

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)
Ethiopia

Vol. 6 (4), S/No 23, SEPTEMBER, 2017: 1-11

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v6i4.1>

African Femininities in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract

This paper considered the concept of African femininity as stems from performative gender relations within a familial set up. The paper argued that femininity in the traditional African sense is not shrouded in frailty, backwardness and powerlessness as western feminists have been depicting about women in various parts of Africa. Through the works of other African scholars as lenses, this paper explored the social construction of African femininity as portrayed by Tsitsi Dangarembga's female characters in her debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*. Through the eyes of Dangarembga's female characters, the paper highlighted some of the structural conditions responsible for altering African femininity and gender relations in general. It remains undisputed that femaleness and maleness are distinctly different attributes, which, to a greater extent, are biologically determined. The question to be asked is whether the fight for equality between the two is a worthwhile cause. Using the near misses, the losing battles, the struggles and the frustrations of Dangarembga's women, this paper argued for complementarity rather than oppositional relationship between the genders for the building harmonious families and societies at large.

Key Words: Femininity; gender; matriarchy; industriousness

Introduction

In the eyes of Dangarembga's (1988) protagonist, Tambudzai, there is victimisation of women by men. She grapples with the source of such victimisation, but she is sure it

does not come from poverty, lack of education, nor is it anchored in tradition. Social constructs are elusive when trying to trace their origins. For instance, in the case of colonialism and its legacy, it was possible to find its roots and to eradicate it because there was an identifiable beginning and therefore its end could be envisaged. This is not so with African femininity as Tambudzai sees it. What is clear to her is that there is femaleness and maleness, and these distinctly emerge when there is conflict. It is clear men and women are different. Seeking gender equality is major source of problems and frustrations as the two are meant to complement each other. It is not about femininity as opposed nor as inferior to, rather as complementary to masculinity. No role is inferior. Maybe the questions which need to be asked are how society did begin to regard masculinity as superior to femininity? If the whole world becomes masculine, does that mean equality would have been achieved?

The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it. And that was the problem. You had to admit Nyasha has no tact. You had to admit she was altogether too volatile and strong-willed. You couldn't ignore the fact that she had no respect for Bababamukuru when she ought to have lots of it. But what I didn't like was the way all conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness, (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 118).

Tsitsi Dangarembga's fictional novel, *Nervous Conditions* has been the subject to many readings about the gender relationships and gender hierarchies in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe. Set in Zimbabwe's pre-colonial era, the author herself a woman, the novel presents the battles of living and surviving in the gendered lifestyle through a tumultuous era colonialism. Some feminists' readings of the novel bring out gender issues as they emanate from the interaction of men and women in the novel. The whole novel centres on the Sigauke extended family. The main protagonists, Tambudzai, Tambu for short, from whom much of the issues of femaleness are depicted, and to which the author plainly shows that she is her preferred character, emerges at the end of the novel a more refined individual ready to bring out a new and unique brand of African femininity. Tambu's observations, as with the opening quote of this paper, bring out balanced analyses of issues at stake in the interactions between the family members. The women in the novel undergo different types of struggles, and so do the men. This paper attempts to decipher African femininity, especially in the Shona culture, as depicted in the classic novel, *Nervous Conditions*.

Images of Western Femininities

By way of definition, Brownmiller (2013) stated that femininity, as a socially constructed phenomenon, begins in childhood with parents or guardians buying their girl children specific toys, sets of clothes and sometimes lipstick, mainly to socialise them to take up specific roles in life. Biological femaleness is insufficient, therefore society, through the concerted efforts of members within socialising institutions, has to help women attain the feminine virtues of vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict, which are line with the expectations within that society (Gill & Scharff, 2011). As a socially constructed phenomenon, in the western context, the journey to arriving at femaleness is rigid, full

of dos and don'ts that are imposed on the female sex. Brownmiller (2013) further cautioned that, to be insufficiently feminine, which means to be mannish or unattractive, is considered as a failure on the part of the female child, and this failure can even be extended to the whole family where she comes from. Femininity throws down to women, a rigid code of appearance that appears like a strait jacket, as symbolised by lipstick, high heels and polished dressing, from which the notions of masquerade, a mask that women wear in order to be accepted socially, are extracted (Chowanrec, Phillips & Rytkonen, 2009). No human being is capable of functioning continuously under the imposed limitations of femininity, thus the notions of the masquerade help explain women's coping mechanism.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949), especially in *The Second Sex*, is one of the key theorists to tackle the issue of femininity. To Beauvoir, there are two main methods of subjective becoming or modes of experiencing and relating to the world, namely, femininity and masculinity (Bjork, 2010). In this ontological stance on the issue of femininity, women are, therefore, endowed with their own "paradox of subjectivity" (Bjork, 2010:41). According to Beauvoir, women, arguably, "find themselves conditioned primarily as a determined being rather than a free becoming; as immanence more than transcendence, as the inessential in relation to the essential and as objects in relation to a superior subjectivity: man" (Bjork, 2010:41). In this explication, it is impossible to understand femininity in its own right, without making reference to masculinity. This comparison, then, shows that men and women are at worlds apart, in terms of their becoming and their beings. The woman's mode of becoming is often riddled with lots of challenges.

Echoing similar views to those of Beauvoir, Schippers (2007) explicated three components that make up femininity: the social location that individuals, regardless of gender, can manoeuvre through performance, the set of practices pertaining to behaviours and characteristics associated with what it means to be feminine and the social and cultural significance of the enactment of femininity. Both Beauvoir and Schippers agreed to femininity being an attribute of lived experience rather than a biological one. Since femininity is a result of certain performances and practices, both men and women are free to adopt those set of practices. The adoption of such practices and performances, by a man or a woman, has cultural and social consequences.

The Western Portrayal of African Femininity

African femininity has always been measured by comparing it to the western standards of feminine becoming, by defining it through the lenses of western masculinity and by comparing it to patriarchy. Africa has, and is still going through tumultuous times of dealing with the aftermaths colonialism, imperialism, violence, wars, post-colonialism and more recently globalisation, to name but a few, that what then emerges is a melting pot of femininities. Perhaps it is important to start by defining how African femininity is operationalised by western scholars, imperialists, colonisers, film makers and many others who have attempted to write about it, albeit with limited understanding as they consider it in isolation. According to Akudinobi (2005, p.135) African femininity, in European films is depicted as a "masquerade...a guise" and as "a nexus of needs and

desires". As a masquerade, African femininity is constructed through the colonialists' unconscious and sometimes perverted desires. The notion of masquerades is quite prevalent in western femininities as evidenced by great emphasis on lipstick, high heels and other paraphernalia of concealment. It is not surprising that western film makers are clouded by the same values when they try to depict African femininity in the films. The films examined by Akudinobi (2005) presents African femininity as a counterfeit construct aspiring to be as close to western femininity as possible. This is because, in the films, native African women are being taught to adopt western values in order for them to satisfy the desires of the colonialist.

Another point to the contextualisation of African femininity by western scholars is their emphasis on female circumcision as emblematic of African femininity. Female circumcision is central to the social construction of African femininity in so many ways; chief among them is the idea of defining a woman's entrance into womanhood, an aspect valorised in the societies in which the practice is prevalent. Whether the women undergo female circumcision out of their own volition or not is an aspect that this section is not concerned with. What is of concern to this section is how female circumcision comes to be associated with African femininity despite the fact that it is confined to relatively fewer societies. Maybe the entrance of female circumcision into the discourses of African femininity is based on the intersection of the two on the aspect of female sexuality. Alternatively, it might be because female circumcision and African femininity share a common fate of arousing much debate. It is because of such controversy that Nnaemeka (1994, p.4) in defense of the practice argues that "some women undergo breast reduction for some of the reasons that some young girls undergo clitoridectomy - to be more attractive, desirable, and acceptable. For the women in areas where clitoridectomy is performed, beauty is inextricably linked with chastity and motherhood." The comparison of female circumcision to the western practice of breast reduction is meant to silence dissenting voices concerning this aspect of African femininity. Central aspects of African femininity have become subjects for international condemnation, especially when read out of context. The problem might not be the customs per se, but rather with the lenses through which these practices are viewed.

Western scholars are fascinated by female circumcision to such an extent that the term is used to epitomise African femininity. To sensationalise the practice, western scholars and activists alike have changed the words for maximum impact, "female circumcision" has become "female genital mutilation" (FGM), and a "traditional practice" has become a "human rights violation" (Shell-Duncan & Herlund, 2000, p.1). In the eyes of outsiders, female circumcision is seen as some sort of violation that has to be condemned internationally. The replacement of the neutral phrases with more militant ones is intentional and is meant to invoke anger and disgust on non-western practices. Moreover, they are designed to rescue supposedly victimised people. Similar sentiments are expressed about African femininity. It is seen as a burden to be done away with. Many western scholars write to condemn the lifestyles and the livelihoods of women in Africa without consideration of the many achievements such lifestyles have accomplished. It is in the same contexts where female circumcision and many other traditional practices exist, where African heroines were born and bred, heroines who fought, alongside their male counterparts against apartheid, colonialism and

racism. Stories about heroic African women, the likes of Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, Muthoni Likimani, Thenjiwe Mtintso, Djamila Bouhired, Charlotte Maxeke, Albertina Sisulu, (Salami, 2014; Abbas & Mama, 2014) who fought and mobilized for the liberation of Africa, give precedence to an empowered African woman who is, not only involved in the care giving of her family, but is sensible enough to fight injustices of national relevance.

The image of the black woman is distorted, not only by colonialists' and imperialists' stereotypical representations, but also by the narrow frameworks by which African femininity is constructed. Imperial and colonial fictions present complex problems, as emblematic of African femininity. The scope of the representation of African femininity shrinks to a mere focus on the sexuality of the black woman, whose sexual drive is often seen with suspicion, as mysterious "as bewitching sexuality enticing yet abhorrent," "libidinal quicksand," as enigmatic and "as an object of sensational investigation and voyeuristic mystification" (Akudinobi, 2005, p.136). The black female sexuality is often depicted as shrouded in mystery. The fascination with black female sexuality is epitomised by the infamous story of Sara Baartman's objectification, exhibition, commodification arising from her breast, buttocks and genitalia. The black female sexual organ is often separated from the rest of her body and scrutinised, such objectification marks an endless string of the subjugation of the black woman. These discourses then build on to the construction of African femininity. The obsession with the body is what makes western femininity different from African femininity. African femininity celebrates what women can do rather than how their bodies look or do not look like.

Ife Amadiume's Response to Western Portrayal of Gender

Perhaps it is important to establish the importance of femininity to the world in its present state. Many have interpreted femininity to be synonymous with vulnerabilities and weaknesses, physically or intellectually. More specifically, it is important to ponder over the benefits in the type of femininity that Africa brings to its citizens and the world. The histories of colonialism and the misrepresentations of African traditions have contributed to the marginalisation and disappearance of African femininity in preference for western ways of being. A few decades ago a Nigerian scholar exposed in her doctoral thesis, whose ideas are captured in her book *Male Daughters and Female Husbands: Gender and Sexuality in an African Society*, the misrepresentations of gender and the plight of African women by western anthropologists. She challenges the erroneous representations of Africa and her people in the classics, quoting, for example, Worsley's label of "primitive" and Malinowski's description of the Trobrianders as "I see the life of the natives as utterly devoid of interest or importance, something remote from me as the life of a dog", in Amadiume (1987, p. 1). Notwithstanding the fame that these writers got from such misrepresentations the ideas they spread based on their own interpretations of African ideologies, formed the basis on which wider political worldviews about the continent and her people were formulated.

One of Africa's celebrated writers Okot p'Bitek was equally enraged upon discovering book titles about Africa in the Oxford University library: "*Primitive Religion, The Savage Mind, Primitive Government, The Position of Women in Savage Societies, Sex*

and Repression in Savage Societies, Primitive Mentality,” and so many others (Amadiume, 1987, p. 1). In these textbooks, the positions of women in the non-Western cultures were depicted as deplorable, even worse than those of slaves. The narratives produced by western writers then justified the invasions in the colonies in the name of bringing civilisation and rescuing the oppressed as perceived. For this reason, “Colonial wives and missionaries ... found relevance as philanthropists, and charity workers, teaching native women to reject their local organisations and form European style organisations” (Amadiume, 2000, p. 4). These initiatives contributed to the erasure of African values such as African femininity and matriarchy. The local organisations of societies elevate nurturing of children, domestic roles and providing food for the family as some of the core values for women. Western scholars, writers and colonisers came to oppose this and began injecting ideas that the women’s roles in African societies were the sources of their subjugations. In all honesty, what is more rewarding than nurturing children to become well-socialised citizens in future for a better tomorrow? Doesn’t the world need of African femininity or the values of matriarchy to tackle some of the social ills bedeviling societies at present?

In response to western portrayal of gender by the patriarchs of anthropology, some female academics, and western feminists, Amadiume (1987) noted that most of these writings lacked an understanding or better still empathy with the socio-historical and the cultural norms of the people which shaped gender relations in Africa. In summary, the patriarchs wrote to conquer or to bolster colonialism, while the female academics and feminists wrote to fight for their own cause which had nothing to do with emancipating women in Africa. Western feminists were fighting to share house work and childcare with their male counterparts, it did not necessarily mean women in Africa were clamouring for that as well. The African matriarchal societies do not consider domestic work and childcare as burdens, rather these are honourable duties. As Diop (1987, p. xiii) observed “Wives were mistresses of the houses and keepers of the food. Women were agriculturists, men were hunters. The women’s power was based on their important economic role,” this shows that women’s positions in African societies were in no way demeaning. The women’s roles were honourable, and African societies accord so much respect for the mother role. Furthermore, among the Igbo people where Amadiume collected her data for her thesis, women were understood to be blessed with “the pot of prosperity” which they were believed to have inherited from the goddess Idemili (Amadiume, (1987, p. 27). These placed the women on a pedestal and their positions were to be envied more than they were to be derided. It is important to point out here that the matriarchy or femininity as expounded by Amadiume’s findings was not about the absolute triumph of women over men. Equality was not an issue, rather harmonious coexistence with men and women performing their roles was how the society was organised.

Another limitation that Amadiume (1987) identified about female academics studying gender in Africa is that they collected most of their data from women living in villages. Africa is rich in cultural and religious diversity and so are the complexities of the intricacies regarding the social stratifications of the women within the societies. Therefore, to collect data from a given locality and generalise the findings of such to African women is grievously erroneous. If not, western feminists and western female academics might have come with a preconceived notion to prove that African women

are downtrodden, backward and primitive. Even with such case studies, women living in villages do not need an outsider to come and tell them how oppressed they are. Such is regarded as a patronising attitude. To redress the anomaly of who should rightfully speak on behalf of African women in different societies, Amadiume (1987) set out to study her women in her hometown, the Nnobi people, with a view to finding out sex and gender arrangements among them. She found motherhood, family and marriage as central aspects guiding women's actions. The actions included, amassing wealth, militancy, aggression and competition to secure their children's well beings. The Nnobi women fought colonialism and any form of external influence for the sake of their children. With such findings, one may conclude, Nnobi women exude a special type of femininity that is deeply informed by history and socio-cultural context.

Analysis of African Femininity in *Nervous Conditions*

Nervous Conditions introduces us to women characters through whom the femininity of Shona culture can be deciphered from – femininity in their interaction with male counterparts and in their engagement in feminine activities. The various activities and struggles the women characters are engaging in are complementary, for the betterment of the family more than they are antagonistic for the sake of fighting patriarchal system. In fact, such divisive and binary distinctions of looking at a society in terms of patriarchy or matriarchy, femininity or masculinity, are foreign to the communal ways of living around which the Shona culture, if not most African societies, are organised. To discuss femininity in this paper is no way meant to belittle how masculinity was represented in the novel. I use the femininities of the female characters in Tsitsi Dangaremba's novel to add to the growing body of knowledge about gender relationships that seem inexhaustible.

As a starting point I adopt Amadiume's (1987, p. 93) definition of feminine virtue as "a woman's beauty was not only physical, but must also be seen in her mind, good character and hard work." She goes on to qualify good character as meaning "industriousness" (1987, p. 94). Here we find a sharp contrast between femininity in the West as defined around lipsticks, high heels, vulnerability and passivity. African femininity in this definition is constructed in a more relevant manner to the society, not as subservient to masculinity, but rather as an attribute that is complementary to the wellbeing of the family, clan and community.

Industriousness as aspect of African femininity is depicted quite early in Tsitsi Dangaremba's debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*. Her protagonist, Tambu is able to overcome "the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other" (Dangaremba, 1988, p.16), through sheer determination, hard work and discipline. When her father, Jeremiah, was faced with such a painful predicament of having to choose between his children, who to send to schools because of limited resources, he chose Nhamo the boy. Tambu is not defeated as she gathers strength and grew maize to sell so that she can pay her own school fees. It is very easy to be misled of the source of 'the weight of womanhood' in this story and blame patriarchy or the men characters, in this instance the character of Jeremiah, the father. Like in any circumstance, poverty affects people differently. Gender role activities are more difficult and tiresome in poverty stricken societies. To blame patriarchy for the experiences of women while carrying out their day to day activities, is to accord the

men power they do not have. Poverty disempowers both men and women. Poverty is not pointed at a specific gender, hence, if there is any weight on womanhood there should also be a burden on manhood, albeit, in circumstantial proportions.

There is clearly no place for vulnerability in African femininity, as Tambu's mother advises her that "this business of womanhood is a heavy burden ... When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age... What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength", (p. 16). It is such ideologies that instil a good work ethic in the African women's folk. It is the same work ethic that Lucia leverages on, to transform herself into self-reliance and independence after she was impregnated by the lazy Takesure. Lucia rejects the idea of depending on Takesure and she goes on to secure a job at the mission where Babamukuru works, so that she can look after herself and her unborn child.

Nervous Conditions introduces the reader to a unique strand of African femininity, where women do not shy away from the challenges that confront them neither do they adopt blame games. Instead they are propelled to draw deeper from both their physical and intellectual prowess to come up with ideas to get out of poverty. At an early age Tambu, manages to overcome the obstacles of poverty when she resolutely announced to her father "I shall go to school again." Despite her father's discouragement because of his own limitations stemming from poverty, illiteracy and lack of knowledge as shown in his response "Your nonsense, you are about to begin it! You know your Babamukuru will not be home for a while yet!" (p.17), Tambu manages to have her way, devise a plan, grow her own maize, sell her corn and send herself back to school. From Tambu's characterisation, a definition of African femininity which comprises of both physical and intellectual prowess can be deduced. In the same manner, Lucia manages to soften the difficult and unyielding Babamukuru into offering her a job at the mission. She had this to say to Babamukuru, "Don't you see how strong my body is? I can't do things that need education, but anything else! Anything else I can do." Lucia went on to get the job at the mission, with Babamukuru's help, as a cook, and she also started to take evening classes to educate herself. Both Lucia and Tambu represent a type of femininity which embodies both intelligence and physical prowess.

When confronted by the leftist Nyasha on why a militant woman like Lucia would grovel to Babamukuru's egotistic tendencies as a provider, her response was tact, "Babamukuru wanted to be asked, so I asked. And we both have what we wanted, isn't it?" (p.162). It is not a sign of weakness on the part of Lucia to bring herself down for what she wants; rather she uses tact to her own benefit. While some, like Nyasha, may consider this to be a sign of oppression of women by man, such interpretations are misguided and stem from a misunderstanding of the socio-cultural norms that regulate gender relations. For instance, in the Shona culture, respect is reciprocal depending on the kinship of the people interacting. Lucia and Babamukuru are in-laws, and are expected to respect the rules of register that govern such a relationship. The nature of the relationship determines who has to concede and this is neither about femininity nor masculinity. Though women are the ones who many times defer to men and in this particular incident Babamukuru is in charge and Lucia is the one in need of help.

To show that gender is not the only determinant of codes behaviour, in a separate occasion, during the festivities of celebrating Babamukuru's return from England Tambu, the narrator observes, "Babamukuru stepped inside, followed by a retinue of grandfathers, uncles and brothers. Various paternal aunts, who could join them by virtue of their patriarchal status were not too shy to do so, mingled with the men" (37). This scene alone summarises Amadiume's (1987) theory about *Male daughters and female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. In the African context femininity is not a construct fixed by gender, rather, through performance, both male and female can play feminine or masculine roles as the situation demands. In celebration of Babamukuru's homecoming, the narrator's paternal aunts can join in their male kin in decision making forums. Their opinions on issues pertaining to the well-being of the family, depending on their merits, are equally as valid as those of their male counterparts. The structural organisation of the society is inclusive of both genders in the decision-making process. Women take part in the decision-making forums of their families of birth, even the titles that they are addressed by, *tete*, signifies an advisor, a think-tank, a well of wisdom. Women are also respected in the families that they marry into as mothers. Motherhood is not only attained by giving birth as the children of her husband's brothers and cousins already call her mother. As mothers, women play the nurturing, advisory, advocate and decision-making roles for their nuclear families and the extended family. In times of disputes, their voices are respected because of the womb power as the family members defer to them as they would to their biological mothers. From several perspectives, women occupy positions of influence in both their family of origin and in those they marry into.

In another incident in the novel where African femininity was put to question, Jeremiah rebuked his daughter, Tambudzai, for reading a piece of newspaper she had found. "He thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living." (34) In this incident, it shows that African femininity given way of living that can be taken away at whim; rather it is how one chooses, under the circumstances, to make of one's life. Jeremiah might have a different frame for real feminine living, but this did not stop Tambudzai from have hers and to make sure she lives it out. While Jeremiah thought that feminine living is about conformity and marriage, Tambudzai does not disagree with this, but rather she is of the view that femininity goes beyond these prescribed gender roles. To Tambu, African femininity is neither a limitation nor a symbol of frailty that is why she harnessed all the strength she had, physical and intellectual, to send herself back to school. Tambu did not rebel against her father in order to live out her femininity; she tactfully and respectfully negotiated to get what she wanted. In this lies the wisdom of African femininity. Rebelling against a father because he sees issues differently is like throwing away the baby with the bathwater. Jeremiah might have warped ideas about feminineness, he still remains Tambudzai's father and he still needs to grant his daughter permission to take certain decisions. It is also important to recognise that both, father and daughter are under the influence of bigger systemic structures in their part of the world at the time. Jeremiah's comments to Tambudzai are, in the way he knows how to, the processes of "girling the girl" (Butler, 1993b, p. 243).

The ideological differences between western and African femininity is evident in the characterisation of Tambu and her cousin, Nyasha who had spent most of her childhood in England. While advising Tambu on how to handle her menstrual periods, Nyasha said “I was better off losing my virginity to a tampon, which wouldn’t gloat over its achievement, then to a man who would add mine to his hoard of hymens” (p. 97). Virginity and chastity are held with high esteem in most African societies as signified by virginity testing and other cultural practices. Nyasha who does not see any value in holding on to being a virgin, advises her cousin to lose it to a tampon, rather than to a man. It is clear the kind of relationship that Nyasha is referring to, where a girl might lose her virginity to a man who would go about boasting, is not the one the Shona culture encourages. Not just in the Shona culture is virginity held in high regards, but in many societies. As Holland et al (1996) observe, that if virginity is lost too soon or without due care, this can result in a negative reputation for a woman. Many feminists and their disapproval of disciplining female sexuality would have the same sentiments as Nyasha’s over this issue; however, beyond activism is always individual and private lived experiences. If lived experiences are not in harmony with ideologies in feminists thought and activism, then individuals live out those ideas at their own peril.

In summary, the whole narrative is about Tambudzai, the protagonist, who, growing up in a poor rural Zimbabwe, manages to carve her path into stability in life, physiologically and psychologically. She overcomes both her brother’s and her father’s incessant relegation of the female members of the family into his bigoted type femininity. It is quite clear, both the brother’s and father’s prejudices against women are not representative of the Shona culture as Tambu is eventually helped by a man, Babamukuru, to realise her dreams of getting an education. In the whole novel, the women are portrayed being engaged in economic activities, even in some cases where the man of the house has failed to do so, for the benefit of the whole family. Strikingly evident is the sharp contrast between Tambu, who remained sensitive to her traditional values, and Nyasha her cousin, whose “Englishness” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 207) drove her into a nervous breakdown. African femininity here is constructed as associated with stability, emotional balance and resilience.

Conclusion

The world is made to believe that femininity, more so African femininity is inferior to masculinity. When we use a comparative approach to maleness and femaleness, we come up with variances which are divisive. Yet in African societies, it was never about superiority or inferiority rather about complementarity for the greater good of the family, clan and community at large. To this end, it is better that we emulate the type of femininity demonstrated by Tambudzai in *Nervous Conditions*, that, while she saw what she perceived as gendered partial treatment in the family, she chose to remain sensitive to cultural norms of behaviour and decorum. Due to the histories of colonialism, imperialism and other externally induced status quos, both men and women in Africa have sacrifices to make. If, for women the sacrifice to be made calls on their feminine skills, it does not take away the part that men have to give up. Tambudzai understood that, to disrespect her father and her uncle through the influence of a foreign type of femininity would put an end to her hope in getting an education, therefore she remained culturally sensitive to the appropriateness of her behaviour in the African context.

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