
Influences of African traditional and westernised lifestyles in the semi-autobiographical *Nervous Conditions*

Conformity and refusal. Those are the two things which many of the married women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* battle with, most probably on a daily basis, but they ultimately surrender to traditionalism - whether it may be because their traditional lifestyles were all that they knew, because of loyalty, or because of conviction. ✓ Whatever the case, they were confined to their lives as conventional African wives, mothers, cooks and cleaners and were expected to uphold the prevailing standards of that duty, which they diligently did. This essay will furthermore explore how the roles of these married women add to the overall meaning especially when considering African traditional and westernised lifestyles in Rhodesia during 1960 and 1970. ✓

"This business of womanhood is a heavy burden." (Dangarembga 1988:16). When Rhodesia was under British colonial rule, many western influences, whether directly or indirectly, affected African traditional women's perceptions of the roles that they play but these perceptions were nevertheless overshadowed by their desire to be faithful and obedient not only to their husbands, but to their cultures – their traditions, and emancipation of patriarchal dominance was but a distant idea. *"What will help you, my ✓ child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength."* (Dangarembga 1988:16)

In an African traditional culture, it was believed that all women ought to take on the roles of wives at some time in their lives and that they are to be raised as acceptable women whose duties were intended to be the cooking, the cleaning, the taking care of children and being the obedient wife. They were raised to be submissive and to unflaggingly fulfil their domestic duties as Jeremiah ever so expressively points out to Tambu, *"Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables."* (Dangarembga 1988:15). Education was an abstract thought when it came to women since being educated means being able to have a decent job, thus being able to provide for the family, which was seemingly the man's duty. Although gender inequality was a global feature, in juxtaposition to African traditional lifestyles, western lifestyles were more tolerant in this regard. European women were not deprived of an education since western civilisation is compelled to advance itself and is generally "propagated by the television"¹ and naturally strives towards a favourable and prominent culture thereby encouraging both men and women to educate themselves. Western culture is also intent on maintaining a superiority thereby maintaining a high economic, and therefore social status. The mission school, the education in England and the convent all shows evidence of this fact. ✓

Furthermore, throughout the plot, the agency possessed by Ma'Shingayi, Maiguru and the other married women plays a vital role in affecting the direction of the story. The characters in *Nervous Conditions* are more than just characters. Since the book

¹ Kennedy. BYU (Brigham Young University). 2017. Feature: Islam and western culture. <http://byu.edu/islam-and-western-culture-navigating-terrain-incognita/> (accessed 19 August 2017)

is semi-autobiographic, the events, experiences and characters are actual and therefore the story is all the more representative of an epiphany of Tsitsi's life. The married women had not only been subject to their traditional circumstances for the sake of the story, but because these events had actually affected the author's views of the western progressive lifestyle to which she had succumbed and also affected her views of her own traditional past whether she had been colonised herself, or whether she had simply embraced the 'Englishness' for her own benefit.

Additionally, the competing characters of Ma'Shingayi and Maiguru in the kitchen during Christmas holidays in December of 1969 – Ma'Shingayi being resentful – or jealous, of Maiguru, because of her economic status and her apparent western mannerisms, and Maiguru simply refusing to retaliate thereby coming across as a selfish, westernised woman who thinks she is better than everybody else "*She is proud.*" (*Dangarembga 1988:141*), increases the authenticity or the validity of the situation (how many African women frowned upon the western ways possibly because of envy) and can, in fact, be relatable to many a reader.

Moreover, Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother was born from a poor black African family who thought that the western ways or the 'Englishness' was fatal and thus consuming Tambu just as it had Nhamo which resulted in his death. She was resentful of the progressive lifestyle, to which her son Nhamo had advanced. He's clothes, behaviours and speech had changed since he had been in the mission school and she was especially displeased by the fact that he had somehow lost his fluency in his mother tongue, Shona. Because of his death which happened while he was at the mission school, her grievement of having to lose Tambu to the mission school, the *English*, was justified in her own right and led to her falling ill. She, Ma'Shingayi, a typical African traditional married woman, assumes her role exceptionally in that without her having to be the mother to Tambu that she is, Tambu might not have felt the dire need to want to rise to much higher than her and rise above her unfortunate circumstances of poverty and gender inequality by becoming educated by English schools.

Adding to that, Maiguru, Tambu's aunt, also a black African woman who might have been Anglicised, yet still stays trapped under the burden of being the wife to a black African male, whose identity is rooted in his traditional past, yet Anglicised into a modern present. He takes on the role as the leader of the family as his traditional culture expects him to and which he embraces, yet he also strongly disbelieves in traditional rituals such as the cleansing of the spirits. He believed in Christianity and the ways thereof. Christianity had played an important part in shaping western civilisation. The ambiguity or contradiction of his character, forces Maiguru to stand up to him but this doesn't have much of an effect on her ultimate submission as a wife. After leaving her home, she returns to the normalities of her life just as they were before, furthermore, not taking on her role as an educated woman who is capable of providing for her family as would be encouraged in the western culture.

What is more is that the other married women such as Tete Gladys and Patience are also acquiescent beings, accepting their traditional roles without protest whether they

Good point

have patriarchal status such as that of Tete Gladys or not. These women had lived their lives orthodoxically without question and Tambu had to endure the decisions that they had made for her life. Although these married women were trapped in their traditional sphere, western influences nevertheless affected them - even so was the nation - which is why they were determined to send Nhamo off in search for a preferable education – in order to better be able to provide for his family, thus raising their economic status which could at the time, only be achieved through integration or assimilation of these western cultures.

In conclusion, the agency displayed by the married women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, because they were in fact, part of her life, they affected the decisions she had had to make even though they were affected by the interconnecting traditional and western influences of the time, thereby greatly impacting on her decision to include them in her autobiography.

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Good work . A clear attempt at addressing the question is evident.
Nyoni K

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DECLARATION

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