

Donovan Russo

12/20/18

The use of Gender and Oppression through *Nervous Conditions*

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* establishes several conflicts and themes throughout its narrative, creating not only an empathetic protagonist in Tambu, but a hero that can resonate to all who feel underrepresented in their respective societies. One of the largest themes in the narrative is the use of gender, especially with how it affects women. From the start of the novel, Tambu is placed into a metaphorical pit, being overshadowed by the men in her family and the lack of resources that seem to define her life. However, it is through these challenges that Tambu fully embraces her individuality and learns to outgrow her weaknesses. Although *Nervous Conditions* has an array of themes and conflicts, oppression in terms of gender is the most substantial and is revealed through education, physicality and familial institutions.

When attempting to analyze the text, it is important understand the impact that education has on its characters. When Tambu and her brother Nhamo discuss school, he says, "But you can't study... Wanting won't help... It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl... That's what Baba said, remember?" (Dangarembga, 21). The use of the word "can't" is interesting in this passage because of how it correlates to the word "won't". Dangarembga establishes a pattern of negative diction that is supposed to define what a "girl" can and cannot do. Because of Tambu's sex, Nhamo believes that she cannot proceed with her education nor will she ever succeed in trying. He even makes it a point of saying, "it's the same everywhere". His use of the word "everywhere" suggests his lack of global culture at this point, which of course symbolizes

not only his sister as a victim, but himself as well. You see, Nhamo is a product of his environment. It is not that he deliberately wants to belittle his sister to be rude or inconsiderate. He does it because that is what he is taught. This can be proven when he cites his father as evidence for his claims. Now if you are Tambu and you hear that your own father degrades your potential, how can your self worth not decrease? This passage, while it goes much deeper than education, uses the concept of schooling to indicate exactly where Tambu stands from a social standpoint. Education is supposed to represent independence and prosperity in the narrative and because Tambu is a “girl”, she “can’t” and “won’t” be able to experience it at this point in her story.

This luxurious way of looking at education can be further shown when Nhamo returns at the end of the year. Tambu describes him, writing:

The change in his appearance was dramatic. He added several inches to his height and many to his width, so that he was not little and scrawny any more but fit and muscular. Vitamins had nourished his skin to a shiny smoothness... His hair was no longer arranged in rows of dusty, wild cucumber tufts but was black, shiny with oil and smoothly combed. (52).

Tambu’s description of her brother further symbolizes the exact benefits that education has to offer her society. Also, when she describes Nhamo’s growth and muscularity, this is supposed to depict his economical development as well. This too is further proven by Tambu’s description: her use of words like “nourished” and the continuous use of “shiny” and “smooth” (smoothness/smoothly). Now the reason that Dangarembga includes descriptive passages like these throughout the narrative is because she wants to convey a certain implication. Rhodesian

citizens do not have access to privileged entities such as vitamins. To go to Babamukuru's (Tambu's uncle's) missionary was to enter a whole new world of opportunity. So to deprive the females and to belittle their potential as Nhamo and Tambu's father did, it is also implying that females are not worthy of the progressive opportunities that come with elevating one's education, which of course continues to oppress them as individuals.

This oppression is further shown through physicality. When Tambu's cousin Nyasha returns late from a school dance, she and her father have a falling out that results in a physical altercation. Tambu describes it, writing:

' I told you not to hit me' said Nyasha, punching him in the eye. Babamukuru bellowed and snorted that if Nyasha was going to behave like a man... he would fight her like one... They went down to the floor ... Babamukuru alternately punching Nyasha's head and banging it against the floor... and he began to struggle again... 'We cannot have two men in this house.' (117).

When looking at this passage, it is interesting to explore how this event got so out of hand. Because Nyasha came home late, she is punished with physical abuse. Because she fights back and actually strikes her father, Babamukuru accuses her of acting like a "man". So in Nyasha's father's eyes, behaving like a man is standing up for yourself. He then proceeds to fight her because in his mind, "we cannot have two men in this house". In reality, for the first time in the narrative, Babamukuru feels that his institutional power is being threatened. A "man" is the one who holds the power and it can only be a "man" who dares to challenge. When Nyasha steps out of line, she is no longer seen as female because she rejected her minoratative role. It is also interesting to question why Babamukuru was so physically harsh at this point; he kept beating

Nyasha almost to a point of death. He does this though to maintain and stabilize his power- his institutionalized power. By beating up his daughter, he sends a message to all the other females in his house that he is not only in charge, but that he will physically overtake them if they decide to rebel.

Although this is of course identifiable with Babamukuru, the use of familial institutions is established early on in the narrative. Tambu describes this concept and how the women in her family are disrespected, writing, “The needs and the sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate... In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it... Thinking about it, this is how I came to dislike my brother... in fact everybody.” (12). Dangarembga’s decision to incorporate that last sentence is fascinating in terms of considering Tambu as an empathetic character; she even starts off the novel with Tambu expressing that she was not sad that her brother died. However, what makes Tambu such a strong survivor his her ability to acknowledge the dysfunction that her family endures. To recognize at such a young age that she was a product of an injustice living environment symbolizes her intellectual capabilities, which of course makes her deserving of being the protagonist of this story. So the disliking of her family is supposed exemplify evidence of her free thinking; she is angry that the men in her family disrespect their female counterparts and she is truly disappointed that the women have quietly accepted their oppressive roles, being totally ignored and disregarded for.

When actually reading the narrative, it is important to consider what Dangarembga is trying to suggest. It is also important to question why she refused to allow Tambu to be brainwashed by her own culture nor the European culture that Babamukuru and his family

assimilated too. The answer to both questions is actually identifiable in one explanation: part of the ultimate conflict that Tambu faces is the power of influence. She has seen what culture and stereotypes can do to a human being, especially with cousin Nyasha being driven mad. So to reject the concept of assimilation and the preconceived roles in society is enforcing the growth of individuality, which is what Tambu had wanted all along. Although she respects European culture and cherishes what it means to be a Rhodesian citizen, Tambu refuses to allow her life or future to be determined by other's agendas and that is why it is so important to understand her fight with gender oppression. Once the reader is able to recognize the battle that Tambu has had to partake in, her will to fight back can be much more appreciated. Although *Nervous Conditions* has an array of themes and conflicts, oppression in terms of gender is the most substantial and is revealed through education, physicality and familial institutions.

Work Cited

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*. Ayebia Clarke Publishing, Ltd, 2004.