
Gender Inequality And Sexual Discrimination In Nervous Conditions

"Everyone wants a strong woman until she actually stands up, flexes her muscles, projects her voice. Suddenly, she's too much. She's forgotten her place..." Throughout the novel, *Nervous Conditions*, by Tsitsi Dangarembga, gender inequality is a large theme. Dangarembga depicts the complex and difficult trials that the women in Rhodesia had to face back in the 1960's. This novel focuses on two different types of young women, Tambu and Nyasha. In an interview, Dangarembga states, "whatever class and/or cultural difference between them, they still have becoming a person given the common constraint of being a woman." (pg209) This is referring to the fact that even though they represent different types of women, they both struggle against oppression as they grow up within a strictly patriarchal society.

The protagonist, and narrator, of *Nervous Conditions*, is Tambu. She is a young fourteen year old girl who is smart and eager to break away from her strict and patriarchal life. Tambu wants nothing more than to escape from the gender limitations that have been enforced for her entire life. Because, Tambu was born a girl, she automatically faced disadvantages. The tradition was that the oldest, male, child is conceived to be the next head of the family. She resented her brother for this from a very young age. Therefore, all of her family's resources went to her brother. Babamukuru offers to pay for his schooling, so he was sent to get an education so that he could provide the best possible for their family. Tambu wanted an education, but was told, "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables." (pg15) She was allowed no say in her life and was expected to do what she was instructed. One thing she did was look at and pay attention to the women around her. She was trying to fight for an education, and she realized that almost all of the women in her family and around her were being oppressed too. She noticed that even those who were gaining an education, those who had different marital status, and westernized women were all being treated as if they are inferior to the men in her family. One example was that of her own mother. She says, "The bed and it's mattress belonged to my father. My mother was supposed to sleep on the reed mat on the floor with her babies." (pg 62) she recognises that her mother is being treated as less than her father and that she lives a impoverished unrespected life, even though she works all day in the fields to provide for her family. She has no other option but to accept the awful life her husband provides for her. Another example is when she discusses her aunt, Maiguru. Maiguru is a very educated hard working women who earns her own paychecks. But despite this, her husband, Babamukuru, gives her no control over her paychecks, she has been stripped of the right to make her own choices or any decision, even choices on how to raise her own children. Instead she must turn to her husband and even though from the outside point of view she may seem to have a perfect life, she has no individual power. She is completely vulnerable and useless when it comes to dealing with decisions or the men around her.

One day, out of nowhere, Tambu's brother dies and she does not care at all, as the first thing she says in the story is, "I was not sorry when my brother died." (pg 1) Because he died she is placed next in line to be the future provider, but she still is faced with the limitations of being a female. Her fight for the ability to get an education in order to better her life finally came true. She is sent to a colonial school in her brother's place. She finally moves to the mission, but she

is conflicted because she now has a responsibility and duty to Babamukuru, but also a rapid increase of new ways including, hopefully, some independence.

Nyasha is Tambu's cousin, and Babamukuru and Maiguru's daughter. Tambu and her go to this colonial mission school together, but she was previously educated in England. Nyasha is different from Tambu though, as she is easily triggered and very strong willed. She is a mixture of two different worlds. Nyasha's identity is a mixture of both England and Rhodesia which is difficult for her to know her true identity. She was raised in England, where she experienced equality towards her, and then she returns home to Rhodesia and recognises how awful she is treated there. Unlike Tambu, Nyasha has no problem, infact she enjoys, arguing and strongly resisting her father, Babamukuru. This causes constant fighting and often beatings and punishments for Nyasha, because she does not act like a proper female. Because of the way her father treats her, and the unwillingness she has to stop standing up for herself, she is often studying to distract herself and developing unhealthy eating habits such as anorexia as a coping mechanism in hopes to deal with her pain and stress of being a girl who is oppressed in a male world.

Throughout the novel gender inequality and sexual discrimination becomes a large theme that Dangarembga depicts. Every woman in this novel has faced iniquity and oppression from the patriarchal society. This oppression brings complex and difficult trials as it crushes these women and kills any aspirations they might have. These women all have attempted to rebel in their own ways, but some of these women were able to become more empowered and some were burnt down to almost nothing during their fight for freedom. Just like the quote from Dangarembga's interview that I stated at the beginning, class and cultural differences do not matter, women are women and they still have that constraint. In this story, Tambu comes from the bottom with nothing, so she is unable to question her authority in order to find her own voice. Meanwhile, Nyasha stands up for her beliefs although she is in a society where that is unacceptable, and because of this she is trapped driven to the edge. These women no matter the circumstances are all depicted as inferior to the men.