

Maternal Imperatives and the Daughter's Moral Burden in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract

This study examines the ethical consequences of maternal endurance in *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, focusing on how practices of care, survival, and silence shape the moral formation of the child within colonial and patriarchal conditions. While postcolonial feminist scholarship has frequently celebrated maternal resilience as a form of strength and survival under oppression, this study argues that endurance may also function as a source of moral authority that redistributes emotional and relational responsibility onto children. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, narrative ethics, moral philosophy, and affect theory, the paper employs close textual analysis to examine how relational obligation is structured through caregiving, emotional restraint, silence, and forgiveness. The analysis demonstrates that maternal endurance legitimizes authority, produces forms of moral indebtedness, and positions the child as responsible for sustaining familial and emotional equilibrium. Silence emerges as an ethical practice through which suffering is managed and internalized, while forgiveness is often framed as a moral expectation rather than a freely chosen act. By foregrounding the child as an ethically burdened subject, this study contributes to postcolonial feminist scholarship by demonstrating that moral formation emerges not only through structural oppression but also through the intimate redistribution of care, obligation, and responsibility within familial relationships.

Keywords: Care ethics, childhood responsibility, ethical formation, maternal endurance, narrative ethics, postcolonial feminism, relational obligation

ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الآثار الأخلاقية لصمود الأم في رواية الظروف العصبية لتسيتسي دانغاريمنغا، مع التركيز على الكيفية التي تُشكّل بها ممارسات الرعاية والبقاء والصمت تكوين الطفل الأخلاقي ضمن سياقات استعمارية وأبوية. وبينما غالباً ما احتفى النقد الأدبي النسوي ما بعد الاستعماري بصمود الأم بوصفه شكلاً من أشكال القوة والبقاء في مواجهة القمع، تجادل هذه الدراسة بأن هذا الصمود قد يتحول أيضاً إلى سلطة أخلاقية تُعيد توزيع المسؤولية العاطفية والعلاقية على الأطفال. استناداً إلى أخلاقيات الرعاية النسوية، وأخلاقيات السرد، والفلسفة الأخلاقية، ونظرية التأثير (Affect Theory)، تعتمد الدراسة على تحليل نصي دقيق لفهم كيفية تشكّل الالتزامات العلائقية عبر الرعاية، والكبح العاطفي، والصمت، والغفران. وتُظهر النتائج أن صمود الأم يُكرّس السلطة الأخلاقية ويُنتج أشكالاً من المديونية العاطفية، ويجعل الطفل مسؤولاً عن الحفاظ على التوازن الأسري والعاطفي. كما يبرز الصمت بوصفه ممارسة أخلاقية تُدار من خلالها المعاناة وتُسْتَبطن، في حين يُقدّم الغفران غالباً كالتزام أخلاقي مفروض أكثر من كونه فعلاً اختياريّاً نابغاً من الإرادة. ومن خلال التركيز على الطفل بوصفه ذاتاً مثقلة أخلاقياً، تُسهّم هذه الدراسة في النقد النسوي ما بعد الاستعماري من خلال إظهار أن التكوين الأخلاقي لا ينبع فقط من البنى القمعية، بل أيضاً من إعادة توزيع دقيقة للرعاية والواجب والمسؤولية داخل العلاقات العائلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أخلاقيات الرعاية، مسؤولية الطفولة، التكوين الأخلاقي، صمود الأم، أخلاقيات السرد، النسوية، ما بعد الاستعمار، الالتزام العلائقي

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Introduction

Maternal figures are widely understood to occupy a privileged moral position in cultural and literary narratives of family, care, and survival. Motherhood is commonly associated with endurance, sacrifice, and ethical strength, particularly within contexts shaped by colonial domination, economic precarity, and patriarchal constraint. Such representations have long been read as affirming maternal survival as a response to structural violence. What is less readily acknowledged, however, are the ethical consequences these narratives produce within intimate relationships. When endurance is affirmed without qualification, maternal suffering becomes morally authoritative, while the emotional and ethical burdens carried by children are more easily absorbed into the background of family life.

Within postcolonial and feminist literary scholarship, resilience is often treated as a necessary and sustaining force. It is difficult to dispute the importance of survival under sustained constraint. Yet when endurance becomes an unquestioned virtue, it can also begin to shape moral expectations within the family. Children may come to learn that gratitude is owed, that silence is appropriate, and that forgiveness is expected rather than chosen. In such circumstances, the child's interior life is shaped not only by structural forces but also by the quiet and ongoing work of managing suffering that is inherited rather than assumed by choice.

These tensions become particularly visible in *Nervous Conditions*, a narrative situated within colonial and patriarchal Zimbabwe that foregrounds maternal survival while simultaneously revealing its intergenerational effects. While the novel is well known for its feminist and postcolonial critiques, comparatively less attention has been given to how maternal endurance itself may function as a mechanism for redistributing ethical and emotional responsibility within the family. Attending to this dynamic makes it possible to reconsider endurance not only as a strategy of survival but also as a relational force that shapes moral formation.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how maternal endurance is constructed as ethical virtue while simultaneously positioning the child as the bearer of unresolved relational obligations. To pursue this aim, the analysis advances three objectives: first, to examine how maternal survival is narrated as morally authoritative; second, to analyze how responsibility for familial suffering is displaced onto the child; and third, to explore how forgiveness operates as a moral expectation that precedes listening, accountability, and repair. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the novel construct maternal endurance as a form of ethical authority?
2. In what ways are children positioned as responsible for managing inherited suffering, and how does forgiveness function as a regulatory expectation within asymmetrical relationships?

Literature Review

To situate the research questions articulated in the introduction, caregiving within families can be understood as an ethically and emotionally complex process, particularly within contexts shaped by colonial histories, patriarchal hierarchies, and economic precarity. Care is not merely emotional labor; it functions as a site where moral meaning, social value, and ethical obligation are actively constituted. Feminist ethics of care demonstrates that moral subjectivity emerges through interdependent networks, challenging individualist models of autonomy and emphasizing the distribution of responsibility across relationships (Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 2003).

Postcolonial feminist scholarship further highlights how maternal experience and caregiving are shaped by political, economic, and gendered structures, showing that survival and ethical choice are inseparable from systemic forces beyond individual control (Rich, 1976). Together, these frameworks establish a conceptual foundation for understanding how maternal endurance generates relational obligations within families. The concept of moral economies of care is particularly useful here, as it demonstrates how care circulates not only as emotional labor but also as a system of reciprocity, expectation, and ethical debt.

While scholarship has extensively examined caregiving as a response to structural inequality, less attention has been given to how these dynamics position children as ethically burdened subjects. This raises key questions about how survival narratives distribute emotional and moral responsibility within the family and how children are shaped as moral agents within asymmetrical relationships.

Three interrelated axes structure this discourse: maternal survival as moral authority, the ethical positioning of the child, and narrative strategies that regulate the visibility of suffering. Maternal survival is rarely framed as individual heroism; rather, it emerges as a relational response to poverty, colonial domination, and gendered inequality (Rich, 1976; Tronto, 1993). Feminist ethical theory further argues that caregiving generates moral authority grounded in relational obligation rather than autonomy (Nussbaum, 2001; Tronto, 1993). However, what remains underexplored is how this authority redistributes emotional and ethical responsibility onto children.

The notion of moral economies of care clarifies this dynamic by showing how care produces expectations of recognition and reciprocity (Tronto, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 2003). Within survival narratives, children often internalize responsibility for relational stability before they have the developmental capacity to fully process it (Freyd, 1996; Munemo, 2020). This positions them as both recipients of care and carriers of its emotional consequences.

Narrative and trauma theory further explain how these dynamics are communicated. Trauma scholarship shows that suffering is often represented indirectly through silence, fragmentation, or narrative gaps rather than explicit explanation (Caruth, 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992). These narrative strategies shape ethical interpretation by determining what is visible, what is withheld, and how responsibility is inferred. Silence can therefore function simultaneously as protection and ethical burden.

For example, literary works such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* illustrate how familial structures shaped by historical violence redistribute emotional and ethical labor across generations, revealing survival as a relational and morally mediated process rather than an individual act of endurance.

Despite extensive interdisciplinary engagement with care, trauma, and moral responsibility, a key gap remains: the ethical consequences of caregiving structures for children. While maternal agency and structural constraint are well theorized, less attention has been paid to how

these frameworks shape children's moral formation. Narrative silence is often treated as a representational technique rather than as a mechanism that distributes intergenerational ethical labor.

Recent scholarship continues to examine *Nervous Conditions* through postcolonial and decolonial feminist perspectives, emphasizing the enduring effects of colonialism, patriarchy, and structural inequality in shaping women's experiences and resistance (Anwar et al. 2022). Contemporary analyses also foreground identity formation, psychological conflict, and gendered power relations in shaping subjectivity within the novel. More recent studies highlight survival, trauma, and healing as central to understanding resistance under colonial Rhodesia (Jakki & Boddu, 2025). However, comparatively limited attention has been given to how maternal endurance shapes the child's moral formation through care, silence, and emotional obligation. This study addresses that gap.

In summary, existing scholarship demonstrates sustained engagement with care, trauma, and moral responsibility, yet the child's ethical positioning within survival narratives remains underexplored. This study contributes to feminist and postcolonial literary scholarship by showing that maternal endurance is not only a strategy of survival but also a structuring force in the ethical formation of childhood.

Methodology

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach integrating narrative ethics, moral philosophy, and affect theory to examine the ethical implications of maternal endurance in *Nervous Conditions*. These frameworks provide complementary tools for analyzing how caregiving, authority, emotional expectation, and relational obligation shape the moral formation of children within familial contexts.

Narrative ethics examines how storytelling constructs moral meaning and distributes responsibility across relationships (Booth, 1983; Ricoeur, 1991). Moral philosophy, particularly theories of relational ethics and ethical asymmetry, provides a framework for understanding obligation, responsibility, and moral authority within unequal relationships (Levinas, 1969; Nussbaum, 2001). Affect theory further informs the analysis by examining how emotional experiences—including silence, guilt, fear, and obligation—mediate ethical perception and relational attachment (Ngai, 2005; Massumi, 2015).

Methodologically, the study relies on close textual analysis of selected narrative moments in *Nervous Conditions*. Particular attention is given to scenes involving maternal endurance, caregiving practices, silence, emotional regulation, and forgiveness to examine how ethical expectations are communicated and internalized. Rather than treating maternal resilience solely as a strategy of survival, the analysis investigates how care and sacrifice may also redistribute emotional and moral responsibility onto children.

Because the study focuses on a single literary text, its findings are not intended to be universally generalizable. Instead, the analysis offers a context-specific framework for understanding how narratives of survival, care, and endurance shape ethical subjectivity and intergenerational responsibility within postcolonial literary contexts.

Analysis

Mothers as Moral Architects

In *Nervous Conditions*, maternal figures do more than provide care or guidance; they actively design the moral architecture of family life. Whereas maternal guidance refers to direct forms of instruction, warning, or emotional support, moral architecture operates more broadly, shaping the ethical conditions through which children come to understand obligation, sacrifice, and responsibility. Dangarembga represents maternal authority as emerging from sustained labor, vigilance, and survival rather than overt coercion. This authority is grounded in endurance itself, which becomes a form of ethical instruction. Ma'Shingayi's warning—"Even if you keep on keeping quiet... do you think we cannot find you, child!" (Dangarembga, 1988, pp. 352–353)—illustrates how the daily realities of scarcity, movement, and persistence operate as moral training. Tambu's responsibilities intensify not because she has transgressed, but because her mother's unrelenting effort establishes an ethical standard of responsiveness that the child is expected to meet.

Within this relational structure, moral development unfolds asymmetrically. Drawing on Levinas's notion of ethical asymmetry, responsibility does not arise from consent or equality but from relational positioning. Tambu occupies a dependent position in which obligation precedes choice; her ethical formation is inseparable from the debts produced by maternal labor. Survival, in this sense, does not just sustain life—it authorizes expectation. Ma'Shingayi articulates this logic explicitly when she remarks, "This business of womanhood is a heavy burden" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16) and urges Tambu to "learn to carry your burdens with strength" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16). Endurance is framed not only as necessity but as virtue, and with virtue comes obligation. Gratitude, attentiveness, and compliance are not framed as emotional responses freely given; they are normalized as moral requirements within a hierarchy shaped by sacrifice. Maternal vigilance thus operates simultaneously as protection and pedagogy, quietly instructing the child in how responsibility is to be carried.

Maiguru's reflections extend this moral framework by exposing the cost of such endurance. Her admission—"What it is... to have to choose between self and security" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 139)—followed by her reflection on foregone possibilities in England (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 103), reveals how maternal sacrifice is both normalized and rendered invisible. These sacrifices stabilize the family while silently generating expectations of recognition. Tambu internalizes this moral calculus when she confesses, "I could not bear the thought of failing, not after all that had been done for me" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 162). Maternal survival thus functions as both ethical authority and relational benchmark, shaping the child's sense of obligation, fear of failure, and moral attentiveness.

Through these portrayals, Dangarembga demonstrates that maternal care is inseparable from moral formation. Mothers do not simply guide through explicit advice or correction; they establish the ethical conditions within which responsibility is learned. Maternal guidance shapes behavior in immediate ways, but moral architecture structures the broader relational environment, determining how children come to understand duty, sacrifice, and moral expectation. However, this authority, grounded in endurance, does not end with instruction. It extends into the realm of care itself, where survival is converted into obligation, and care becomes a mechanism for producing moral debt.

Care as Obligation: Labor, Leverage, and Moral Debt

Care in *Nervous Conditions* is never neutral. It circulates as labor, attachment, and expectation, generating hierarchies of obligation rather than comfort alone. Maternal care functions as both sustenance and leverage: those who provide it accrue moral authority, while

those who receive it inherit responsibility. Early directives such as Jeremiah's command—"Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 15)—reduce care and domestic labor to measurable performance, aligning ethical adequacy with usefulness and reinforcing gendered expectations of responsibility. Within this framework, caregiving becomes a form of moral apprenticeship. Ma'Shingayi's insistence—"Let her try. Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 22)—withholds protection in order to cultivate endurance. Hardship is reframed as preparation, situating Tambu within a system where care is inseparable from discipline.

Similarly, Maiguru's acknowledgment of choosing "between self and security" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 139) underscores how adult sacrifice sustains familial continuity while reinforcing ethical asymmetry. Her endurance stabilizes the household, but it also quietly generates expectations of recognition, restraint, and moral responsiveness in the child. Care thus produces obligation not only through explicit command but also through emotional attachment and dependence. Tambu's growing awareness of maternal sacrifice reshapes her moral self-understanding; responsibility is felt not as choice but as debt. Care becomes a moral economy in which survival authorizes expectation and endurance demands acknowledgment. In revealing these dynamics, Dangarembga shows that maternal labor is both sustaining and constraining; it preserves life while disciplining the child's emerging ethical identity and narrowing the space in which responsibility can be refused.

Silence as Ethical Instruction

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga demonstrates that what remains unspoken often carries as much ethical and emotional weight as explicit instruction. Trauma, conflict, and responsibility are frequently mediated through silence, narrative gaps, and partial disclosure, compelling children to interpret moral meaning without clear guidance. Rather than offering direct explanation or moral commentary, the narrative positions the child to learn through observation, bodily experience, and inference. Ethical understanding emerges less through instruction than through exposure to situations that require interpretation before full comprehension becomes possible.

Nyasha's vomiting following forced compliance exemplifies this dynamic. Her distress is communicated somatically rather than verbally, requiring both those around her and the reader to infer the ethical implications of coercion and resistance. Similarly, Tambu absorbs the consequences of her brother's sabotage without reassurance or explanation, internalizing relational tension as something to be managed rather than openly addressed. In such moments, silence structures moral labor by shifting interpretive and emotional responsibility onto children, who must respond without clarification or validation.

Silence in the novel also operates in uneasy proximity to protection. Ma'Shingayi's warning—"The problem is the Englishness, so you be careful!" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 207)—simultaneously protects Tambu from immediate danger while signaling broader, unnamed risks. This partial disclosure requires the child to anticipate harm, regulate behavior, and exercise judgment in circumstances she cannot fully understand. Protection, therefore, does not eliminate vulnerability; rather, it teaches the child how to live within uncertainty. Ethical responsibility becomes embedded in vigilance, restraint, and self-monitoring rather than explicit moral instruction.

These narrative gaps function as a formative ethical mechanism precisely because they withhold explanation and compel interpretive labor. By leaving causal relations, emotional motivations, and moral judgments partially unspoken, the narrative forces children to construct meaning themselves. In doing so, they internalize responsibility for understanding and responding to ethical situations without external clarification. This process trains them to navigate ambiguity, regulate emotion, and infer moral significance from incomplete information, thereby shaping ethical consciousness through the active filling-in of what is left unsaid.

Through such moments, Dangarembga illustrates that ethical development is shaped less by direct teaching than by sustained exposure to ambiguity. Witnessing sacrifice, discipline, and vulnerability without explanation cultivates attentiveness to relational obligation while normalizing uncertainty. Silence thus becomes a formative ethical mechanism: it sharpens perception, disciplines response, and conditions children to carry responsibility in the absence of dialogue. Within this framework, moral consciousness develops not through clarity but through the necessity of navigating what cannot yet be named.

Children as Vessels of Premature Forgiveness

If silence shapes ethical perception, forgiveness in *Nervous Conditions* emerges as one of its moral consequences. Forgiveness is frequently imposed upon children as an expectation rather than arising through genuine emotional reconciliation. Within the novel's affective framework, children are expected to repair relational ruptures and preserve familial stability before they possess the emotional or cognitive resources to do so fully. Tambu's admission—"I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 12)—reveals the tension between authentic feeling and moral expectation, exposing how emotional conformity is often demanded before ethical understanding becomes possible.

Such moments reflect a displacement of accountability. Rather than addressing harm directly, responsibility is transferred to the child, who is expected to absorb the conflict to preserve relational continuity. Nyasha's experiences make the mechanism of authority particularly visible as enacted rather than argued. Babamukuru's coercive command—"You will eat that food... Sit and eat that food. I am telling you. Eat it!" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 192)—does not function as persuasion or moral reasoning but as embodied enforcement. Authority here is not justified through dialogue; it is performed through repetition, command, and bodily control, turning obedience itself into the argument.

Tambu's refusal to attend her parents' wedding—"I am sorry, Babamukuru, but I do not want to go to the wedding" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 169)—briefly exposes the fragility of this structure. Her dissent is not engaged intellectually or ethically; instead, it is met with disciplinary consequences, demonstrating that disagreement does not enter a space of negotiation but triggers enforcement. In this sense, authority is enacted through outcomes—punishment, withdrawal of approval, and emotional pressure—rather than reasoned justification.

Maiguru's negotiated compromises between selfhood and security further reinforce this pattern. Her endurance models sacrifice as moral necessity, establishing an intergenerational framework in which obligation becomes internalized rather than questioned. Tambu and Nyasha respond through silence, bodily distress, and restrained resistance—forms of response that, despite their oppositional quality, continue to absorb rather than redistribute responsibility.

By framing forgiveness as an anticipated duty rather than a freely chosen act, Dangarembga demonstrates how ethical formation unfolds under conditions of constraint. Children are required to mediate harm, regulate emotion, and sustain relational order before autonomy is fully available to them. Ethical maturity, in this framework, is not gradually developed but prematurely demanded, reinforcing the uneven distribution of emotional and moral labor across generations.

Ethical Formation as Intergenerational Transmission

In *Nervous Conditions*, endurance, care, silence, and premature forgiveness converge to shape Tambu's ethical formation across generations. Maternal perseverance functions not merely as survival but as moral pedagogy: it demands recognition, legitimizes authority, and structures the child's responses to both relational and structural hierarchies. Tambu learns to interpret sacrifice as obligation, to regulate her emotional responses, and to align her behavior with expectations produced by maternal and familial endurance. Ethical development thus unfolds within asymmetrical relationships, where responsibility is grounded in survival and sustained through recognition rather than choice. Care operates simultaneously as protection and obligation. Tambu's educational advancement and social mobility remain inseparable from maternal and extended familial labor, framing achievement as relational rather than individual. What appears as opportunity is therefore inseparable from ethical debt. Narrative silence intensifies this process by requiring the child to interpret suffering without explicit explanation, while expectations of forgiveness further encourage emotional compliance before harm is fully named or addressed. Through these interlocking mechanisms, responsibility becomes internalized rather than externally imposed, shaping moral subjectivity from within.

Dangarembga ultimately demonstrates that ethical subjectivity is formed through lived relational experience rather than formal moral instruction. Children become ethical agents by observing endurance, absorbing obligation, and navigating emotional constraint in conditions they did not create. Childhood in *Nervous Conditions* thus emerges as a critical site of intergenerational transmission, where survival, care, and authority are inherited alongside opportunity. Ethical formation, in this framework, is not a neutral developmental process but a relational inheritance—one that shapes how responsibility, recognition, and moral duty are learned long before they can be fully understood or refused.

Conclusion

This study examined how maternal perseverance, caregiving, silence, and anticipated forgiveness in *Nervous Conditions* shape the ethical formation of children within colonial, patriarchal, and material constraints. Rather than presenting maternal endurance solely as resilience, the analysis demonstrates that it also functions as moral instruction: sustained effort generates authority, care produces relational obligations, silence communicates ethical lessons, and forgiveness is often expected before it is genuinely felt. Through these dynamics, childhood emerges as a space where responsibility is internalized early, often before full comprehension or consent becomes possible.

The findings demonstrate that maternal action creates both opportunities and obligations. The household becomes a space in which guidance, labor, and protection are inseparable from moral expectation. Ethical responsibility is transmitted not only through explicit instruction but also through observation, embodied experience, and relational exposure. Narrative silences and anticipatory forgiveness intensify this process, requiring children to interpret suffering, regulate emotional responses, and navigate asymmetrical moral structures from an early age.

By foregrounding the child as an ethically burdened subject, Dangarembga's novel complicates uncritical readings of maternal resilience. Care and perseverance function not only as forms of protection but also as mechanisms that redistribute responsibility, shaping moral consciousness through intimate relational dynamics. Ethical agency therefore emerges as relational rather than autonomous, formed through the interplay of endurance, obligation, and constraint.

Ultimately, *Nervous Conditions* invites readers to recognize that the effects of maternal perseverance extend beyond immediate protection or material support. Childhood becomes a site where structural inequalities are transformed into lived ethical experience and where the intergenerational transmission of care carries both opportunity and responsibility. The novel therefore calls attention to the often-unseen moral labor demanded of children, revealing ethical formation as not only learned but also inherited and negotiated within familial relations. This shift displaces ethical responsibility from the individual child alone, situating it within the broader family structure, where caregiving practices, silence, and expectations collectively produce moral development rather than merely shaping it.

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AI Statement

To the best of the author's knowledge, no AI generator has been used in this paper.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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