

Tsitsi dangarembga's
nervous conditions
and mariama ba's
scarlet song: how
female...



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In several respects, American writers have used literature as a means to promote equal rights for women; however, these writers are often white females – or even white males. While these writers are certainly able to uncover a variety of aspects that American society needs to change in order for it to maintain or attain equality for women, they often fail to shed light upon the trials that women face in countries that possess societies that are much less accepting of a woman's independence. Part of the reason for why there is not a wide range of novels written about women in other countries, such as Africa, is due to the difficulty that women face in getting their works published; for instance, if their works are overly feminist and reflect African society in a negative way, then it is less likely that African males will publish their works. As a result, female African writers must be clever and subtle in exposing the injustices of their society. Indubitably, Tsitsi Darangebma's *Nervous Conditions* and Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song* pave the way for African women to fight against patriarchy and the gender stereotypes that constrain them, and they do so by writing about female protagonists that learn to defy society's expectations.

Dangarembga partly uses Tambu's yearning for education in *Nervous Conditions* to expose how women in Zimbabwe are provided with unequal opportunities in comparison to men. In Thompson's "Common Bonds from Africa to the U. S.: Africana Womanist Literary Analysis", she mourns the idea that "Africana women the world over, in their day to day acts of survival, reflect a different paradigm because their problems are unique and more disparate than those of any other group of women throughout the world" (Thompson 178). Women from countries such as America or England

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might not even fathom the idea that men would prevent them from certain liberties, such as attaining an education; these progressive societies simply imply that women may seek as high a degree of education as they so desire. However, such is not the case in certain African countries, which is why Dangarembga has so much to report regarding inequality in Zimbabwe.

Throughout Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, it quickly becomes apparent that the female characters face obstacles that are not as common – or common at all – in other countries; primarily, Dangarembga demonstrates that women in Zimbabwe are not encouraged to be educated. When Nhamo goes off to acquire an education at the mission school, Tambu is not provided with the same opportunity as her brother. With limited fees, the family perceives it to be more important that Nhamo, as a male, be the one to attain an education. Although one might argue that Tambu's parents eventually allow her to be educated, patriarchy is still present due to the fact that she is only permitted to gain an education because of her brother's death. At that point, her father knew that one of the children needed to be educated and, with Nhamo deceased, it now had to be Tambu. By demonstrating the extent of obstacles in which Tambu has to face simply to acquire an education, Dangarembga exploits Zimbabwe's failure to provide women with opportunities to reach their full potential as members of society.

In order to change the way that African society views women – and the way that women view themselves – Dangarembga depicts Tambu as a young woman who, through perseverance, gradually proves society's perception of a woman's level of ability to be incorrect. When analyzing how female

African writers now work to transcend the traditional form of writing that she believes male writers often use, Uwakweh uncovers the flaws with the majority of works created by men. She suggests that, in patriarchal based literature, there exists a "recurring tendency in male fiction to emphasize traditional or conventional images of the African woman as wife and mother or to make rebellious females suffer the tragic fate of the nonconformist" (Uwakweh 75). Undoubtedly, this tendency to depict women in stereotypical roles and the implication that women, who do step outside of the norm of patriarchy, are eventually punished deeply sets African women back in their conquest for freedom, independence, and progression.

Fortunately, Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* challenges these stereotypes of a traditional woman by using Tambu as an example of a strong female protagonist. Despite the fact that Tambu's father tries to stunt her independence and knowledge by originally only providing her brother with an education, he is not able to prevent her from taking initiative to accomplish her goals. Tambu's initiative is apparent in the instance in which she spends time growing her own vegetables in order to gain a profit. It is only because of Tambu's self-made business that causes Ms. Doris, feeling sorry for a young girl having to work so strenuously, offers to pay for Tambu's education. Once she is given the opportunity to be educated, she submerges herself in her studies and does not take them for granted. By using Tambu to surpass her culture's expectations of her as an African woman, Dangarembga challenges audience members to alter their preexisting perceptions of how much a woman should be permitted to live her own life. Dangarembga's challenge is notably significant because, when <https://assignbuster.com/tsitsi-dangarembgas-nervous-conditions-and-mariama-bas-scarlet-song-how-female-african-writers-conquer-patriarchy-one-novel-at-a-time/>

stereotypes about women only being capable of completing household chores are continuously demonstrated within literature, it enforces society's idea about African women and, thus, further works to entrap them inside the bounds of patriarchy.

Just as Dangarembga uses Tambu's character to expose patriarchy, Ba uses Scarlet song for a similar purpose; however, the difference lies in the fact that Ba's protagonist, Mireille, does not come from an African society. While on the surface, Ba's novel appears to be about romance, it is much more so meant to illustrate how a patriarchal African society places unrealistic expectations on women through its assignment of gender roles. According to Berndt in her "Hotbeds: Black-White Love in Novels from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean", "Bâ attends to the interests of a white woman married to an African man"; as a result, Ba can be placed in the minute percentage of authors whose protagonists do not reflect both the author's gender and race (Berndt 221). While Ba is an author from Senegal, her protagonist is Mireille, the daughter of a French Diplomat, who moves to Senegal when she marries Ousmane. It is Ba depiction of a female, French protagonist that allows her to publish such an anti-patriarchal novel ; in a way, she sneaks in the idea that it is justifiable for Senegalese women to stand up for themselves by using a white woman as a metaphor for the Senegalese women who share in her struggles.

Along the same lines of the idea that Ba takes a jab at patriarchy by fooling her audience into not noticing that she is doing so, Ba partly justifies

Mireille's rebellion against patriarchy by originally creating her character to

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be one that does everything that a stereotypically respectful, African wife should do. According to Thompson, Ba portrays Mireille as a “ wife, mother, dutiful daughter, intellectual, politically aware female and devout Muslim. The heroin cooperatively juggles this multiplicity of roles, never complaining until her husband breaks the collective struggle in his desertion of her” (Thompson 179). Thompson goes on to explain that, because Mireille is able to content herself with such a vast array of changes within her life, she fulfills two of the traits that African Womanism would suggest makes her a “ flexible role player and Adaptable [woman]” (Thompson 179). Thus, Mireille's character not only serves as an example of a respectful woman but also as an example of one who abides by African males' standards of women by being a woman is who comfortable with moving away from her own family to join her husband in Senegal. As a result, Ba evokes sympathy from her readers, who see that even Mireille, a woman who persistently tries to live up to Senegal's standards by leaving her home and culture behind to please her husband, still loses in the end.

In order to demonstrate patriarchy's unachievable standards, Ba portrays the extent in which Mireille still struggles to be accepted in Senegal, despite all of the sacrifices she has already made to join her husband. Furthermore, Ousmane's mother is one of the main forces that Mireille has to go against in order to gain acceptance from members of the Senegalese culture, without losing her own identity in the process. The influence that Ousmane's mother's values have upon Ousmane's and Mireille's relationship is a prime example of how patriarchy affects those who are trapped within its

constraints. For instance, Mireille's mother in law does not approve of Mireille
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because she does not fulfill the stereotypical roles of women, such as cleaning and cooking, and she does not appreciate Mireille's education, because, according to her own values, education distracts a woman from being able to complete her household duties. Even though Mireille, in several respects, immersed herself in Senegal's culture, others still judge her due to the African society's unrealistic expectations of Senegalese women (Thompson 179).

Because Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Ba's *Scarlet Song* portray female protagonists who work to step outside the barriers that society attempts to constrain them in, both works prove to be prime examples of progressive literature that inspire other women, who are trapped in patriarchal societies, to conquer the gender roles that others place upon them. While there is much to learn regarding the obstacles that white woman in America have had to surmount in order to gain the independence that they long for, it is just as vital for readers to recognize that there are women in other countries who are still struggling for the basic rights that the majority of American women have already attained. When living in countries, such as Zimbabwe and Senegal, that do not necessarily support the idea a woman governing her own decisions, female authors must discover creative methods of revealing the unfair expectations that patriarchal societies place on women; if their stories are too outwardly critical of their society, then their works will not likely be published by male publishers, who wish for their country to maintain a positive image in the world's perception. These female authors especially realize the necessity of their works being published,

because they long to use their writing to reach women in need of inspiration and hope.

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