambu's maternal aunt, and Takesure, a cousin whom Babamukuru had employed to help with the farm work so that Takesure could earn the money to pay the bride-wealth for his second wife. Takesure, however, has impregnated Lucia, who shrewdly credits the baby to Jeremiah, judging him to be the better man of the two. In fact, she later got involved with him. Indignant at his brother's sinful behavior, Babamukuru ordered Takesure to leave with Lucia, but the two of them have stayed. Initially kept out of the trial-like convention with the other women and children, Lucia rushes in to confront Takesure and his lies, and to make it clear that her interest in staying was to help her sister Mainini out of the misery of her life with Jeremiah. Babamukuru settles the matter. Deciding that all this misfortune is because Jeremiah and Mainini did not have a Christian wedding, he directs them to be remarried "in church before God" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 147).

Tambu feels that her uncle is making a mockery out of her parents' union and her own existence. She refuses to take part in the comedy of her parents' church wedding. On the morning of the wedding, her emotions leave her weak and unable to get out of bed. She risks losing everything by refusing to attend the wedding. Later, her uncle punishes her with 15 lashes and orders her to do all the housework for two weeks, during which Lucia and Maiguru give Babamukuru a piece of their own minds about family matters. Disposing of her submissive, compliant image, Maiguru explodes: "When it comes to taking my money so that you can . . . waste it on ridiculous weddings, that's when they are my relatives too. . . . I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being a housekeeper for them. I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 172). To show Babamukuru that she is serious about what she is saying, Maiguru walks out the door. She takes refuge at her brother's house, until Babamukuru brings her home; she is now less submissive and more genuinely happy than before the emotional outburst.

The action of the novel advances quickly. Tambu is offered a scholarship to the multiracial Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, "a prestigious private school that manufactured guaranteed young ladies" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 178). Believing that such schools are meant to assimilate Africans into white European culture, Nyasha is disappointed to see her cousin so thrilled about this opportunity. Babamukuru also expresses his reluctance to let Tambu go, since "it is not a good thing for a young girl to associate too much with these white people" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 180). But Maiguru stands by Tambu's right to pursue her education, and Babamukuru relents. After some persuasion, Tambu's parents agree.

The Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart. Babamukuru and his family drive Tambu to the multiracial convent in Salisbury (now Harare), where she is to sleep in a segregated African section. After they leave, Tambu becomes so overwhelmed with her academic studies that she does not have time to miss Nyasha and the rest of her family. Nyasha writes, complaining that she has become isolated from the girls at school, who consider her a snob and an unauthentic Shona. She feels that she needs Tambu badly: "In many ways you are very essential to me in bridging some of the gaps in my life" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 196).

By the time they meet again, Nyasha has grown overly thin, the result of a problem that began before Tambu left for the convent. When Nyasha's father forced her to finish her food, she complied, then went into the bathroom and made herself throw up. Three months later, when Tambu comes home on another visit, Nyasha is looking skeletal. She grows weaker by the day, losing weight steadily, and studying herself into a frenzy. Her health deteriorates until she has a nervous breakdown. The next morn-

ing, the family takes her to Salisbury to see a white psychiatrist, who refuses to diagnose Nyasha as anorexic, insisting that Africans do not have such problems. A black psychiatrist, however, recognizes her suffering and puts her into a clinic. Forced to leave her cousin to improve on her own, Tambu visits her family before returning to school. There her mother attributes Nyasha's problems to "Englishness"; the ancestors, she thinks, could not "be expected to swallow so much Englishness" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 203). The novel ends with Tambu reassuring herself and her readers that she refuses to be brainwashed and that she can no longer "accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on [her] horizon" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 203).

ANOREXIA NERVOSA

In *Nervous Conditions,* Nyasha suffers from a condition that was on the rise globally among teenagers in the 1960s and 1970s. A dangerous disease that afflicts primarily adolescent females, anorexia nervosa causes people to starve themselves, even to the point of death. The affliction surfaced with increasing frequency in England, among other places, and it showed "a substantial prevalence among the Caucasian population in South Africa," Rhodesia's African neighbor (Gordon, p. 36). Books like Hilde Bruch's *Eating Disorders* (1973) called attention to the psychological and political dimensions of the disease. The female victim was asserting the right to control her own body—while conforming to cultural standards of beauty. In Nyasha's case, these standards were those that prevailed in England during and after her stay. In 1966 the female model Twiggy, with her sticklike figure, became all the rage in England; within a decade, anorexia was afflicting about 1 in 100 girls in English secondary schools (Gordon, p. 38). It is during this decade that the fictional Nyasha succumbs to anorexia, struggling to exercise control over her own life in a society that demands conformity to ways that she literally cannot stomach. The disease is characterized, writes Bruch, by "an all-pervasive sense of ineffectiveness, a feeling that one's actions, thoughts, and feelings do not actively originate within the self but rather are passive reflections of external expectations and demands" (Bruch in Gordon, p. 15). Its victims feel trapped, like they are not in control of their destiny, a nervous condition that troubles Nyasha in the novel.

Nationalism and feminism. In *Nervous Conditions,* Tambu's mother, Mainini, acknowledges that "[t]his business of womanhood is a heavy burden" (*Nervous Conditions,* p. 16). Certainly Mainini is a victim of Shona beliefs and sexist practices. Less obvious but also embedded in the novel is the idea that African tradition and European colonialism were complicit in the subordination of women. When Tambu takes her qualifying exam for Sacred Heart College, the nuns test her on Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women.* Set across the globe in New England a hundred years earlier, this novel follows four daughters and their prospects for marriages that will lift them out of poverty. The emphasis, endorsed by the colonial test givers, is on the young woman as prospective wife. Actually one of the four daughters, Jo, chafes under the limitations placed on women in her society and longs for the freedom enjoyed by men, but this does not keep her marriage too from being featured in Alcott's novel. Directly and indirectly, *Nervous Conditions* brings the joint sexism of traditional and colonial attitudes to the forefront .

Other African coming-of-age novels (or *bildungsromans*) focus on the colonial education of the heroes and heroines and the ethical choices they make growing up in changing societies. In a number of these novels, the protagonists struggle with the alienation they experience from their cultures because of colonial education. (See Mongo Beti's ***Mission to Kala,*** also covered in *African Literature and Its Times*). Such novels, points out one scholar, concern more than the individual experience; they are often about "the postcolonial culture affirming its own identity as well as about individuals achieving independence and a sense of self" (Fister, p. 37). *Nervous Conditions,* however, is not a conventional postcolonial novel; the novel is better seen as a revisionist bildungsroman. Although it shows how colonial education pulled African children away from their roots and cultures, it also depicts how local patriarchal society worked hand-in-hand with colonialism to repress Shona women. In other words, the novel refuses to celebrate native culture as long as it subordinates or sanctions the colonial subordination of women.

In Africa, especially in the period of decolonization and independence, writers—including feminist writers—were encouraged to write about the liberation of African societies from colonial rule. A popular belief was that feminists ought to pledge their primary allegiance to the nation and its traditions. Affirming the potency of African

cultures and negating the colonial stereotypes about Africans were deemed more important than posing difficult questions about gender relations. Feminist writers thus found themselves faced with a difficult dilemma: how could they praise African traditions and nationalist groups that made women second-class citizens? Along with other writers, Dangarembga responded through fiction that refused to condemn colonial exploitation alone for women's miserable lot or to celebrate the national struggle as a step forward in the emancipation of the whole society.

Sources and literary context. After the publication in 1966 of Flora Nwapa's ***Efuru*** (also covered in *African Literature and Its Times*), the bildungsroman, or novel of development, became a popular genre among female African writers, whose works began to enjoy widespread acceptance only in the 1970s. Many novels were written about the dawning self-awareness and personal growth of African women at various ages, the mature Efuru and the adolescent Tambu being two examples.

The very existence of the genre in African letters was revolutionary in that it introduced women as active, dynamic agents of their own lives rather than as passive background characters or companions to male protagonists. How much such novels reflect reality and how much they are meant to affect reality by the ideas they convey remains an open question:

> Many [women] . . . have confessed that they are motivated to write by the impulse to change the status quo. . . . This is closely related to the desire to liberate African women, change their consciousness and recreate a positive self-perception. . . . Consequently, many have recreated women in their literature as agencies . . . of active socio-political change.
>
> (Kolawole, p. 153)

Nervous Conditions is credited with helping to restructure the nature of African heroines by presenting women who face down tradition and force change in society. Tambu defies her father by acquiring an education and her uncle by refusing to attend her parents' Christian wedding; her cousin Nyasha goes so far as to hit her father; and the girls' mothers, Mainini and Maiguru, though entrapped, voice their suffering and opinions.

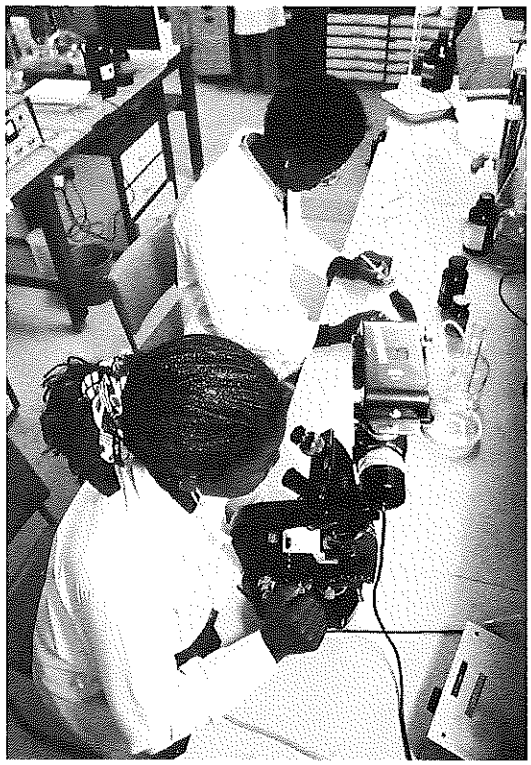
Events in History at the Time the Novel Was Written

Women's rights in Zimbabwe. After the initiation of black majority rule in 1980, the Zimbabwean government recognized the vital contribution that women had made in the national liberation war and promised to support their emancipation.

FRANTZ FANON

The title and epigraph of *Nervous Conditions* are drawn from Frantz Fanon's ***The Wretched of the Earth*** (also covered in *African Literature and Its Times*). "The status of the 'native'," says Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to this set of essays, "is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*" (Sartre in Fanon, p. 20). The colonized, who envy colonial privilege, dream of substituting themselves for the colonizer and adopting his system of values, in the process adopting a conception of themselves as inferior, which creates a permanent tension, a nervous condition. Fanon himself explains that afraid of being punished by colonial authorities for unintentionally trespassing rules, the colonized are fearful, always on the alert. This fear, combined with Babamukuru's share of Shona authoritarianism, helps explain his fierce reactions to his daughter's unconventional behavior in the novel.

Zimbabwe proceeded to pass new laws on behalf of the female population. In 1982 the Legal Age of Majority Act gave women the status of legal major instead of legal minor, their classification under customary laws written down in the colonial period. The government instituted free primary education for everyone, regardless of gender or race. By 1984 girls alone comprised almost half the total primary school enrollment and about a third of the secondary level enrollment (*Tabex Encyclopedia Zimbabwe*, p. 409). In the work force, the Labour Relations Act (1984) prohibited gender discrimination and guaranteed new mothers three months maternity leave. Within the family, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1985 made women beneficiaries of property that was accumulated during marriage, and children no longer automatically were awarded to the father in case of a divorce. Still, society regarded men as the main breadwinners, and a man's need for a job took priority over a woman's, even though women now comprised 51 percent of the country's population. Passing new laws was one hurdle; implementing them was another, and the persistence of old attitudes



Educational opportunities for women increased after the Second Chimurenga, or War of Liberation.

militated against rapid implementation, as did the daily struggle for survival. In the end, like the women (and men) in *Nervous Conditions*, much of late 1980s society would continue to live off employed relatives.

> Harare offers the most dramatic illustration of change in [the twentieth] century: within 30 km are . . . [Shona] villages with what look like traditional homesteads, whose owners still sometimes practise polygamy . . . while at the centre are shopping malls, computerized banks and traffic jams. Yet, alongside all the urban glitter are thousands of unemployed living off their employed relatives. . . .
>
> (Beach, p. 189)

Reviews. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, written when she was 25, received international acclaim and won the African section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in August 1989. The African American novelist Alice Walker commended the novel as having a new voice that spoke with such self-assurance that at times it sounded very old. Stella Dadzie called *Nervous Conditions* "compelling and unpretentious," identifying its strength as "Dangarembga's sensitivity to the lived reality of her people, providing her with a finely tuned gauge with which to measure their relative strengths and weaknesses" (Dadzie, pp. 374-75). Charlotte Bruner, reviewing the novel for *World Literature Today*, wrote that Dangarembga's "excellent style and power of characterization make the book outstanding" (Bruner, p. 354). More than a decade after its publication, *Nervous Conditions* continues to generate vigorous discussion about the female condition, colonialism, nationalism, and feminism in contemporary Africa.

—Jamil Khader

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ZIMBABWEAN WOMEN TO LIBERATION

Women played a major role in the national struggle for liberation, or Second Chimurenga, which altogether claimed an estimated 30,000 lives (Beach, p. 182). The young and the childless were recruited as combatants and freedom fighters. Dressed in fatigues, they were nearly indistinguishable from their male comrades. They provided traditional services too, like preparing the food and clothing that the freedom fighters needed for survival. Like other war heroes, these female combatants were honored by public memorials that pay tribute to their patriotism, courage, and love of freedom. However, the national monuments portrayed the male freedom fighters in trousers but the women wearing skirts, an indication perhaps that the struggle for women's rights after independence would, to some degree, be an uphill battle.

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