

Living in the Outer Layers: Gender Roles in Tsitsi Dangarembga's portrait of Zimbabwe

Dante, in his *Inferno*, describes the eight layers of hell—each tier reserved for a specific type of person who commits a specific type of crime—all encircling the center layer which is designated for those who execute the most powerful of crimes. The Rhodesian society depicted in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* resembles this circular image of separation; each gender, class and race resides in a different layer surrounding the center which holds the culturally neutral dominant, white, wealthy, European men. Those in the center layer, according to Michael Kimmel, though the minority, control the “workplace family, school, politics” and the “‘deviants’ [anyone who is not a wealthy white male] are disciplined” (16) for the sole reason that they do not embody the same traits as those who are culturally neutral. Accordingly, the outermost layer imprisons Lucia, the poor, single, black woman whose sexual habits taint her reputation. A step inward, Tambu's Mother, Mainini, endures the pains of her gender and class on the homestead. Maiguru, who is revered for her education and poise, still resides outside the inner layers enjoyed by the men. Despite their varying places in society, these women all suffer from the same “[universal] victimization” (116). This victimization, “[does not] depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. Men [take] it everywhere with them” and “all the conflicts [come] back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness” (116). Lucia, Mainini, and Maiguru experience the same gender related oppression in different forms that fit their lifestyles appropriately, but Lucia, unlike the others, ultimately tries to break free.

Mainini's situation on the homestead magnifies the grueling social role that women must assume in order to submit to their superior husbands. Her primary concerns

are those of her husband and family; her own wishes place second if she even dares to address them at all. Mainini's life is not her own; her very purpose is to live for others and she understands that the "business of womanhood is a heavy burden" (16). She tells Tambu that "she [Tambu, as a woman] can't just decide today she want[s] to do this, tomorrow [she] want[s] to do that" and "[w]hen there are sacrifices to be made, [women] are the one[s] who [have] to make them" (16). Mainini is jaded by society's "general laws" (38) that enforce the idea that women are inferior; she is jaded to the point that she automatically says Tambu "must have a chance [...] to fail for herself" (24) when she (Tambu) tries to make money for school. Mainini almost plays the role of a feminist as she convinces Jeremiah to let Tambu plant seeds, but then she denies Tambu's success without question—her own suffering leaves her with a tragic sort of wisdom. Mainini never has the opportunity to dream or to envision a better future for herself because "[her] mind, belonging first to her father and then to her husband, [is not] hers to make up" (153). Her identity and her life are not her own possessions; like a puppet, she obeys the dominant males (who reside closer to the culturally neutral) in her life and chooses to silently endure this burden.

Maiguru, who Tambu initially believes to be a "different kind of woman from [her] mother" because "[Maiguru is] not poor and [has] not been crushed by the weight of womanhood" (16), does indeed suffer from the same gender oppression—only in a more subtle and hidden form. Maiguru does not have to sacrifice herself with labor, as Mainini must in order to support her family, but as Babamukuru's wife, she has "to choose between self and security" (101). Although she obtains her Master's degree in England, she accepts the common agreement that she went to England to "look after her family"

(101). She silently contributes to her family's wellbeing without recognition; Babamukuru "wouldn't be able to do half the things he does if [she] didn't work as well" and in fact, "she never receive[s] her salary" (101). Despite the fact that she contributes directly to her family's status, Maiguru does not have the privilege of making decisions; she feels like "nothing in a home [that she is] working [herself] sick to support" (172). Contrary to Mainini, who does not have the education or opportunity to imagine a different possible future, Maiguru must endure the knowledge of "the things [she] could have been, the things [she] could have done" (101). No one seems to realize or appreciate "what sacrifices [Maiguru] made" (102) for her husband and family because they are not as physical or as tangible as those of Mainini. Because Maiguru is married to Babamukuru, her "[situation is defined] as good" (102)—as if her marriage is the primary means by which to determine her identity and position in society. This theme of identity within a marriage rises again when Mainini Patience "who, [has been] married for only eight years, still [has] enough identity left not to feel disloyal to Babamunini Thomas for agreeing with [Tambu's] mother" (137) during her stay at the homestead. Marriage gradually erases the mind and the true personality of these women as they fall prey to a society that demands their submission to men.

While Maiguru initially seems to hold the most power among the women, as would be appropriate in her relatively respected position, Lucia actively eliminates the expectations for females as she challenges the men in her family. Lucia grows to be a stronger individual with a sense of power that Mainini and Maiguru, despite their superiority, do not possess; in doing so, however, she is stripped of the feminine label. The villagers describe her as "nothing of a woman" because "she sleeps with anybody

and everybody, but she hasn't borne a single child yet" (126). She is, in fact, accused of being a witch, as if her status not only makes her not a real woman, but not even a real human. The men meet during a stay at the homestead to decide what to do with Lucia, and Takesure notes that "[they] need a good strategy to outsmart that woman. She is vicious and unnatural" and "[s]he is uncontrollable" (145). The men acknowledge that Lucia is smart even, but this is the very reason that she must be condemned and restrained. This acclaimed witch, however, has the courage and sense to request a job and the opportunity to attend school, thereby allowing her freedom from marriage and the ability to support herself and help support her family. Immediately, she obtains the power that independence and self-sufficiency bring to a woman. The fact that she is out-casted proves irrelevant, as she then becomes a sort of heroine when she saves her sister's life from destruction.

Lucia, though the farthest from what this African society deems culturally neutral, is the strongest woman of the novel. Perhaps her utterly low position is what actually drives her to defy the system that harshly defines her status. She is without a husband, and therefore, she still clings to her noteworthy and unique identity. Lucia inspires a sense of hope for generations of women to come; her rebelliousness seems intimidating, but brave and daring nonetheless. It is as though she plucks herself from the outer layer of the circle and proves that she can compete with those—the men—who dwell in the inner circles of society.