

Nervous conditions by tsitsi dangarembga: representation of gender conditions

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Gender Expectations of Women

The gender expectations of the Shona culture represented in *Nervous Conditions* create gender inequalities for Tambu, Nyasha and Miaguru. Shona women are expected to be “servants” and accommodate the men. These expectations signify the limited opportunities and choices that Shona women have. In contrast to the Shona women, the Shona men, including Babamukuru, Nhamo, and Jeremiah, are to view themselves as breadwinners and the heads of their household. The women in the novel, Tambu, Nyasha and Miaguru, struggle with the gender inequalities created by the Shona culture’s expectations of gender.

Tambu’s father, Jeremiah, was not motivated to pay for Tambu’s education because he values the gender expectations in the Shona culture. Tambu worries about missing school due to not affording the fees. Jeremiah tells 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 15). By replacing books with food, Jeremiah reminds Tambu of her expected purpose, which is to accommodate the men and cook for them; this is the female expectation in the Shona culture. Jeremiah’s use of sarcasm and rhetorical question imply that Tambu’s desire to receive an education is a joke and unrealistic to him. Because she is a female, Jeremiah does not take into account that Tambu wants to learn. Tambu faces patriarchal treatment and struggles with gender inequality.

Tambu's brother, Nhamo, continues to reinforce the expectations of women of the Shona culture. When Nhamo arrives home from school, he always leaves his luggage for Tambu and her cousin. Tambu states, " Once or twice, because there was too much for [my cousin] to manage on her own, I went with her. Knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power the authority to make us do the things for him, I hate fetching my brother's luggage"

(Dangarembga 10). The luggage that Nhamo expects his sisters to carry symbolizes gender inequality that Shona women face. The luggage also represents the patriarchal Shona society that Shona women, including Tambu and her cousin, must abide by. Tambu hates the fact that she has to carry the luggage because she is representing the servile expectations that a Shona woman must acquiesce to for the men.

Tambu feels inferior when she serves the men in the household. In the novel, Tambu has the task of carrying the water-dish:

Today it was a doubly tricky day because although Babamukuru was the guest of honour, there were male relatives present of higher status than he... I knelt and rose and knelt and rose in front of my male relatives in descending order of seniority, and lastly in front of my grandmothers and aunts, offering the water-dish and towel. (Dangarembga 40).

The water that Tambu carries around signifies the fact that men have power over women in the Shona culture. The water is clean at the beginning, and the culture honors and respects the eldest men in letting them use the

cleansed water first. Only after all the men have washed their hands are the females allowed to use the dirty water. Tambu serving the water-dish and the women using the dirty water illustrate that Shona females are not seen as equally “important” as the males. Thus, this scene proves how unequal the women are to the men in the Shona culture.

Tambu is not the only woman in *Nervous Conditions* who struggles with the Shona culture’s gender expectations. Nyasha reveals her true feelings about her father, who values the Shona culture. Nyasha tells Tambu:

You can’t go on all the time being whatever’s necessary. You’ve got to have some conviction, and I’m convinced I don’t want to be anyone’s underdog. It’s not right for anyone to be that. But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that’s the end of you. You’re trapped. They control everything you do. (Dangarembga 119)

Nyasha discloses how little freedom she has due to the expectations of women in the Shona culture. However, she also accepts the roles of women that are put upon her. In a way, Nyasha represents the Shona women who are struggling to free themselves from the expectations of women that the Shona culture holds. Nyasha’s struggles represent the Shona women who are in misery due to the constant control the men have over them.

Miaguru, Nyasha’s mother, also reveals her true feelings about the harmful expectations put upon women in the Shona culture and that her husband reinforces:

Babawa Chido, I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being a housekeeper for them. I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support... And when I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this house. (Dangarembga 120)

By telling her husband she is tired of the way she is treated, Miaguru stands up to male figure in her household, who constantly reinforces the expectations of women in the Shona culture. Miaguru represents the many other Shona women who are tired of these servile perceptions of themselves and want a change. She reveals the anger that many Shona females have about being expected to accommodate men.

Nervous Conditions encourages readers to question the continuing and different perceptions of women today. Readers should consider if the expectations of women today have really changed, and if they are the same everywhere. These harmful expectations of women are important to acknowledge because creating rigid conventions according to gender creates stereotypes and ignores the actual character of people.