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76

A proficient analysis of the predicament experienced by female characters.
Provide an analysis of other characters as well.
Well done!



Tsitsi Dangarembga's nervous conditions highlight the plight of African women who find themselves torn between culture, colonial rule and identity. In her book Dangarembga explores the conditions of women in a colonized patriarchal Rhodesia and explore their struggles as they try to break free from the oppressive structures of the black society that expects them to be submissive to men and conform to the norms of African traditions. Women in nervous conditions are faced with difficult challenges that throw them into dilemmas or nervous conditions. The essay below shall discuss the predicaments of different women as presented by Dangarembga in her book, women that shall be discussed below are Tambudzai, Nyasha, Maiguru, Lucia and Mai Shingai.

Tambudzai, Tambu, for short is our teenage protagonist who is a victim of both racism imposed on black people by colonizers and being oppressed by men. Tambu is born in poverty her parents can hardly provide for her and her siblings, their poverty is a result of loss of land and their riches to the colonizers as Tambu's grandmother explains "We lived up in Chipinge, where the soil is ripe and your great grandfather was rich [...] wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land" (Dangarembga 1988:18). Also the traditional structures of the black society expect women to submit to their males and work hard for them as expressed by Tambu mother adds to Tambu's misery and dismay

"This business of woman wood is a burden, how could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that, you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one to make them, [...] and these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa what will help you my child is to carry your burdens with strength" (Dangarembga 1988:16)

Tambu finds herself torn between conforming to the norms of her society that states that she should stay home and train to become a good wife and chasing her dream of getting educated and escape poverty and oppression. Despite being a girl she loves school and she is good at it, but she cannot be sent to school because she is a girl she is expected to stay at home and help her mother in the field and learn to become a good wife. In her society only boys are allowed to get education and educating a girl child is considered as a worst of money.



"But I want to go to school"

"Wanting won't help"

"Why not"

"It is the same everywhere, because you are a girl."

Tambu understands that education is her only ticket to emancipation from poverty and oppression, despite her condition (being a girl and poverty) and all that is expected of her, she is hungry for education and is determined to go to any length to get it. When she realizes that there is no money for her school fees she asks her parents for a seed and a piece of land so that she can grow maize and sell it at the market to raise her fees but her father who believes that educating a girl is nothing but a waste of money and arrogantly replies “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) but realizing that her father was unrealistic she ran to complain to her mother that why she cannot be educated like her Maiguru, but her mother tells her that it is simple because she is a woman “this business of womanhood is a burden [...] you can’t just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated.” (Dangarembga 1988:16) Tambu is thrown into a dilemma she has to decide between following her dreams of getting education or staying at home as advised by her parents “I thought about this for several days, during which I began to fear that I was not as intelligent as my Sub A had led me to believe” (Dangarembga 1988:16). when she could not make sense of her parents’ words she decides to become like her Maiguru and get educated. “I shall go to school” (Dangarembga 1988:16) she announced and started tilling land so that she can raise her fees.

As the novel progresses we find Tambu in a difficult situation, where she has to choose between standing up for her parents’ dignity; and letting her Babamkuru humiliate them by his idea of a big white wedding at their age. Babamkuru being the eldest and the head of the family decides that his young brother Jeremiah and his wife get a church wedding that will make their marriage legal and legitimate as he consider it illegitimate and a sin. Tambudzai knows what kind of embarrassment this wedding would cause her parents especially her mother and how it questions her legitimacy as her parents’ daughter, she’s knows that what Babamkuru is doing is going to reduce her parents and make them a laughing stalk in the village, but how can she challenge her might Babamkuru she has no means of stopping him. She says

“The whole business reduced my parents to a level of the stars of a comic show, the entertainers [...] A wedding that made a mockery of the people I belong to and placed a doubt on my legitimate existence in this world” (Dangarembga 1988:165)

Tambu knows she has to do something; she has to make a decision and stop her uncle from humiliating her parents “I knew I had to come to a decision, make sort of action but I was not Nyasha” (Dangarembga 1988:16), she cannot stop him she does not have the courage because all her life she has been taught to submit to males. Tambu is in a very serious predicament on the other hand is her legitimacy and her parents’ dignity; and Babamkuru whom she still regard as might and undisputed and is scared to question him and she lets the preparations proceed. However in the end she manages to make a decision and defies the expectations of the society that expects her to submit to men by refuses to attend the wedding despite Babamkuru threats. Although Tambu get a very harsh punishment for her behavior but she is happy and proud that she has finally stood up for herself hence this brings the domineering nature of Babamkuru and how he perpetuates gender discrimination and putting his women counterparts in nervous conditions.

Tambu is further thrown into a predicament when she has to decide whether to stay at home and taking care of her ailing mother or go to a convent school and complete her education. Tambu being so hungry and determined to breakaway from poverty and the cruel traditional structures that favour men to women, a culture that deny her rights and defy her dreams and traditions that reduce women to nothing but slaves, she works hard to escape all this and she gets a scholarship to study in a white school in the big city. Her determination to get education is shown when she says to Nyasha who tries to discourage her by saying it the same as staying in the mission:

“if you were clever, you slipped through any hole you could find. I for one was going to take any opportunity that came my way. I was quite sure about that I was very determined. I would go I was sure of myself. [...] how could I possibly forget about my brother and the mealies, my mother and the latrine and the wedding those where all the burdens my mother had succumbed to going to the convent was a chance to lighten these burdens, by entering a world where burdens were light. I would take the chance, I would lighten my burden” (Dangarembga 1988:182)



Tambu wants to go the convent so that she can lighten her burdens, so that she does not endure what her mother has endured, but her mother being an uneducated cultured and submissive woman does not approve of the fact that her child is going to study at a white school and equates it to death. Tambu’s mother is scared that her daughter will return a stranger and die like her brother Nhamo. She gets emotional and talks in a way that worries her daughter, she says to her:

“Tell me my daughter what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? it will be English, English all the time” (Dangarembga 1988:187)

Tambu mother falls very sick and now Tambu has to make a decision, whether to stay at home with her mother as she knows the cause of her sickness or to go and pursue her dreams at the convent she says:

“I knew what was worrying my mother, a medium could not help whereas I could, by not going to secret heart but this was asking too much of me” (Dangarembga 1988:188)

Finally decides that she will go to the convent and get education because this is her only way to lighten her mother’s burdens and the burdens of being poor and black, she knows that only education will free her from the cruel traditions of her society and from the dominancy of man.

Nyasha, in Dangarembga Nervous Conditions is a victim of clash of cultures, colonization and exploitation by men particularly her dominating father who forces her to be submissive and even resorting to physical violence when Nyasha refuses to conform to his ideas of an ideal woman. At a very young age Nyasha is taken to England by her parents where she gets education and learns the white culture and language. Nyasha does not only learn only the white language but she imitates their lifestyle, dressing and behavior. She develops her own ideas about life and equality and when she comes back home she finds herself torn between culture and the psychological demands as she is expected to make adjustments and adopt a Shona life style and mold herself into an ideal Shona

woman who submit to patriarch and work hard. But Nyasha with her European ideas she fails to adapt and embrace her culture and continues to question its significance, she is thrown into a serious predicament that in the end she finds herself in a psychiatrist clinic.

Dangarembga portrays Nyasha as a character that cries for identity, she struggles to find herself in the face of culture, traditional expectations and western superiority. Nyasha despite being westernized and living up to western standards she does not agree that the whites are superior to Africans and that the African lifestyle should be replaced by the civilized white lifestyle and she at the same time does not want to conform to the black traditions that are oppressive and believes that she has a right to live her life the way she wants it. This conflict of views begins to get to her and she is conflicted as to which culture to follow and begins to see her father as an agent of colonization and oppression of women, she grows violent and ends up fighting her father. Nyasha is an active voice that voices against colonization and oppression; she claims that the white colonizers are looting everything that belongs to the black people but she on the other hand sees blackness as oppression and refuses to be submissive like other black women particularly her mother who is submissive to her father. Nyasha blames the colonizers for their misfortunes and her father for the conditions in her house, she says:

“They have done it to me [...] they did it to them too [...] they put him through it all [...] why they do it Tambu [...] to me and you and to him, do you see what they have done?, They have taken us away, Lucia, Takesure. All of us [...] they have trapped us. But I won't be trapped” (Dangarembga 1988:204)

Nyasha's nervous condition is also shown in the novel when she complains to Tambu she is confused, she does not know what to do anymore, she is trapped this white culture has trapped her. She says that she knows what is expected of her, she's aware of how her hybrid character hurts her parents, they want her to change and adopt the Shona culture and fit into the society; but she cannot do that the white culture has become a part of her hence she cannot change herself. Nyasha opens up to Tambu and expresses her predicament

“We shouldn't have gone [...]. The parents ought to have packed us off home they should have, you know, because now they are stuck with hybrids for children. And they do not like it [...]. I can't help having been there and grown into me that have been there. But it offends them [...] really it's very difficult.” (Dangarembga 1988:79)

Nyasha's condition makes her unpopular at school, she is hated by everyone because of her anglicized nature. When she tries to change and conform to the expectations of the society and become submissive to her father she develops an eating disorder and she loses her mind which makes her end up in a psychiatrist clinic.

To depict the nervous conditions of women in a socially broken cultural society that perpetuates gender and racial inequality Dangarembga uses Maiguru, Tambu's aunt to show the difficulties the women face in a double colonized society. Maiguru is an educated woman who faces gender discrimination in the face of culture and colonization. She is culturally expected to submit to her

husband and on the other hand she is expected to spread the gospel of white greatness at the mission school. Maiguru attained her degree in England and is working as a teacher in a mission school, however despite being educated she remains voiceless and is submissive to patriarch and serves her husband without questioning his superiority. Maiguru is a dilemma when she has to choose between freedom and security, she knows the things she could become if she breaks out of her bondage but she is trapped both by being a mother and a wife, she decides to stay and serve her husband, she willingly sacrifices her freedom in exchange for security and comfort. Shae says to Tambu:

“What it is? [...]. To have to choose between self and security. When I was in England I glimpsed at the things I could have been, the things I could have done if- if-if things were different- but there was Babawa Chido and the children” (Dangarembga 1988:103)

She is trapped by being a mother and a wife and a black Shona woman who is expected to submit. She is trapped by having to become a good African woman who accepts the greatness of the whites without questioning it, there is no evidence of her questioning the white dominancy in the novel but she gracefully accepts that her children have been anglicized and they do not understand Shona anymore. However latter in the book, Maiguru explodes when she cannot take it anymore, when grows tired of oppression in her own house she expresses her anger and how she feels about the way she is being treated

“Yes she is your brother’s child [...] but when it comes to taking my money so that you can feed her and her father and your whole family and waste on ridiculous weddings that’s when they become my relatives too [...]. I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support” (Dangarembga 1988:174)

After an outburst Maiguru is faced with a serious problem, it is either security or respect, she has a choice to make staying would make her husband not to take her serious and leaving would mean earning herself some respect, in the end she leaves even though she comes back after a few days she comes back with a little respect.

Lucia, Tambu’s maternal aunt is a fine grown up woman who has won herself a title of a witch because of her promiscuous nature. Lucy although she likes sexual pleasure she does not want to get married because does not want to bind herself into marriage that will make her suffer, Lucia is the type of woman that stands for injustice and fight patriarchal nature of her society. When Lucia is impregnated by Takesure, Babamkuru asks them to leave his homestead but she refused and asks her where do they expect her to go, go back to her father’s homestead and die of hunger or perhaps cause him humiliation because of bringing home a fatherless child. Lucia has a decision to make whether to go with Takesure and become his third wife or staying with her sister since she cannot go back home. She refuses to go with Takesure and latter asks Babamkuru to help her find a job and she continues with school hence becoming an independent woman, free and has escaped poverty.

Not all the women in Dangarembga’s nervous conditions find their identity or fight for their emancipation, there are some women who remain silent and submissive throughout the novel and do little to free themselves, Mai Shingai is a voiceless woman in the book who carry her burdens

with strength and slavishly submit to men, she is uneducated and does not question the unequal structures of her society. Mai Shingai is portrayed as a paragon of culture in the book; she is traditional African woman who have accepted her condition and passively carried out her roles with strength. Mai Shingai as portrayed by Dangarembga, is a kind of woman whose life has never belonged to her but to men at first to her father and later to her husband, she is portrayed as kind of woman who needs man to validate her that is why in when she is asked by Lucia her younger sister to come with her and start her life afresh and leave her slavish life she refuses.

Mai Shingai is thrown into a dilemma in the novel when Lucia asks her to leave her domineering husband and come with her so that she can start her life afresh and leave her slavish life but Mai Shingai having not made her own decision in her life she has a difficult making a decision and she does little to think about the and says to Lucia it does not matter what she wants in life because it does not make any difference whether she stays or leave it is not important because a woman does not get to choose but has to endure her suffering hence she decides to stay at and serve her husband with a slavish devotion.

Tsitsi Dangarembga in her book Nervous Conditions successfully establish the nervous conditions of her women characters that she uses to show the life the struggles that are faced by women in a double colonized society, a society characterized by gender inequality, oppression and political colonization. She brings the clash of culture, traditions, colonization and a woman identity in a broken society. Women are find themselves in predicaments where they have to choose between freedom and identity; and security which entails conforming to the traditional norms of womanhood, being submissive to patriarch and passively carry their gender roles that are oppressive. Some of the women characters in the novel successfully find their feet and forge their identities such as Tambu and Lucia however; some like Mai Shingai do nothing about their conditions she accepts the traditional norms of her society and make them her burden. ↴



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