

ENG2603 NERVOUS CONDITION NOTES

THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study explores the gender, race, class and cultural experiences of black African women. It will analyze *Nervous Conditions* (1988) from a feminist point of view of women's subjugation. The main argument of this study is based on the notion that even though gender oppression against women is widely discouraged and is in the process of being eradicated, unequal power relations between the sexes still lingers. Women still suffer daily infringement of their basic rights as human beings and live with the ever present experience of sexual oppression.

The focal point of this exploration is an analysis of the role women play in the novel and to expound on how patriarchal oppression fosters discriminatory treatment against women. The established norms and decorum sanctioned by culture as a whole which relegate women to subordinate positions are investigated. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is used as a point of focus critically to investigate the oppressive experiences of African women, all of whom now live in post-colonial

The Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is a novel that shares many of the preoccupations of African women's autobiographical writing, and is spoken throughout by a single narrator who may be defined as "a narrative voice" or "speaker" of the text, one who supplies the "I said" tags and descriptions. The narrator of *Nervous Conditions* is an internal participant of the story, and a seemingly reliable one since the rendering of the story and its commentary affords the reader the opportunity to accept it as an authoritative account of a non-fictional truth (Rimmon- Kenan 1987:87).

The narrator is a woman who has already experienced the occurrences described in the text; the protagonist is a young woman trying to overcome hardships and develop herself to the fullest. As a woman she's undermined and deemed inferior. This subordination is further influenced by cultural ideologies that accord men a higher status than women. The text explores how a Shona woman being oppressed by cultural norms, patriarchy and race had minimal chances for social advancement.

AFRICAN SOCIETIES.

In the African culture, women are often trapped in traditional roles, as men do not take equal responsibility for family care and will not do what they see as women's work. It is within the novel that we can see how Tambu's mother, Ma'Shingayi is trapped in the traditional role of caring for the household as well as the children,

"The business of womanhood is a heavy burden." - Ma'Shingayi page 16,

this is when she explains to her daughter, Tambu, that there are sacrifices to be made, and you as the woman, must be the one to make them. It is also within this quote that we can see that Ma'Shingayi has accepted her fate as a servant to the men in her life.

In many cases, women do not have control or equal control over the management and

allocation of family income, as we can see where Babamukuru has entire control of his wife, Maiguru's income. Later on in the novel Maiguru speaks up to Babamukuru about her unhappiness and how she will no longer allow him to use her hard earned money as he pleases, here Maiguru displays agency in her role in the novel.

When looking at the main married women in the novel, Ma'Shingayi (first married in the eyes of the Shona culture and later married within the Western culture) and Maiguru, we can clearly see how each woman faces challenges in their respective households.

Tambu and her mother, cannot imagine that Maiguru suffers in anyway, as to them, she seems to have it all, money, education and decency.

Maiguru throughout the beginning of the novel, is seen as a strong, educated, successful and professional woman, and thus, she stands out from the rest of the women in the family. Life in England I believe changed her views and beliefs on her traditional life and role,

"When I was in England I glimpsed for a little while the things I could have been, the things I could have done if-if-if things were different. But there was BabawaChido and the children and the family. And does anyone realise, does anyone appreciate, what sacrifices were made? As for me, no-one even thinks about the things I gave up." - Maiguru page 103.

As a woman, Maiguru had to sacrifice the opportunities she earned by educating herself. We see how she constantly battled between the two cultures, of being obedient, loyal and submissive to her husband with maintaining her traditional role and being herself, by showing true agency and not having someone govern her every move, thought and spoken word.

" I am sick of Babawa Chido. Let me tell you I have had enough! And when I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy anymore in this house." - Maiguru page 172.

Here Maiguru had finally had enough of being subservient to all and stood up to her husband, after having to conceal her deep seared resentment and frustration brought on by the family.

Her delaying tactics during the wedding preparations were subtle indications of resistance if not the rebellion against the traditional role of womanhood. Maiguru's departure and subsequent return serves as a turning point in the order of power relations in the house, as Babamukuru's decisions were no longer unchallengeable.

Within Maiguru and Babamukuru's family, we can also see the battle that each of the children face when it comes to the difference in cultures.

Chido I believe has fully embraced the Western culture with little difficulty and near the end of the novel, much to the dislike of Ma'Shingayi, he has a white girlfriend.

Nyasha, on the other hand truly battles with the two very different cultures, as seen when they first return from England and both her and her brother have forgotten how to speak their native tongue, Shona. She also expresses that while they were in England, they had

forgotten their home, the do's and don'ts, the smell, the look, the language, and essentially who they were raised to be, and that frightened them. Nyasha confides in Tambu that their parent's shouldn't have taken them, shouldn't have exposed them to the Western culture, as she believes that because of their changed home and lives, it changed them as individuals.

Nyasha imitates everything European and despises her traditional culture and race while failing to understand her own true needs. We see her battle between the two cultures as she continually disrespects and challenges her father. Her battle between the two cultures causes her to have a "nervous condition" i.e. breakdown,

"They're taken us away." -Nyasha page 200 (taken what away? Their culture/self concept? Who are they?) "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you" - Nyasha page 200, not European or traditional?

While the children were not married, I thought it of importance to mention then in relation to the African traditional and Westernised lifestyles.

The other married woman, Ma'Shingayi, is portrayed in the beginning of the novel as a hardworking figure, the ideal image of a traditional woman. However, after her son's death, she grows spiteful, angry and jealous and she sees how her hard life has made her accepting of the limitations of which life has saddled her,

"This business of womanhood is a heavy burden." - MaShingayi page 16.

Here she explains to Tambu, that when there are sacrifices to be made, you as the woman are to make them. Between the two main married women, Maiguru and Ma'Shingayi, Ma'Shingayi has resentment towards Maiguru because of her education and wealth, and Ma'Shingayi's lack thereof,

"I am only saying what I think, just like she did. She did tell us didn't she, what she thinks, and did anyone say anything! No, why not? Because Maiguru is educated. That's why you all kept quiet. Because she's rich and comes here and flashes her money around, so you listen to her as though you want to eat the words that come out of her mouth. But me, I'm not educated am I? I'm just poor and ignorant, so you want me to keep quiet, you say I mustn't talk. Ehe! I am poor and ignorant, that's me, but I am a mouth and it will keep on talking, it won't keep quiet." - Ma'Shingayi page 142.

It is also through these spoken words of hers, we can see that she recognises her own poverty and lack of education as the reasons she has no voice. In this, we can see that there is a hierarchy within the patriarchy of the Shona society, that women who are more educated, such as Maiguru get more respect, while poor uneducated housewives such as Ma'Shingayi are at the bottom of the hierarchy chain.

In conclusion, we can determine that although both women have different cultures, or have incorporated both into their homes, Ma'Shingayi keeping to the traditional culture, while Maiguri battles to incorporate both into her home life. Although both women are submissive and respectful to their husbands, they do show some agency throughout the novel, where Maiguru speaks up to Babamukuru and leaves, and Ma'Shingayi when she

speaks out to the women regarding the difference between her and Maiguru and how Maiguru is respected more due to her wealth and education. However they do not display true agency, whereby they determine their own words, actions, thoughts and lives.

NYASHA'S IDENTITY CRISIS

Colonisation did not only affect the politics and the land of the colonised, but also the mindset. It was not unusual for the colonised to aspire to be like the white colonists, in all respects. Adopting western values may alienate African people from their traditional communities. Those that endeavour to adopt the culture of the colonists may end up being rejected by both cultures. Nyasha in the novel is a portrait of the colonised African mind. Throughout the novel Nyasha is portrayed as a misfit, a condition that becomes very obvious towards the end of the novel. When Nyasha's family returned from England, they were given a majestic reception by their relatives. Nyasha arrived wearing a mini skirt, of which she was obviously conscious, as she kept pulling it down. This is the first indication of Nyasha's inaptness. In other words, she imitates everything European and fails to understand her 'true' needs, the need to be 'decently' attired according to traditional Shona custom. The narrator's disapproval of Nyasha is made evident when she states that:

'I would not give my approval. I turned away' (1988:37).

Tambu's disappointment with Nyasha revealed itself several times during the evenings of the festivities. Before Nyasha's family departure to England they used to converse in Shona and play together without any inhibitions. A few years on Tambu could not relate to Nyasha neither in Shona nor in tribal dance. Tambu invited Nyasha to dance, a gesture which was in keeping with the jovial mode that was prevailing that evening. Nyasha's reaction was to shut off the whole world.

'She clicked her tongue scornfully, it was a very abrupt way the way she did it' (1988: 43).

It was as though she despised her traditional culture and kin, as she was non-communicative. In fact Tambu's parents thought Nyasha was a miserable child. She had changed from being a bold, ebullient and Shona speaking, to a girl that was duller and dimmer and wearing a very complicated expression. Relations within the community are contingent on reciprocity, in that each action is judged according to the customary norms.

Fanon observed that (1986: 109 the moment of **'being for others'** requires a certain element of conformity and placations. This **'being for others'** is noticeably absent in Nyasha's instance, as observed by Tambu. Nyasha had taken to smoking – a habit that was unbecoming of a young girl growing up in a Christian mission. Such an act was a culmination of many other episodes that were improper for a Shona maiden. Tambu's shock at Nyasha's habit is expressed as:

'You smoke cigarettes; I was aghast. Babamukuru was right! His daughter was beyond redemption.' (1988: 84).

In fact, Nyasha's behavior is explicated by James and Busia when they say: 'They can do nothing but imitate Europe even in ideas, generating none themselves but simply applying ideas and practices which were not conceived for their own societies. Within this cultural universe of third world dependency, the woman is the dependant of the dependant, being pulled along in the whirligig of neo-colonialist meaningless behaviour like her male counterparts.

She imitates everything European and despises her tradition and culture and race while fails to understand her own true needs (1993: 109)

A polite way of demonstrating respect and appreciation is by kneeling. African females in traditional households are expected to kneel whenever entering a gathering including men, whether bringing food or attending to address one or more of them. Anna, a servant in Babamukuru's mission house, usually knelt when entering Nyasha's room. It is a habit that Nyasha finds irritating even though the sign was an act of obedience. The failure to kneel in such occasions will be tantamount to disrespect in terms of Tambu's cultural norms. This was not the only instance where Nyasha's disapproval of such obeisance came to the fore. Tambu's observation of the acute cultural alienation experienced by her cousin, Nyasha, taught her that, for the African, education comes with a price. Determined to resist the insidious process of mental colonization, Tambu is nevertheless aware that in order to escape the fate of her mother and aunt, it is a risk she must be prepared to contemplate.

When Nyasha had a nervous breakdown her parents took her to Salisbury to see a psychiatrist who happened to be white. He analysed her through eurocentric eyes and said that

'Nyasha could not be ill...Africans did not suffer in the way we described. She was making a scene we should take her home and be firm with her' (1988: 20).

Nyasha's crisis was preceded by tantrums during which she remarked:

'I don't want to do it. Tambu really I don't but it's coming I feel it coming... they have done it to me, really they have (referring to her parents). It's not their fault they did it to them too. You know they did it to both of them, but especially to him. They put him through it all. But it's not his fault. He's good...he's a good boy a good mint....a bloody Good kaffir...why do they do it ...to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they have done? They have taken us away...they deprived you of you, him of him. Ourselves of each other (1988: 200).

Nyasha's is completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other. An argument can be inferred from Nyasha's outburst that the whites 'did it to them' and her father has been reduced to being a **'bloody good kaffir'** and a good boy. Nyssa's crisis did not find any sympathy from MaShingayi. She relegated Nyasha's plight to being too English. She warned that this **'Englishness'** could lead to their downfall if not kill them.

It could be said that Nyasha had shortcomings in being a complete person in the eyes of the Shona clan. She thus could not exist as a bona fide Shona maiden. In fact MaShingayi says that **"about that one that we did not even speak. It is speaking for itself...it's the 'Englishness'" (1988: 203).**

MaShingayi is portrayed as a hardworking rural woman who is trying to eke out a living from ploughing the land. She had several pregnancies with only four children surviving at the end of the novel. Her husband Jeremiah took her as a wife at the age of 15 without formalising with a wedding, an issue that was to come up 15 years later.

MaSingayi is trapped within the double bind of **'poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other' (1988:16)**, whose submissive self-effacing life represents the very essence of oppressed female passivity. With no sense of her own self-determination, she is unable to conceive of an identity for her daughter outside of marriage. Economic powerlessness and 19 years of domestic drudgery have taught her to survive what she cannot change. She has been socialized into assuming a passive role in an environment dominated by patriarchy. It is this role of resignation that she expected her girls to emulate. She advises her daughter, **'this business of womanhood is a heavy burden...what will help you my child is to learn to carry your burden with strength' (1988: 16)**.

MaShingayi is aware that investing in education would safeguard her family from poverty. She has seen how Babamukuru was able to provide for the clan because he was highly educated. She envisioned that her son would become a provider for the family, were he to be afforded education. She leaves no stone unturned ensuring that Nhamo receives an education. When there were no funds for children's schooling, she planted vegetables and sold them at the bus rank. With the extra cash she paid for Nhamo's education but not for Tambu's. As MaShingayi had the mindset that promoted male domination, she believed also, that the education for the son would fulfill familiar expectations whereas the gains of a daughter would be inevitably lost to her husband's family. MaShingayi translates food cultivation into education because she understands that a son's education is not an escape from poverty but an investment that will return to the family.

MaShingayi associates her racial group with oppression due to colonialism in Rhodesia. These words were an echo of what was said by Tambu's paternal grandmother who narrated that

'wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land...wizards were avaricious and grasping, there was less and less land for the people..' (1988: 18).

The statements by the mother and the grandmother were aimed at educating Tambu about colonization and its effects on the black people. This was part of customary education which was bequeathed by the custodians of culture (grandmother and mother). However Tambu could not consider Babamukuru (being educated and rich) a victim of colonization as claimed by her mother.

As a custodian of cultural values and practices, MaShingayi finds it difficult to accommodate strange practices as propounded by Maiguru and her family. Nyasha had problems with acclimatizing to Shona practices and customs, culminating in an identity crises and severe ill health, which justifies MaShingayi's criticism of Maiguru as not decent and as a witch. Of Maiguru's children and their westernization she says **'it will**

kill them if they are not careful' (1988: 202).MaShingayi's complacency with traditional practices is demonstrated by her fear and dread of Tambu's academic progression. MaShingayi's concept of a woman is being subservient to the husband and looking after the family.

When Tambu was about to enroll at the Sacred Heart College, MaShingayi experienced a breakdown. She feared that she was losing Tambu for good. MaShingayi believed that she was alienated from her daughter by Babamukuru (the ultimate decision maker) and his education. She stated: **'I've had enough; I've had enough of that man dividing me from my children and ruling my life' (1988: 184).**

The alienation between mother and daughter emanates from her (MaShingayi) belief that when Tambu became more educated, she might get **assimilated in the 'Whites' ways'**, a fear which was also echoed by Nyasha when she said that,

'the process was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precious few they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them' (1988: 179).

This is the only instance in the story where Nyasha and MaShingayi shared the same view about a specific issue. It is this fear of **assimilation** of 'white ways' that was instrumental in causing MaShingayi's breakdown and it is the experience of this assimilation that brought about Nyasha's nervous condition.

MaShingayi, as a traditionalist who would never compromise her customary ways, occupies one pole and Nyasha another pole. These opposite poles that are occupied by Nyasha and MaShingayi are mutually destructive. The novel is centered on this tension between the two poles. Nyasha, on the one hand, has escaped poverty and is constantly pushing away the tentacles of male domination. Her assimilation of western values has eroded her anchor in African traditions. The absence of this anchor leaves her without a frame of reference – hence the nervous condition. MaShingayi, on the other hand, holds steadfast to her tradition and is wary of any possibilities that may change the status quo.

This ideal image cherished by Tambu towards Babamukuru was reinforced by the clan's appreciation when Babamukuru had found a job for Lucia. When Babamukuru said, **'Not much. A little job. At the girl's hostel. You will help to cook food there at the hostel' (1988:158)**, this statement was received with joy and ululations. Lucia's response was to cite Babamukuru's ancestry. These praises are the highest that can be bestowed on somebody within the African context. Of course Lucia was on her knees when she praised him. Tambu's mother performed a similar gesture, by kneeling and worshipping beside Lucia. Maiguru completed the picture by also kneeling on the floor despite her status accorded to her education.

Tambu's admiration for Babamukuru was so great that she regarded him **'as the closest thing a human being could get to God'.** (1988: 199). Tambu's view of Babamukuru as a God demonstrates the amount of respect that she has for him and the reverent power that he has over her. In fact Babamukuru was respected by all the members of his family. Babamukuru's authority over all women within the clan portrays how patriarchy creates the conditions for women to be dominated, exploited and oppressed. Tambu's concept of becoming a woman would be to imitate her aunt, Maiguru. As a child, Tambu used to

compare the role played by her mother, MaShingayi, and Maiguru, her aunt, in their respective families, and within the clan. Whilst her mother, on the one hand, had to spend the greater part of the day working in the fields to eke out a living, Maiguru on the other hand would be in the classroom teaching. The definite symbol of empowerment has enabled Maiguru to hold down a decent job and a comfortable home. It was inevitable that Tambu would fashion her future around her successful aunt at the expense of her mother whom she referred to as;

'no more than another piece of scenery to be maintained... but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the part of my departure' (1988: 58)

However, the Sacred Heart College and its 'Englishness' proved not to be the sunrise on her horizon to freedom. Nyasha's identity crisis which led to a nervous breakdown proved to be a turning point in Tambu's conceptualization of emancipation. The illusion that if she were to be surrounded by all the modern trappings that money could buy then she would be content, was gradually replaced by the realization that there were other entrapments that were gender and racial in nature. This realization corroborates the black feminist argument that in a racist society, black women are victims of racial and gender oppression whether they are middle class or working class. The impetus of this resolution was the cautionary words from her mother MaShingayi that Tambu should assiduously avoid being devoured by **'Englishness'**, as had been the case with Nyasha and Chido. This warning proved to be a wake-up call. She had nightmares on two consecutive nights. The warning instilled a suspicion in Tambu's mind that crystallized into guilt. Despite repressing this guilt, it suffocated her gradually, and was instrumental in prompting her to

'refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story' (1988: 204).

MAIGURU AND ENTRAPMENT: GENDER

The entrapment of Maiguru is only superficially different from that of her sister in law, MaShingayi. They both pay the highest price for being female partners in their household. Tambu could not imagine Maiguru suffering because, according to her, she had everything: money, education and decency. Maiguru was Tambu's role model and she was obedient and loyal to her husband, until her depression drove her to rebel against her husband. She had had enough of being subservient to her husband's family. In fact she had the audacity to stand up to her husband and say:

'I am sick of it Babawa Chido. Let me tell you I have had enough! And when I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy anymore in this house' (1988:172).

When in the company of her in-laws, she sat on the floor, as is customary for women, as patriarchy is unchallengeable according to tradition. No matter how discomfiting an instruction could be from her husband, she complied without questioning or grumbling. Although she did express misgivings during one Christmas vacation when too much meat was purchased for the clan. As Babamukuru's wife, her own potential and aspirations are completely submerged in the role of wife and mother prescribed by Shona patriarchy. And, as the wife of the mission school headmaster, her submission

is reinforced by the Christian ideal of the dutiful and obedient helpmate. Maiguru conceals her deep seated resentment and frustration brought about by her husband's control of her life.

On the eve of Jeremiah and MaShingayi's wedding, Maiguru was reluctant to loan out her bridal dress. She employed her delaying tactics like forgetting, when she was required to lend a helping hand. As a wife to the head of the clan, the head who decided that Jeremiah and MaShingayi should get married, she was expected to assume a leading role in the preparations. Her delaying tactics were subtle indications of resistance if not rebellion against the traditional role of womanhood. Maiguru's husband, Babamukuru, was head of the clan by virtue of birth and economic power. He was powerful and influential within his clan. He was also regarded as a repository of knowledge. The narrator, Tambu, describes him thus: **'He didn't need to be bold anymore because he had made himself plenty of power. Plenty of money. A lot of education. Plenty of everything'** (1988: 50). Babamukuru enforces his power especially when he is challenged by those around him (Maiguru, Nyasha).

However, Babamukuru is much a victim of the colonial system as his poverty-stricken brother in the farmstead. Dangarembga shows how Babamukuru himself suffers in the role of patriarchy. He was obliged to educate, feed and house his extended family and intervene at every opportunity to ensure that things run his way. Maiguru was also a financial provider within the clan, despite resenting her husband's lavish support of his family, partly from her earnings. Though Maiguru seems a faithful and subservient wife and follows her husband's orders and understood her role as the wife of the head of the clan, she occasionally revolted against this customary order of things. She blatantly stated that: **'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 that I am working myself sick to support'** (1988: 72)

For Maiguru to abandon her beloved family and stay with her brother in Salisbury demonstrated how strongly she felt about the issue of being relegated to marginalization when confronted with issues concerning her immediate family. She takes everything in her stride, but when the extended family was involved she tended to see red. She could put up with Nyasha's behavior but could not tolerate having to serve her in-laws.

It was Babamukuru who decided to take Chido and Nyasha to England - a decision based largely on his desire to control their progress and development. The narrator, Tambu, recollects gathering information about the decision from different people including Maiguru. Nothing is, however, recorded which indicates that Maiguru had expressed her opinion on the matter. Maiguru's departure and subsequent return serves as a turning point in the order of power relations in the house. Babamukuru's decisions were no longer unchallengeable. When Babamukuru decided for Tambu that the convent would have a bad influence on her character, it was Maiguru who influenced the decision in favor of attending the Sacred Heart College.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Nervous Conditions is focused on the colonized African clan (Sigauke clan, part of the Shona people) in the then Rhodesia during the 1960s. The novel explores the exposure

of the Sigauke clan to westernization in various ways. At times this westernization would be at loggerheads with traditional customs, practices and beliefs, with disastrous consequences. As we shall see, colonialism is seen as a double-edged sword: on the one side, it is the 'carrier' of a discourse of western modernity which, in its emphasis upon education and democracy, enables a challenge to African patriarchy. On the other side, a colonial education alienates its African subjects from their culture, with disastrous psychological consequences.

The novel examines unequal power relations between men and women in the Sigauke clan which was largely steeped in tradition. Women (Nyasha, Maiguru, Lucia, Tambu and MaShingayi) challenge the practices of male domination in various ways, usually unsuccessfully. Each of these women makes an effort to question some of the decisions that were the prerogative of the patriarch. The women also attempt to break out of the role of domesticity and servility to the surprise of the men. Although the novel appears to be the story of Tambu and her ambition to educate and develop herself in the face of a myriad of obstacles, it is very much about Nyasha, one of the central characters of the novel, who was alienated from her own clan by virtue of her **'Englishness'**. Social injustices conspire against her to the point that she suffers a 'nervous condition'.

The story is also about MaShingayi, a traditionalist who was complacent with the status quo and could not tolerate womenfolk who were rebelling against it. It is also about Lucia who had the audacity to gate-crash into the meeting of the patriarchs. Lastly and not least there was Maiguru who was balanced perfectly between the two conflicting cultures to the dismay of her daughter on one side, and her in-laws on the other side.

This analysis is about entrapment of the five women and their efforts at ameliorating their condition – the nervous condition; after all 'the condition of a native is a nervous condition'.

TAMBU'S ENTRAPMENT: CLASS AND GENDER

The narrator, Tambu, portrays entrapment as the oppression of women with regard to class, race and gender. In narrating her story, Tambu places herself in the triple jeopardy of the black women writer. She is faced with having to betray men, as is the case with Tambu when she talks about her brother, Nhamo, and his ill-treatment of her. The black women writer also has to contend with the community that would regard her as a traitor because she assimilated some of the western cultural traits. Lastly she may have to be alienated from women that share a similar plight of subjugation, as the latter could be complacent with the status quo (Bosman 1990: 94).

The narrator's opening remarks in the novel are those of the entrapment of MaShingayi (Tambu's mother) and Maiguru (Tambu's aunt). She depicts her cousin, Nyasha, as being rebellious and bent on challenging the status quo within the clan. Tambu views herself and Lucia (Tambu's aunt) as having escaped. She says:

'My story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's, about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment, and about Nyasha's rebellion' (1988:10).

The extent to which the protagonist, Tambu, is trapped is portrayed by her mother's

remarks that: **'and these days it's worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other' (1988:16)**. Tambu's story traces her hardships from infancy: she had to cultivate the fields, fetch water from Nyamarira river, look after her younger siblings, cook for the family, and sleep on the kitchen floor on cold days with a single, threadbare blanket as cover. Tambu also endured humiliation from her brother, Nhamo, who made her an object of mockery. Her father, on the other hand, viewed her feeble efforts in trying to educate herself as ridiculous. Her mother tried to teach her how to tolerate hardships as a woman.

While Tambu was culturally restricted to roles that denied her opportunity to rise above domesticity, her brother, Nhamo, on the other hand was able to study. He was privileged to attend school with the whites who were part of the ruling colonial class. Furthermore, Nhamo was able to attend school despite the family having to eke out a living. This was consonant with the patriarchal beliefs of empowering male members of the family for perpetual domination.

The relationship between Tambu and Nhamo was reduced to that of the privileged and the non-privileged. Nhamo had all the opportunities because of his gender, while Tambu had to be content with being groomed as a prospective bride. The relationship between these two siblings was mutually destructive. Nhamo tried by all means to bring her down, as when he stole her maize and gave it to friends, and to dominate over her as a male. Tambu, on the other hand, grew to hate her brother, to the point that even when he passed away, she felt no sadness as expected. In fact her opening remarks in the text are about her apathetic attitude to Nhamo's untimely demise:

Driven by a desire to educate herself, Tambu sought to sell mielies as a vendor. Incidental to this exercise as a merchant, she met a generous white lady, Doris, who donated ten pounds towards Tambu's school fees. The question that arises is: why were the funds that were sent by Babamkuru from abroad for educating Nhamo and Tambu, not used to help out Tambu's education even before the donor came into the picture? Was it not that mindset of the patriarchal society that promotes male empowerment at the expense of the other gender?

This mindset is further corroborated by Tambu's father, Jeremiah, when he asked her whether it was possible to **'cook books and feed them to your husbands? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables'** (1988:15).

These remarks by Tambu's father served to worsen her contempt for her father, and brother. Tambu and her conservative father never agreed on anything significant and, finally, they simply co-existed in peaceful detachment. With the gender-based tension between Tambu and Nhamo, it is not surprising that at the time of Nhamo's death she showed no feelings; rather she had nursed sentiments of hatred towards her privileged brother. On the other hand her feelings for Babamukuru were somehow different because he took care of his family and provided all their needs. He provided for his wife a beautiful house that had furniture of quality.

In comparison to her home where there was no running water and electricity amongst other things, the cleanliness of her surroundings was of such a nature that it is echoed by her observation that: **'The absence of dirt was proof of the other worldly nature of my new home'** (1988:66). This observation about the absence of dirt extended to

economic, social and cultural features. The dualism felt by Tambu between Babamukuru's '**clean environment**' and home was noticed by her mother, MaShingayi, when she said:

'You think your mother is so stupid, she won't see Maiguru has turned you against me with her money and her white ways? You think I am dirt now, your mother. Just the other day, you told me that my toilet is dirt, it disgusts me, That's what you said (1988: 140).

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN CULTURE

A culture contains structures and practices that uphold a particular social order by legitimizing certain values, expectations, meanings and patterns of behavior (Weedon 1987). In general terms, culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, traditions and behaviour patterns of a particular group (Peplau et al 1999:27). Every part of our existence is determined by culture; the lives of women and men are shaped in crucial ways by the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. As such gender relations are contingent on the observance and acknowledgement of the power of culture.

Social roles are prescribed by culture. How a member of each group should behave is influenced largely by the cultural norms. Traditional cultures define distinctive roles for male and female. The father is the acknowledged decision maker for the family. In Nervous Conditions the male dominance is an accepted way of life, as it will be demonstrated in the analysis. These traditional attitudes about gender are prevalent within African communities and are strongest in rural areas.

In these areas dominance and aggression is a province of men while female nurturance is the province of women. At times women take over the task of being bread-winners, and are thus not only confined to the primary responsibility of cooking and taking care of children.

The novel's protagonist, Tambu, is denied access to education because she is a girl. Tambu's father's refusal to further her education is influenced by cultural assumptions, which consider education to be a male preserve. Tambu's proper place is presumed to be in the home, serving her family and, later, her husband. Women are construed as perfect managers of the household who pass on societal values to their children. Women in Africa often have their fundamental rights denied by governments who justify this deprivation through resorting to African culture.

Women's powerlessness is portrayed in Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions where Maiguru remarks to Tambu about her dissatisfaction with the manner in which Babumukuru (her husband) handles household finances. She resents her husband's lavish support of his brother's family partly from her wages. However her position as a wife prohibits her to act against her husband's will.

In some situations men fail to cope with the demands of having more than one household. This is depicted in Nervous Conditions where Takesure, a distant cousin of Babamukuru, had ostensibly come to help Jeremiah in the fields. Actually, when he came to Jeremiah's homestead he was running away from his two wives, for he had no means of supporting

them. While a man in a traditional African society can marry as many wives as he wishes, a woman may only have one husband at a time. Female infidelity is socially unacceptable and often results in heavy fines of both the wife's father and her lover. If she persists she could be divorced and deprived of her children. However a man's infidelity commands no more than a rebuke from a wife's male relatives, who often politely suggest that they are not averse to providing a further wife if he can justify his need and ability to support her.

Though women relent to their husbands' desire for additional marital relationships the prevalent feeling of resentment and anger breeds hatred against her rival(s). She may seem complacent to her husband and co-wives about the situation; however lack of inner peace is sometimes signified by her retaliatory witchcraft attacks against her rival(s).

WOMEN AND HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION

The household is often the main and sometimes the only place where women participate. Women are almost universally responsible for caring for children and other members of the household and for all domestic work that their caring role entails.

Women have 'the primary responsibility for their families' health and for provision of food, water and fuel and their work is not only unpaid, but largely unrecognized as well. Their major responsibilities for the households' well-being do not always mean decision making power within the family' (Karl 1995: 03).

In many cases women do not have equal control over the management and allocation of family income, especially if the income has been earned by men in the family. This is clearly illustrated in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* where the protagonist's paternal uncle Babumukuru had entire control of his wife's income by virtue of being the family head.

Women are locked up into domesticity in their households. The subordinate positions that are held by women within the marital setup are disguised in idealized images of women as perfect wives and mothers. Since the task of caring for children is often the responsibility of the wives, they are conceived by societies as transmitters of culture and traditions.

Working women carry a double work burden since they also perform all household chores. Despite their willingness to endure the heavy load placed on their shoulders their work is rarely valued. Women, who often accept their roles passively and are outwardly complacent, bolster their husbands' status within their community. The latter also enjoys respect for having 'docile wives'.

A man who assumes domestic chores like cooking and cleaning may be subjected to ridicule as he would be regarded as lacking authority and control over his wife. He may even be called 'a woman', because of the work he does. As it will be pointed out in the analysis of *Nervous Conditions*, Jeremiah and Takesure are portrayed as lazy and interested in drinking beer rather than helping MaShingayi with her daily chores.

Women's status in the household affects their ability to participate outside the home.

While women can often assert influence in public through the males of their household, women's secondary status in the family frequently precludes them from taking a direct part in the outside world. Moreover since they carry a major burden of childcare and domestic work they often face severe time constraints on their participation outside the home (Karl 1995: 03).

Women's unpaid household work is usually not valued or considered a contribution to the economy. Karl explains that: Lack of income on the women's part or lower income, reduces women's decision-making power in the household. The inequalities women face within their families have an adverse effect on women's self esteem. Studies have shown that women's participation in the economic life affords them a basis for self respect and social dignity (4).

To conclude: partnership in household responsibilities will result in women's increasing involvement in society and the greater decision making power in the home.

MAIGURU

Maiguru is a complex, often contradictory, and multilayered character who grows increasingly concerned about the development of her children and their responses to the various cultural traditions, both Western and African, with which they have been raised.

Her fears and anxieties are rooted in her own experience of trying to reconcile attitudes and behaviors that come from two very different worlds. Her conflicting attitudes suggest the deep divide that exists in her perception of herself as a woman and as an African. When the family returns to Rhodesia, Maiguru wishes her children to retain the mark of distinction and difference that they have achieved from living in a Western society. She defends the fact that they have lost their ability to communicate fluently in Shona, their native tongue. After the family has settled back into life in Rhodesia, Maiguru's reactions and attitudes change, and she grows concerned at how Anglicized her children have become. Only when her daughter is severely ailing in the final stages of the novel does she realize the dire consequences of these conflicting cultural pressures that have been placed on her children.

When the family returns to the homestead for the holidays, Maiguru, highly educated and accustomed to earning her own living as an educator, is reduced to a traditional role as domestic drudge. During subsequent holidays, Maiguru refuses to attend the celebrations.

Even more boldly, Maiguru confronts her husband about her lack of respect and recognition in the family, an action that leads to the even bolder move of her leaving the house altogether. Although she returns to the family fold, Maiguru has evolved into a realistic model of modern womanhood for the young girls in her care. She represents a subtle but emerging voice of feminist dissent, a woman ahead of her time who attempts to enact change in gradual and realizable ways.

THE INFLUENCE OF COLONIALISM

The essential action of the novel involves Tambu's experiences in a Western-style

educational setting, and the mission school both provides and represents privileged opportunity and enlightenment. Despite Ma'Shingayi's strong objections, Tambu knows the only hope she has of lifting her family out of poverty lies in education.

However, the mission school poses threats, as well: Western institutions and systems of thought may cruelly and irreversibly alter native Africans who are subjected to them. Nyasha, who has seen firsthand the effect of being immersed in a foreign culture, grows suspicious of an unquestioning acceptance of colonialism's benefits. She fears that the dominating culture may eventually stifle, limit, or eliminate the long-established native culture of Rhodesia—in other words, she fears that **colonialism may force assimilation.**

The characters' lives are already entrenched in a national identity that reflects a synthesis of African and colonialist elements. The characters' struggle to confront and integrate the various social and political influences that shape their lives forms the backbone and central conflict of *Nervous Conditions*.

TRADITION VS. PROGRESS

Underpinning *Nervous Conditions* are **conflicts between those characters who endorse traditional ways and those who look to Western or so-called "modern" answers to problems they face.** Dangarembga remains noncommittal in her portrayal of the divergent belief systems of Babamukuru and his brother Jeremiah, and she shows both men behaving rather irrationally. Jeremiah foolishly endorses a shaman's ritual cleansing of the homestead, while Babamukuru's belief in a Christian ceremony seems to be rooted in his rigid and unyielding confidence that he is always right. As Tambu becomes more fixed and established in her life at the mission school, she begins to embrace attitudes and beliefs different from those of her parents and her traditional upbringing. Nyasha, ever the voice of reasonable dissent, warns Tambu that a wholesale acceptance of supposedly progressive ideas represents a dangerous departure and too radical of a break with the past.

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