

WHY DO THE WOMEN IN *NERVOUS CONDITIONS* REBEL?

ARE THEY SUCCESSFUL?

The stories of the women in *Nervous Conditions* are set against the Regime of the British Imperialists in the 1960's. Not only were these women subjected to the control (and consequences thereof) exerted by the Colonial masters but they were also subjected to the control by sexual discrimination of the African Shona men who upheld the system of patriarchy. (male dominance and preference) Each of the five women mentioned on page one of the novel rebel, that is, go against the bullying tactics of their men and the established order. Some are successful, some merely give rebellious voices to their grievances and do not follow with actions; or their actions negate any hope of real emancipation. This essay will examine the success or failure of each of the five women in their rebellion against the patriarchal system (involves gender issues) of their Shona culture and in their rebellion against Colonial Imperialism. (The prevailing Political System of the time)

Tambu, an obedient, respectful, hard-working girl is also strong-willed, adventurous and rebellious. She becomes aware of gender issues and realizes 'what it is to be a girl' (Dangarembga 1988: 4) when it is Nhamo who is chosen to 'lift the family out of squalor' (the poverty of the status of her class) as Babamukuru allows him to study at the mission school. His attendance at school meant that there was no money for her school fees. Her thoughts are rebellious and she rejects her father's idea that she should learn to 'cook and clean' and stay at home (Dangarembga 1988:15). In defiance and rebellion she works against the unjust patriarchal system; she takes matters into her own hands and grows maize to supplement money needed for her education. Her father attempts to claim the money she makes as he feels that by extension she is *his* daughter and so the money belongs to him. Tambu is clear in her

analysis of the unjust system as she states that 'the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate.' (Dangarembga 1988:12 ).

When Nhamo dies her selection to study at the mission is not connected to her personal growth but is seen in terms of her usefulness to uplift her father's branch of the family. However this move does fit into her personal desire to be educated. Throughout her narration she is searching consciously for an identity. In this search she comes into conflict with Nyasha's rebellious 'views about female subjectivity' (Mc Williams 1991:104) and her anger at being a member of a race subjugated (crushed) in a British Colony. At this point she does not want to jeopardise her education and rebel against her benefactor, Baba. She wishes to follow a straightforward path towards a clear unambiguous education.

At the mission her identity is poised between Baba's delineation of what is 'good' and what is 'evil'. When Nyasha is condemned as a 'whore' by her father Tambu reflects that he is making her a victim of 'femaleness', just as she felt victimised when Nhamo went to school. She explains that 'The victimization was universal' (Dangarembga1988:115). She does eventually acknowledge that her reverence for her uncle 'had stunted the growth of her faculty of criticism' (Dangarembga 1988: 164). Her opposition becomes overt (open) when she refuses to go to her parents' wedding and in so doing she rebels against Baba. He chastises her saying that anyone who defies him is 'evil'. She adamantly refuses to believe that she is evil (Dangarembga 1988: 167) and there is a growing realization within her of the social construct that patriarchy represents. She also becomes increasingly aware of the inferior class status that Colonization has foisted (forced) upon her.

When she wins a full scholarship to study at a prestigious private school (Dangarembga 1988: 179) Baba tries to thwart this move stating that she 'could not go' and there was a boy at home who needed to be educated. (Dangarembga 1988:180) Again he tries to exert his patriarchal authority as he possibly sees that he is losing his control of Tambu. However, she

refuses to be the female relative who relies on Baba's generosity in order to be educated. Much to her surprise it is Maiguru who supports her ambitions to be an independently educated. Tambu and Nyasha are disruptive forces against the social and political worlds of patriarchy, class and race. They in fact threaten the status quo. They assert themselves in different ways against Baba whose authority represents the negative aspects of patriarchy and in some ways seems aligned to (on their side) the position of the Colonizer.

By the end of her narration, Tambu is ready 'to question things' about issues that may affect her personal and political life. She recognises the imperfections of the adopted 'white' culture and the futility of Nyasha's unconditional rejection of her home culture. She says that 'she refuses to be brainwashed'. (Dangarembga 1988:204). She now knows how to use her country's past history to see a path into her future. She has written her 'own story', 'the story of four women, whom (she) I loved, and our men, this is how it all began' (Dangarembga 1988:204) and in the process she has discovered herself. She has analysed the 'nervous conditions' of each person in her environment and she knows that this is an important step towards her freedom. Her successful rebellion has led to the liberation of her mind.

The drama of rebellion is more strongly manifested in the female figure of Nyasha. She is strongly aware of the injustice of patriarchal beliefs and how gender discrimination is restricting her development. She regularly clashes with her father about her dress, her choice of reading & general behaviour. She is also acutely aware of the political injustices suffered by Africans at the hands of Colonialism. She rebels against what Colonial education feeds her and consistently questions the 'history' taught and 'force-fed' at schools. She feels trapped as the 'white' culture she experienced in England is in conflict with the African norms metered out by her father. During her mental breakdown she declares that it is 'their history', 'their bloody lies' (Dan 1988: 201). She sees the psychological damage of Colonial education and states 'that it's bad enough when a

country gets colonized but when people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end (Dangarembga 1988: 147).

When she is condemned by Baba as a 'whore' she openly rebels and punches her father (Dangarembga 1988:115). She is caught in the trap of 'good' versus 'evil' but doggedly declares 'she won't die' (Dangarembga 1988: 200). She desperately states that 'she is not one of them (English) and not one of you (African). She faces a double-bind as she has had a liberal British education (which encouraged critical thinking) and now she has a limited Colonial education which disallows her from thinking for herself. She almost symbolically shreds her history books that she has spent so much time studying. She comes to understand that she cannot absorb colonial history and be part of the history of Colonialism. She does not have the stability of a past that has had consistency as Tambu's past has had. She uses her body to demonstrate her rebellion as she threatens her life as her bulimia goes out of control. This is her means of casting off the authoritarian hold of Baba whom she recognises is "anglicised' and aligned (on the side of) with the Colonizer.

Mentally Nyasha cannot fight off the dualities of down-trodden womanhood (sexual discrimination) in Shona society and Colonial control and so her nervous conditions are manifested in a nervous breakdown which sees her rebellion fail.

Maiguru, is an educated woman with a Master's degree. The money she earns is not her own as in Shona culture she has to consult Baba. Despite having an education equal to Baba she is not seen as his equal. Tambu at first thinks that Maiguru is not 'crushed by the weight of womanhood' (Dangarembga 1988: 16). Her home reflects all the trappings of a Western middle-class environment. Her obsequious (sickly, sugary) behaviour sees her pandering (fussing) over Baba. By calling him 'Daddy dear' and 'sweetie pie' (Dangarembga 1988:80-82) she upholds the patriarchal system. She upholds his status against Lucia and at all times conceals her inward dissatisfaction in order to maintain her image of a wealthy African woman. She does openly rebel at the harsh punishment of

Tambu, metered out by Baba and finally gives voice to her unhappiness exclaiming that she is 'not happy any more in this house' (Dangarembga 1988: 172). Sadly her 'escape' is to another representation of a male patriarch, her brother. She is without a home and her rebellion has not been successful as she is compelled to be in a nervous condition as she finds herself in a colony where she has no rights and cannot have a home of her own. Her only recourse is to her home with Baba. However on her return she does appear to have dropped the 'baby-talk' and she supports Tambu's desire to attend the private school. She is very aware of the prejudice against educated women. She shows that she is gaining in strength and flatly refuses to spend another Christmas at the homestead.

Lucia, mentally and physically strong, rebels against the patriarchal system in that she stands up to Baba's authority. She avoids marriage as this too would draw her into the Shona tribal system of patriarchy. She enjoys bodily pleasures but is not dependent on a male. She candidly explains with reference to Takesure 'that a woman has to live with something.....even if it is only a cockroach' (Dangarembga 1988: 153). She is the only woman who can with authority stand up to Baba. When she evaluates Tambu's discomfort about her parents' wedding she assertively confronts Baba. Strangely Tambu notes that he is patient with her and when she leaves he even applauds her by chuckling that she is 'like a man' . He secretly admires her strong stance.

Lucia's ability to stand up for what is right, help vigorously when needed, indicate her mental and physical strength which enable her to find emancipation (escape) from the male dominance of the society into which she was born. Her rebellion has been successful. Her strength is also manifested in the fact that she still retains strong ties to her cultural roots.

Tambu's mother exemplifies the subjugated African wife. She has been taught by her African traditions to accept her inferior status as a black woman in a Colony that has also disallowed her any political rights. She has to submit to Baba, the elder family patriarch; live with a lazy, adulterous husband; accept extreme poverty; accept the loss of her son

and then daughter and then be forced into a ridiculous, farcical, Christian marriage. At times her words are rebellious. She desires her freedom from the Colonial masters as she constantly rails against the '*Englishness*' that causes problems. However she advises her daughter to be content to be inferior to men as 'the business of being a woman is a heavy burden,' (Dangarembga 1988: 16). Despite the fact that she remains entrapped Tambu does acknowledge that her 'Mother knew a lot of things' and that she had 'regard for her knowledge.' (Dangarembga 1988: 203). As such she heeds her warning about the importance of not abandoning her roots and not being too eager to embrace the '*Englishness*' of the mission and convent.

#### REFERENCES

Dangarembga, T. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. Banbury, Oxfordshire: Ayebia Clarke Publishers.

Mc Williams, Sally. 1991. "Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: At the Crossroads of Feminism and Post-Colonialism." *World Literature Written in English* 31(1): 103-112

Vambe, M.T. 1992. *Authorising Women, Women Authoring: The Literature and Culture of Zimbabwe*.

<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/zimbabwe/gender/mtvambe5.html>

[Accessed 6 October]

