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## Political Reading of Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

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### Abstract

This paper explores Tsitsi Dangarembga's debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*, from a political perspective. It has been read as portraying of gender relationships, social hierarchies and oppression of African women. This paper takes a different route as it analyses the role of masculinities through a political perspective. The conflict and struggle between genders in the text can be read through a political and historical perspective. This particular reading is permitted through a close analysis of the male characters in the novel. The research argues that male characters resemble or behave in away similar to white colonizers in their treatment of African women. Reading the novel through a political perspective provides the reader with the benefit of understanding the changes that occur in the characters and the role of gender conflict in the text. The triumph of Tambu and Nyasha at the end underscores the failure of colonial power to colonize Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Tsitsi Dangarembga/ postcolonial, African literature/ feminist literary criticism.

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### INTRODUCTION

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is considered a masterwork of modern African literature. It is the first English novel written by a black Zimbabwean woman. The work was completed in 1984, but it was rejected by local publishers as it touches upon highly sensitive subjects in African society. "For four years Dangarembga was rejected by Zimbabwean publishers whose attitudes to her writing were that she was too much of a feminist" (Tendai 22). After its publication, the novel has achieved international success. It has become one of the most important literary texts in African literature. Nowadays, the text is taught at Zimbabwe schools. Even though *Nervous Conditions* is a fictional literary work, the novel's prestige rests in part on its realistic scenes of actions and events. The locale of the novel and the social context are unmistakably the early colonial period of an African community. The novel's internal narrative is set in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The author does not build her theme, characters, dialogues, conflicts and plot strictly around particular historical events. Yet, the characters in the text are caught in a specific historical and social framework. The female narrator represents the past and present of the African community. She reveals both the negative and positive facets of the traditional and colonial experiences.

The colonial experience as an encounter between European forces and the colonized

people is hardly mentioned in the novel. There is no obvious struggle between the white colonizers and the indigenous African people. According to Sagnet Zimbabwean male authors wrote in the late 1980s "foreground the chimurenga struggle for national liberation, *Nervous Conditions* barely mentioned it" (33). Searle believes that Dangarembga goes far above the immediate level of British colonization found in *Things Fall Apart*. Many critics have analysed the text through gender relationships, social hierarchies and oppression of African women, simultaneously male characters in the text are only considered in terms of their interactions with female characters. This paper takes a different route as it analyses the role of masculinities through a political perspective. The conflict and struggle between genders in the text can be read through a political and historical perspective. This particular reading is permitted through a close analysis of the male characters in the novel. The research argues that male characters resemble or behaves in away similar to white colonizers in their treatment of African women. Viewed from a political perspective, the female characters signify the colonized nation (Rhodesia), whereas male characters represent the British Empire. "Dangarembga's heroine suggests that women can reproduce the nation as intellectual subjects not just as embodied ones" (Stone 113). Yet, there are significant differences between the white colonizer and African male, since the latter is a product of the former. "*Nervous Conditions* nevertheless, shows clearly how

those men are themselves products of the colonial system” (Sugnet 36). The other difference between the two is that African male has an ambivalent role in the text as colonized and colonizer. Due to the limitation of space and time, this paper concentrates mainly on Babamukuru and the two young girls Nyasha and Tambudzai. Yet, other characters are brought into light to support the above claim.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Nervous Conditions* recounts the story of two young African girls; Tambudzai and Nyasha. Tambudzai is the tale orator who is raised in a typical African village. Nyasha and Tambudzai’s personalities and motivations have attracted the most criticism of *Nervous Conditions*. The novel is about Tambu’s willingness to progress through formal education. “ I decided it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood” (16). The text reveals how women individually or collectively seek their identities within traditional female daily life in colonial Zimbabwe. The female characters in the novel struggle with what seems to be the prevalent rules of the society regarding race, gender, culture and religion. The only way to withdraw from this patriarchy is to refuse it.

*Nervous Conditions* has always been viewed as a feminist representation of the African community. Lindsay Aegerter adopts a womanist lens in her analysis of *Nervous Conditions*. She proposes that *Nervous Conditions* articulates “a dialectic and autonomy community” (231). Aegerter affirms that the female characters in *Nervous Conditions* are given voice. They occupy the locus spot in the text. According to Aegerter, “the African women of *Nervous Conditions* do not merely react; they act. And in their very action – in their refusal to live their lives only in response to oppression lies their resistance” (231). Furthermore, Aegerter views Tambudzai’s identity as inextricably connected to women collectively. Thus, Tambu and Nyasha demonstrate two sides of one whole person.

The novel demonstrates that African women face enormous social problems. Uwakweh examines the social structure of society. She argues that Dangarembga represents African females as encountering the double oppression of patriarchy and colonization. More precisely, Uwakweh concentrates on the negative impact of colonization on the social life of the African community. The negative effects are seen through all aspects of social life in Zimbabwe.

Colonial domination in Tambu’s world manifests itself in all aspects of social life, such as defining the age at which African children should start school, maintaining a racist agenda against the indigenes in educational institutions [...] and using the selective nature of its educational systems to limit the educated indigenous population (79).

Furthermore, Uwakweh argues that Dangarembga as a postcolonial writer has shown some political concerns about major issues such as the value of Western education and the exploitative nature of colonization. “This dialectical tension in the novel projects the socio-political dimensions of the novel” (Uwakweh 77). In fact, Uwakweh’s reading of *Nervous Conditions* provides an insightful analysis of the text through the political dimensions. Yet, it seems that Uwakweh does not show how Dangarembga highlights the political concepts. The exploitative nature of colonization is not revealed.

Sugnet takes a different view in his interpretation of the novel. Yet, he is within the framework of feminism. Sugnet argues that the text’s depiction of feminism and anti-colonial nationalism based on Fanon’s conceptual lens. He traces the gradual development of the young African girl. Tambu’s struggle is seen as a gendered struggle for national liberation.

The national liberation struggle is conspicuous by its absence in this novel, yet I think there may be a complex party subterranean relationship between it and the struggle of the young Tambudzai against the immediate manifestation of patriarchy in her life (Sugnet 34).

Sugnet goes beyond this idea and argues that Dangarembga uses Fanon’s concept “on violence as the decisive rapture in the colonial situation” (39). On several occasions, female characters in *Nervous Conditions* violently resist patriarchal dominations. As an example, he considers Nyasha’s resistance when her father punishes her.

Dangarembga in one of her interviews distinguishes between the situation in Africa and in the West concerning feminist theory. When she is asked about the unequal treatment of Tambu and her brother within their family, she replies that the patriarchal system which is adopted by Western feminism can not be applied to Africa “because the situation in my part of the world has one variable which makes it absolutely different: the men are also in a position of powerlessness” (qtd. un Holland 121). Dangarembga’s view of Africa has a great value to the above research question as the paper examines the gender rela-

tionship through a political perspective. Dangarembga in her interview was not talking about the male characters in the text, but she was providing a realistic view of Zimbabwe. Both genders are exposed to a certain degree of oppression. The novel reveals many incidents in which African males are presented as inferior to the white colonizers." Excuse me, Madam, Mr Matimba said in English, in the softest, slipperiest voice I have ever heard him use, speaking to an old white woman who walked arm in arm with her husband" (27). This quotation manifests the weakness of African males when approached by white colonizers. Also, Babamukuru admits his inferiority to white colonizers. "I have been wondering, sister, began Babamukuru politely. I was under the impression that the girls [...](198). Babamukuru has not used such highly polite rhetoric with any other characters in the novel.

Another facet that asserts the political reading of the text is found in the epigraph of the novel. The title *Nervous Conditions* is taken from Fanon's *The Wrath of The Earth*. This epigraph is highly significant since it implies Dangarembga's engagement with revolutionary nationalism. Dangarembga was aware of all the political tensions and historical events in colonized countries. Thus, there is a high possibility that the novel should be read at the political and historical level.

## ANALYSIS OF THE NOVEL

Reading *Nervous Conditions* through the political dimension does not reject the possibilities of other readings. This analysis is an attempt to add a new insight to the existing research.

In postcolonial discourse, indigenous women are employed metaphorically to represent the invaded lands. "From the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond) female bodies symbolise the conquered land" (Loomba 129). There is a connection between women and land in postcolonial discourse. "The nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally as a woman" (Loomba 180). The uses of motherland and homeland are interchangeable terms in postcolonial texts. In a narrow sense women are usually cast as mothers and wives, but in a broader view they signify the nation. According to Stone "the representations of homes and houses have figured prominently in the production of gendered national subjects" (112). Furthermore, the notion of resistance is imagined as a woman. The resistance against colonizers can be portrayed via women. "Resistance itself is imagined as a woman" (Loomba 180).

*Nervous Conditions* reveals many events and incidents which affirm that the novel can be read above the level of gender struggle in a colonized nation. In the early stage of the story, Nhamo takes the chance of education, while Tambu faces many impediments and difficulties in her journey to receive formal education. For many people access to education mean gaining a certain amount of power. It is not physical power but it is power of progression. Viewed from this perspective education signifies material sources. In this case, material sources are the ultimate goal of colonization. Consequently, the struggle over education between Nhamo and Tambu may be seen as the struggle between colonizer and the colonized people over material sources. "Tambu's struggle to gain an education is not a woman's alone but has been shared by colonized peoples in general who were quick to recognize that being tutored in western wizardry meant access to power" (Nair 134). Tambu's negative feeling towards Nhamo's death asserts this reading since death suggests the disappearance of colonization. His death serves as a symbol of the destruction of European imperialism.

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you many define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are more reasons for this more than mere consequence of age (1).

Tambu does not provide explanations for her lack of emotional feeling. She makes it clear that her abnormal feeling has no correlation with her age. It is an odd feeling in terms of a brother and sister relationships. Her brother, as the text depicts, acts like the colonizers whenever he approaches his sisters. Furthermore, he is represented as selfish and only caring about his own success. "Knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do things for him" (10). Viewed from a political perspective, Nhamo is seen as the colonizer and Tambu as the colonized nation. Tambu as the colonized nation has manifested some sort of resistances. She rebels against the domination of her brother. "I went straight for my brother and brought him down in a single charge" (23). These two examples reveal the ambivalent role of Nhamo as a colonized and colonizer. In one aspect he is portrayed as having authority and power over his sisters and in the other he is just a coward. Approaching Nhamo as a colonizer, Tambu says that "our home is healthier when he was away" (10). Dangarembga uses the word home delibera-

tely to indicate the nation. Therefore, Zimbabwe was a better place before the arrival of the white colonizers. This image of Zimbabwe prior to the arrival of colonialism is enhanced as Dangarembga depicts the awful deeds of the white colonizers. "He threw my grandmother and her children off his farm" (18). Moreover, throughout the text the white colonizers are described as wizards. The imagery Dangarembga adopts divulges the feeling and the power struggle that white colonizers brought with them.

Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land [...] the wizards were avaricious and grasping: there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the grey sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it. There they built a home (18).

White colonizers come to Africa with certain assumptions about their own cultural, intellectual and moral superiority. They view Africans as savages and members of primitive inferior cultures. During colonization, indigenous populations are marginalized and their voices are not heard. Therefore, the resistance of colonized people may be seen as counter responses to the dominant Eurocentric discourse. Dangarembga sheds light on the terrible deeds of the white colonizers. This type of discourse is seen as a form of resistance to the negative representation of Africa. In addition, the author shows negative attitudes towards the white colonizers. "Some of the crowd cheered, saying she was more human than most of her kind. Others muttered that white people could afford to be, in fact ought to be generous" (29). Dangarembga expresses her negative political stance towards colonization. Moreover, the novelist indicates the huge lands that are owned by the white colonizers. "I never did discover how many hectares of land those nuns owned, but to the eye it looked like hundreds" (196).

The female characters of *Nervous Conditions* engage in many rebellious acts that include fighting brothers and fathers and starving self. The rebellious acts are perceived as a form of social protest against the prevailing political and social conditions of the people of Zimbabwe. The novel provides all types of women old, young, married and unmarried. The rebellious acts are apparent throughout the novel between male and female. This study concentrates on Tambu and Nyasha on one side and Babamukuru on the other side. The resistance of female characters is seen as a blow against the dominant male society. In fact,

the struggle between Nyasha and her father becomes the centre of the novel.

Babamukuru has a highly enigmatic personality. He is portrayed as having two contradicting roles in society. Within his small community, he is the colonizer, while in the larger one, he is the colonized. His cultural background and his colonial education have coupled together to form the complexity of his identity. This vacillation of Babamukuru's character is apparent throughout the story. "Babamukuru appears to triumph in both traditional African and British realm" (Holland 128). Consequently, his social behaviour is a mixture of the two values. Prominence among masculinise is an important feature of African culture. Men of Africa need to achieve certain characteristics in order to be recognized as important figures in the community. Yet those features are changeable in accordance with the political and social changes. "The characteristics of a Big Man began to change, melting into western standards of manhood" (Holland 123). Thus, Babamukuru works extremely hard to obtain a high social status within his community. "He surprised the missionaries by performing exceptionally well at school, in spite of putting in a full day's work on the farm" (19).

Throughout the novel Babamukuru is viewed as the patriarch of Tambu's family. At a number of levels, Babamukuru can be seen as the colonizers. His attitudes and behaviour towards the members of his family are viewed as a sort of colonization. Babamukuru resembles the white colonizers in many ways pertaining to the social life in Shona. Physically he does not live in the village but he controls the village from a distance. In a similar way British colonizers do not permanently settle in Zimbabwe. They colonized and have power over the place and people for some time. In other words, the people of Zimbabwe were under colonization by the British colonizers. One of the pretended tasks of colonizers is to provide formal education to the indigenous group through missionary schools.

They had come not to take but to give. They were about God's business here in darkest Africa. They had given up the comfort and security of their own homes to come and lighten our darkness. It was a big sacrifice that the missionaries made (105).

Dangarembga illustrates the colonizers' rhetoric, yet the storyline does not glorify the colonizer's claimed morality. Dangarembga demonstrates the pretended moral aspect of colonization. The white colonizers have a counterfeit proclaim to enlighten Africa. There are no poli-

tical or economic exploitation behind their arrival to Africa. Through such a type of discourse the white colonizers deceive many indigenous people. As stated earlier, Babamkuru is seen as a product of this system. He wins a scholarship to pursue his higher education in England through the missionary funds. "He had pushed up from under the weight of white man with no strong relative to help" (64).

In a similar way to the colonizers, Babamukuru provides education for the people of his homestead. He has a plan to educate one member of each family in the village. "We need to ensure that at least one member from each family is educated, at least to Form Four standard, because after that he will be in a position to take a course" (44). Babamukuru gains the vision of education through his experience with the colonizers. In this way, education is viewed as a moral element that colonizers provide to colonized people. Yet, in actuality colonial education is a means to impose and maintain colonial ideology. "But there was one terrible change. He had forgotten how to speak Shona" (53). In this short quotation, Tambu is describing how her brother has changed as a result of colonial education." But submitting to an alien system of education" Nair states, "also meant a transformation of traditional cultures and a threat to existing structures of power within the family, clan and community" (134). In a similar vein, Loomba asserts that colonial education devalues native literatures. The people of Zimbabwe, in this case, are subject to change in accordance with the colonial education they receive.

Babamukuru as both colonized and colonizer plays double roles in the text. He is the first person of his small community to interact with the western world in a significant way. His acts and attitudes towards his family are aggressive sometimes. Babamukuru is described as having plenty of power. "He had plenty of power. Plenty of power. Plenty of money. Alot of education. Plenty of everything" (50). Furthermore, Babamukuru is similar to a colonizer in terms of enlightening other members of his family. "He pointed out that the blessing I had received was not an individual blessing but one that extended to all members of my less fortunate family, who would be depend on me in the future" ( 89). I argue that Babamukuru uses the colonizer's discourse whenever he describes his family. He does not use exactly the same terms *savage and uneducated* but he implies that members of his family rely heavily on him. Babamukuru acts as a provider and hero for his family. "The aura of a foreign

education, when combined with the generous distribution of goods [...] was a potent mix that granted Babamukuru extraordinary authority and influence within the network of his extended family" (Searle 57). He is used by the colonizers to serve their agenda. His role is to naturalize colonization. Beza argues that the general opinion of these men is not always positive. They are viewed as products of British colonization, "which had become not only very proficient at facilitating the transfer of wealth to their former master, but also one that had generally assumed colonial means of repression, and in some cases even worse"( 5). Singh reveals a negative stance towards these men. He says "at whatever cost, they will help in keeping the colonial enterprise alive, particularly if it mean food on the table" (128).

Almost all the female characters rebel against Babamukuru's colonial acts. As stated earlier, Babamukuru resembles the colonizer in a number of dimensions. Dangarembga depicts him as the only African man who lives in a white house. "My uncle was the only African living in a white house. We were all very proud of this fact" (63). Also, Tambu describes the house as a kingdom. "This kingdom that I should not have been entering" (66). The degree of resistance varies from generation to generation. The two young girls demonstrate serious resistance and reject the colonization of Babamukuru. Other female characters refuse to be under the control of Babamukuru. However, their rebellious acts are not as serious as those of two young girls. For instance, Maiguru stands up against her colonizer husband. Her resistance is not permanent:

But when it comes to taking my money so that you can feed her and her father and your whole family and waste it on ridiculous weddings [...]. Let me tell you Babawa Chid, I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being a housekeeper for them. I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support [...] I have had enough (174).

In the quotation, Maiguru refuses the oppression of her husband. Additionally, she expresses her anger about a specific material thing. Money in this case is an issue for Maiguru. The conflict between Maiguru and her husband around material things is seen through a wider scope as the struggle between colonized people and colonizers. Maiguru's rebellious acts are supported by her own daughter. Nyasha's position on this conflict gives credence to the political reading of the text. "I do not know admitted the daughter, but it would be good for her if she did"(175).

On several occasions Nyasha and Tambu

resists the colonization system of Babamukuru. Being a colonizer, Babamukuru sets a number of rules and forces every one under his power to follow these instructions. Moreover, he is seen as God. "Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven"(Dangarembga 70). He is given high status like the white colonizers. It seems that he is distinguished within the indigenous group. Consequently, his rules and instructions have to be followed. "I am the head of this house. Anyone who defies my authority is an evil thing in this house, bent on destroying what I have made"(Dangarembga 169).

Tambu also rejects the colonization of her uncle. There is a moment of realization when Tambu encourages herself and stands against her uncle and refuse to attend the wedding party of her parents. Despite, the threat and punishment that Babamukuru shows Tambu remains firm on her position. Her tolerance of the punishment is viewed as a price for her new identity. "To me that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity" (171). The political reading of this situation suggests that there is a price for freedom. The colonized people need to sacrifice something in order to gain their equality and freedom.

Throughout the novel Nyasha uses different methods to show her resistance. She develops methods to act gradually against Babamukuru's standards. She on different occasions deliberately breaks those standards. There is no equality between Nyasha and her father in terms of power, yet she stands up against him orally at first stage. Then she begins to strike to express her anger of colonization. The political reading of the novel as seen through Nyasha's personality is very believable since she is more intellectual than the other female characters and also she is aware of all the political issues surrounding Africa and the Third World. "She read a lot of books that were about real people, real peoples and their sufferings: the condition in South Africa, which she asked Maiguru to compare with our own situation and ended up arguing with her when Maiguru said we were better off"(Dangarembga 95).

As stated earlier, Babamukuru is a colonized person as well. In fact, his social status in the community, his plenty of power and his well-paid job do not prevent him from being colonized. At certain times in the novel, the real personality of Babamukuru is shown. He is under colonization like the rest of the African people. Even though he was the head of the missionary school, he is with no power to change or modify certain subjects in the school. He could not reveal his objections to certain subjects that are taught

in his school.

"Nyasha was always urging me to go with her and in the end told me frankly that while Babamukuru could not forbid her going because the dances were a school activity from which it would not be appropriate to debar his daughter, he believed them to be sinful all the same" (96).

Babamukuru is not able to stand up against the white colonizers. In fact, he is not able to discuss this issue with them. Even though he considers dancing as a sin which violates his own religion, tradition and values, he can not remove it from his school. He is forced by the white colonizers to let this subject to be taught in his school.

## CONCLUSION

*Nervous Conditions* is open for many interpretations. Many critics have analyzed the text from different perspectives. Reading the novel through a political perspective provides the reader with the benefit of understanding the changes that occur in the characters and the role of gender conflict in the text. The triumph of Tambu and Nyasha at the end underscores the failure of colonial power to colonize Zimbabwe. The resistance against colonization is symbolized in the struggle of Womanhood versus Manhood in the lives of the characters.

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