

The sisters mainini and lucia in tsitsi dangarembga's "nervous conditions"

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One of the most successful pieces of literature from Africa is the novel of the Zimbabwean native Tsitsi Dangarembga, "Nervous Conditions". The novel talks about the situation of African women and the predicaments they have to face on a daily basis. Dangarembga seems to argue that there is a sort of entrapment of women within the society stripping women of genuine freedom and an unprejudiced position in the society. It is expressed by the narrator and protagonist of the story, a young African girl named Tambudzai in her line "... my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's, about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment, and about Nyasha's rebellion" (Dangarembga 1)

Dangarembga's beautifully constructed novel strives to provide suggestions on how to avoid such gender related entrapments that are biased to patriarchy. This is a prevalent vicious cycle of powerless women is not only present in Africa, but all over the globe as well. To communicate the issues of African women, Dangarembga had created an ensemble of African Women that have varying voices to represent women of different views regarding the role of women in their society.

If we were to relate Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions to a painting, it seems like she had used different colours and varying strokes through her beautifully designed characters. In the heart of this painting are the sisters Ma'Shingayi, more commonly called "Mainini", and Lucia. The sisters have contrasting personalities but interestingly their differences can still lead the readers towards insights regarding the role of women in the society.

Let us first discuss the character of Mainini, since she has a much closer relation to the protagonist, who is her daughter. Mainini could be described as a supportive mother—that is for the case of her dead son Nhamo, but not for Tambudzai. Mainini became very devastated by the death of her son, to whom she had worked hard to provide education. After the unfortunate death of her investment, her son, she became a negative thinking character. She thinks maliciously and more often jealously of others that are around her. Their hard life adds more to Mainini's negative outlook in life.

Mainini plays an important role in the text as the narrator thinks of her as a representation of a repressed woman. The book characterizes Mainini as too submissive and obedient. Her being subservient makes her prone to abuse by opportunists. Because of this trait, her way of thinking evolved into something that sort of paranoid, that others will always take advantage of her. This can lead her to a vicious conclusion that there are no reasons for a person to be kind, because this world runs under a dog-eat-dog system.

The narrator describes her mother Mainini through this line "... who suffered from being female and poor and uneducated and black so stoically" (Dangarembga 86) This line suggests that Mainini is the representation of the disempowered woman. The saddest aspect about Mainini is that she herself views herself as powerless. It seems that Mainini is already worn-out by all the burden that she carries.

She had expressed her exhaustion from her life through this line "... the business of womanhood is a heavy burden... how could it not be? Are not we

the ones who bear children” (Dangarembga 16) That line just suggests that Mainini recognizes that there is inequality in terms of gender. She questions why women are not compensated and treated as equal to men. She had thrown this question when she notices that men can act lazy while it is regarded as unwomanly to act in such a way.

On the other hand, we have Mainini’s sibling Lucia. Lucia can be considered an opposite of Mainini in terms of personality and outlook in life. The book had described Lucia as someone who has a strong personality. In fact, her personality was so strong that people were afraid of her specifically because they suspect Lucia to be a “witch” and a “prostitute”. Dangarembga had designed Lucia’s character as surrounded by mystery and malice.

Lucia’s role in the narrative seems to be a thinking character. She would throw witty and smart lines like “even if you ignore me... it doesn’t mean I am not here” (Dangarembga 125) Another of her positive traits is that she is a warm-hearted and caring person.

But despite those positive traits, Lucia is perceived by their community negatively. She is viewed to be a sexually promiscuous woman and she becomes the topic of gossips in their community. It is believed in the story that Lucia has affairs with “... men who did not want to settle down but who were often very rich...” (Dangarembga 127) Lucia is also considered as a talkative and expressive individual. Lucia in fact lectures women whom she thinks are being abused because of clinging onto conventional notions about womanhood.

Lucia's way of thinking can also be traced to the disempowerment of women in their community. But unlike Mainini, Lucia had developed a positive outlook and disposition. Lucia becomes an admirable character in the story as she is the only one speaking a witty tone. We can interpret that her kind of mindset is due to the fact that she recognizes that their society is like a prison for women, but however the men take advantage of her, they can't take advantage of her free mind.

Lucia's open-mindedness highlights the flaw that makes women inferior to men in terms of societal roles. Just like here sister Mainini, Lucia had had her share of misfortunes and abuses. She was sexually abused by Takesure, a womanizer who has no means of supporting those he impregnates, and forced to be one of his many concubines.

A villager had said "... look at that Lucia! Ha! There is nothing of a woman there" (Dangarembga 126). The villager may have jumped to that conclusion because the more conventional notion about womanhood is far from the characteristics of Lucia. What the critics of Lucia fail to see is that she had jumped over the fence that is set by the society and traditions. She had deconstructed the stereotypes that are much associated with womanhood such as being subservient and proper. Lucia's character may have wanted to communicate to the readers that these "societal fences" are set up with patriarchal thinking, they will always be in favour to men.

What the characters of Mainini and Lucia had shown us are different ways of thinking by a woman. Their kind of thinking does not only exist in books,

these kinds of mentalities of women also exist in the real world, sometimes in even more extreme forms.

The character of Mainini tells us a story that we can consider as common. Women remain silent and meek even though they are being abused deliberately. They don't fight, and does not want to fight, the vicious cycle of women abuse. That is because they think that being abused is their role as a woman. This way of thinking is never good for any woman. As the character of Mainini had shown us, her self-induced repression makes her treat everybody with hostility.

On the other hand, Lucia had shown us that some traditions and standards had to be brought down in order for women to achieve genuine freedom from male dominated societies. Lucia had shown us that an open-mind can break through the chains that bounds women. Mainini and Lucia had shown us that it is all a matter of choice, whether a woman should choose to be abused or to be free.

Works Cited

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. Nervous Conditions. Seattle, WA: The Seal P, 1989.