

ENG2603
Assignment 1
Nervous Conditions

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“Agency is the freedom and capacity to live or act in a defined world, in a literature sense we can interpret this in a few different ways we could look at a specific character in a novel and see his or her ability to make choices, act freely and control their respective lives within a novel.” We analyze the role each women within the novel showing different forms of power within their agency.

The women depicted in *Nervous Conditions* play a significant role in Tambudzai’s family life in Rhodesia. There are women within the story that display African traditions and those that have applied Western ways to their lifestyles due to being exposed to them.

Nervous Conditions is written in the first person “I” this is done for the reader to get the feeling of closeness of the story written. The story of the patriarchal system in Rhodesia, now known as Zimbabwe 1968 is where women were oppressed by men.

The novel reveals how race, gender and economic status played a role in how you were perceived within the community back in the 1960’s. Today, sadly these practices are still present in Zimbabwe.

Tambudzai is the protagonist in the novel, is a young girl living with her family in Rhodesia who strives to get an education and make a way for herself to become something great out of her home town. She is defiant when it comes to the patriarchal system. She believes that there should not be such a divide between men and women. She is transformed throughout the novel, going from a young girl into a young woman, and then an adult as she leaves her homestead to receive an education at the mission. This is the gateway where she begins to gain her power and become an individual, although, she must make sacrifices in order for her to achieve these goals. On page 16 Ma’shingayi says to Tambu “...when there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them.” This is an indication of the type of relationship that they have with each other because they do not see eye to eye.

We see sacrifices Tambu made in her life when she is required to leave her home and family in page 58 & 59 for the opportunity for education, this in turn makes her family insignificant to her because she has always felt that education, and bettering herself has been more important than living through the patriarchal system. When Tambu goes to the mission she understands how Nhamo (her brother) could have been so arrogant about it because she now feels empowered to a certain degree.

She begins to transform from the African culture to more Westernized ways, we can tell this on page 95 where she speaks of straightening her hair and painting her nails. As the story has progressed, so has Tambu's courage towards her uncle, on page 169 she says "I'm sorry, Babamakuru, but I do not want to go to the wedding." Here she stands up to her uncle because she does not feel right to go to her parents wedding. She has emancipated herself from her family but also from her uncle by taking this stance, even though she was heavily punished for it she feels as though it was worth it.

At the end of the novel Tambudzai reflects on her journey through becoming a woman and detaching herself from her family and ultimately her culture. On page 208 she reminisces on the positive and negative aspects of her life, understanding that she is now wiser than before and proud of herself.

Ma'shingayi (Tambu's mother) is a hardworking woman who does a lot for her family, she has sacrificed a tremendous amount for her family but especially for her son's education. Unfortunately she became very spiteful and angry after Nhamo's death and falls into a depressive state because of it. She feels a strong sense of jealousy for those women in her life who are more independent than herself – such as Maiguru.

Ma'shingayi and Jeremiah who are not officially married, however she is still loyal to him and obeys all that he asks of her. In the novel they are embarrassed and are requested to make their relationship official by getting married. This, does not sit well with Ma'shingayi as women do not usually get married at her age, however she has been in an oppressive relationship with Jeremiah for 19 years that she follows through with what

is asked of her. Ma'shingayi is submissive and has accepted that her life will never be more than being just a wife and mother, this is why she follows the ways of the Shona culture.

Maiguru is a character that we could easily relate to Tambudzai, as by the end of the novel Tambu is educated and Westernized just as Maiguru is. Maiguru is married to Babamakuru who is the patriarch of the family but colonized by the "white man". She is driven by fear and often throughout the novel she contradicts herself between the African and Western ways as these two cultures also affect the way her children are raised. Maiguru tries to gain control over her children – as she will never gain control over her husband – she implements the Shona culture onto her children because she feels they act too Westernized. Page 74 "They are too Anglicised, they picked up all these disrespectful ways in England" She strives to pull them back into the Shona ways. Maiguru feels pressure from Babamakuru's family for being too Westernized and in turn, unlike them and the values that they carry.

Maiguru makes a drastic decision to leave Babamakuru as she is educated and been to England where she has seen how women are treated differently as to how they are treated in Rhodesia, she takes the leap to leave her husband but later in the novel returns. She does not come back the same person, she is bolder, braver and more in control, as well her words of affection towards her husband have disappeared, she feels he does not deserve that kind of respect and love anymore.

We see this on page 184 "...It wasn't a question of associating against educated women. Prejudiced. That's why they said we weren't decent." Maiguru defends Tambu's right to go to the convent school. This is a simple example that she has become a more vocal decision maker in the family. As the novel develops, Maiguru represents a sense of subtleness and encompasses a voice of feminism as she is a role model for girls in the novel.

Nyasha is Tambudzai's cousin, they used to be close when they were both younger but their relationship had changed when Nyasha and her family moved away to England. Nyasha represents both worlds of African and Westernized culture, however she is more so for the Western culture as she has lived in England for quite a few years and as a result she has forgotten how to speak Shona. Nyasha suffers from anorexia in the novel, this is as a result from the pressures of her family and being controlled by her father. On page 84 "I don't mind going to bed hungry...", Nyasha prefers reading books as it takes her mind places, it is her escape from the life that she has in Rhodesia. In the Shona culture, people who are thin in weight are seen as poor, this causes Babamakuru to become embarrassed and ashamed of his daughter, he is angry and calls her a whore.

After this incident Nyasha and her fathers relationship is never the same, she tell Tambu how life being 'trapped' is, on page 119, "You can't go on all the time being whatever's necessary. You've got to have some conviction, and I'm convinced I don't want to be anyone's underdog. It's not right for anyone to be that. But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that's the end of you. You're trapped. They control everything you do." Nyasha refers to the patriarchy as "they". Her father disrespects her and she can't stand her mother for being subservient to Babamakuru.

Lucia is Tambu's aunt, the rebellious one within the community as she is the center of all the gossip and rumours of her having multiple affairs with rich men. This creates the impression that she is a very persuasive female who is able to manipulate those men into feeling desired. Lucia is independent but not married, some believe she is a witch but far from because she is educated and ambitious, always eager to improve herself in life. She displays Westernized ways in the way that she acts and lives her life, in the community she is seen as promiscuous.

To conclude the African culture and Westernized culture was something truly prominent in Rhodesia in the 60's and 70's. The white men colonized Rhodesia and the Shona men ruled the women of the country. Male dominance made women feel trapped, women were not educated as it was not seen important. The married women in Nervous Conditions displayed different agencies be it by the way they conformed to the duties required of them from their dominating husbands or by them emancipating themselves from the culture by educating themselves.


Bibliography

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DECLARATION REGARDING PLAGIARISM

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