# Destructive Elements Against Womanhood In Nervous Conditions

Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions demonstrates how destructive elements against womanhood are perpetuated by both the colonial and traditionalist (i.e. African) systems in Zimbabwe; and thus, anti-female sentiments are inherently societal biases and beliefs. Essentially, sexism is neither a colonial or traditional construct, and that gender-inequality represents the bridge between the two (conflicting) ideals. Therefore, by showcasing the anti-female tendencies of both systems, Dangarembga is suggesting that for girls and women the path to emancipation lies neither in economic empowerment (represented through education), nor in cultural empowerment (represented through family dynamics); but instead, in female solidarity, femaleness and autonomy.

The persistence of gender inequality as a constant in both systems is reinforced by the notion that repressive figures in the text are not distant symbols, distant figures, or intangible elements. Rather, the oppressors are individuals within Tambu's family. Although, Dangarembga does suggest a hybridization of the systems is present, the juxtaposition of the homestead and the mission represents, respectively, the "traditional" and "colonized" worlds. This is further reinforced by the inhabitants of those settings, and their contrasting notions of religion, language, clothes, and dance. The literary significance of Dangarembga's creation of a colonial and traditional setting, is that it allows her to suggest that for women there is simply only one setting: a world of female disempowerment, akin in some aspects to slavery (i.e. an individual's means of economic production are not their own to bare).

In the traditional setting the perseverance of gender inequality is reflected through, but not limited to: I) the implicit acceptance that women are inferior to men – this is perpetuated by the constant reduction of Tambu as a person, and her growing importance as a tool (i.e. source of income) for the family; II) the physical allocation of space and food at the homestead – which prioritizes the family's resources for the paternal relatives, and segregates the maternal relatives; III) the ignorance displayed towards the self-drive and accomplishments of the women – an example of such is Jeremiah receiving praise for Tambu and Ma'Shingayi's economic activities; and lastly, IV) the usefulness of women in the traditional society being determined by their willingness to perform their "natural" tasks (i.e. cleaning, cooking, and bearing children – "the real tasks of feminine living").

In the colonial setting gender inequality is reflected largely through the same mechanisms: I) the continued acceptance that women are inferior to men – Maiguru's economic activities are not considered her own, but of the family's; II) even though at the mission women are allowed inside and eat with the men, they're just as powerless at the homestead – Babamukuru has little desire to engage in conversations with the women, and instead sees them as providers, this is demonstrated in the way his daughter and wife tend to his meal; and lastly, IV) the continued association with women & "usefulness" – Babamukuru states that Tambu is a "useful" woman as compared to Nyasha, who speaks often and questions things; when Tambu does eventually question him and refuse to obey him, he calls her "useless".

Dangarembga also ensures that the reader does not believe that the answer to this gender

inequality is a hybridization of the two systems (i.e. settings). This is eminently demonstrated by the Sacred Heart covenant and nuns, who maintain pride in segregating African students in a racist and dehumanizing fashion.

By providing the reader with distinct colonial and traditional settings, where the characters reflect those colonial and traditional elements, Dangarembga evolves her argument in a deliberate manner, which stops the reader from attributing gender inequality and injustices against women, to a single idea (i.e. to colonialism or traditionalism). This is also reflected in the texts lack of greater context surrounding Rhodesia. Therefore, rather than her argument focusing on colonial or traditionalist societies, or Rhodesia-specifically; her argument against the notion that economic and cultural empowerment leads to the emancipation of girls and women, evolves from anecdotal to methodical.

Dangarembga foreshadows the fallacy of economic empowerment through Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother, who tells Tambu that she will have to live with "the weight of womanhood, and the poverty of blackness". This indicates Tambu's eventual realization that education, which is a symbol of economic advancement, is not going to be her path to freedom. By separating the two ideals, and emphasizing the association of economic disparity with "blackness", Dangarembga is highlighting that economic empowerment does not offset the "weight of womanhood". This is further emphasized through Maiguru.

Although educated to the same degree as her husband, Maiguru has little power: I) she doesn't have the power to dictate the parenting of her own children; II) she doesn't receive her own salary; and III) the external world (i.e. society) views her as an extension of Babamukuru – her accomplishments and self-drive are not praised as her own. A startling recognition is that Maiguru, in some ways, is akin to a slave: A) her economic production is not her own; and B) she has no personhood. Ultimately, women are investments that their husbands reap. This furthers the argument that education does not remove the patriarchal expectations of women; in fact, the only women who rises above the patriarchy is Tete Gladys, and it is because she is a patriarchal relative. This suggests that rising above the patriarchy is beyond the available means of any women – that would include economic enablement through education.

Even culturally, Maiguru has no control over herself, and is regarded as the wife of Babamukuru. The cultural epithet bestowed upon her yields no tangible or intangible benefits to her as a person or woman; rather, the epithet becomes a burden for Maiguru, and causes conflict both internally and externally (e.g. with other family members). Moreover, Maiguru herself demonstrates the anti-feminist cultural traits of a colonial education, by arguing against the "decency" of her daughter's appearance, and literature choice(s).

Thus, Dangarembga makes clear that even with economic advance, via education, and cultural significance, women – regardless of their colonial or traditional contexts – are unable to free themselves from the gender inequalities present in society. While the women in Nervous Conditions do not topple the oppressive regime they inhibit, their small, yet meaningful, triumphs suggest that through femaleness and solidarity, women (at least those in the context of the text) can find some form of liberation. This suggests that Dangarembga is seemingly stressing the importance of feminist ideals, and it's lack thereof in colonial and traditional systems, religions, and philosophy.

This is exemplified throughout the text in multiple ways. First, Tambu's recognition of the solace

she finds in working with the other women. This emphasises the role women play in including another in the presence of constant exclusion they face by the men. Second, although defeatist in nature, Ma'Shingayi's support and solidarity with Tambu, provides Tambu the autonomy (and opportunity) to momentarily rise above the patriarchal elements present in their family, in her pursuit of education. While Tambu may not realize it, her mother is able to do so, without the education that Tambu believes is necessary in order to so. Third, Tambu's acknowledgement of Nyasha and their relationship as a 'love affair' reaffirms the notion that by banding together, and thus through "femaleness", they can be allowed to develop critical thought. Fourth, Maiguru's purchasing of tampons for the girls, suggests that when banding together, women can rise above both the traditionalist and colonist thoughts, that describe elements of womanhood as "deviant" or "dirty". Fifth, Lucia's successful care for Tambu's mother, without the patriarchal suggestion of a "medium", showcases the continued comfort present in femaleness. Lastly, Nyasha's declining state without Tambu suggests that without solidarity, and regardless of access to education, the femaleness of Nyasha begins to suffer, and thus does Nyasha herself. This is evident as Nyasha begins to obey her father without Tambu; suggesting that women are weaker without another.

The key takeaway from this is, is recognizing that only women are helping preserve womanhood. While some women (in the text) do negatively impact other women and femaleness, it is ultimately only the women who help other women. This seems to stress Dangarembga's argument that only inherently feminine ideals, actions, and people can elevate women towards liberation.

Overall, Nervous Conditions, is a dynamic and multifaceted text that explores the experiences of girls and women in Rhodesia. Tsitsi Dangarembga suggests that gender inequality transcends both colonial and traditionalist systems, and that it (i.e. female inequality) is the bridge connecting the two (conflicting) ideals. Furthermore, Dangarembga showcases that regardless of colonial and traditionalist systems, education and cultural advances do not propel girls and women towards a form of emancipation. She juxtaposes this with the victories the women experience, and highlights how it is due to their femaleness, and not education.