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The Nature of Nervous Conditions in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is, primarily, a novel about nervous conditions. It's about many other things, too. It's about power. It's about women. About men and poverty and riches. It's about education and missions and colonial Zimbabwe. It's about black and white. But at the end of all of these themes lies the nervous conditions of the novel's characters and how they formed, how they are rooted, and how they express themselves.

In this paper, I will examine the nervous conditions of three characters in particular: Babamukuru, Nyasha, and Tambu. By identifying each of their conditions and examining them closely, I hope to identify the causes of their condition, both the stimuli and the character's reactions to them. By comparing the way that each character develops their condition, I will discuss the complexity that Dangarembga allows her characters and the actual humanity that they are meant to reflect. She does not give us a condition that results from a colonized position, but a variety of nervous *conditions* that result from varied positions in relation to varied issues. While outside forces form the characters and their conditions, it is the struggle within the characters of the novel that creates conflict.

Nervous Conditions is the story of Tambudzai, the narrator, and her family. Her family is very poor, and all she knows as a child is work. She dreams of leaving like her brother Nhamo to live with her uncle Babamukuru and go to school at the mission in Umtali. When her brother

becomes ill and dies, she takes his place in her uncle's house and gets the chance to get an education, which she believes is the key to an escape from the poverty and the subjection of her mother to her father. As Tambu becomes accustomed to living in a house built for a white family and all of the excitement of going to the mission school, she realizes that world she idolized from afar is not as ideal as it seemed. Her uncle is not rich compared to what she sees on TV. Her aunt Maiguru is no less subjugated than her mother, even with a Master's degree from England. And her cousin Nyasha does not seem to think that she is the luckiest of all girls.

The struggle between Nyasha and her father becomes the center of the novel. Nyasha spent much of her childhood in England when her parents went to school there. While she is very aware of the plight of her people under the colonial system, she does not fit in with the Shona culture around her and her domineering father is afraid that her improper behavior reflects poorly upon him. She is outspoken and unafraid to challenge his authority, and they are in constant conflict. Tambu observes them, reflecting on her own views in relation to theirs. Near the end of the book, while Tambu is at Sacred Heart, a Catholic school where she earned a prestigious scholarship, Nyasha is finally taken to get help for the eating disorder that she has developed in defiance of her father.

The novel's characters are not islands, but are interconnected, complicated, and affect each other as they search for their identity in a world of varying expectations. What the mission wants is different than what Shona culture wants is yet different from what Babamukuru, the ultimate authority of the family, wants. It is these varied expectations that is at the root of their nervous conditions. The title of the novel comes from Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, a discussion of colonized Africans:

Two worlds: that makes two bewitchings; they dance all night and at dawn they crowd into the churches to hear mass; each day the split widens. Our enemy betrays his brothers and becomes our accomplice; his brothers do the same thing. The status of “native” is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*. (17)

Sartre’s native struggles with cultural identity—is he African or is he European? He is suspended between two worlds, constantly renegotiating his identity according to his place in time and space. Dangarembga expands on this native in *Nervous Conditions*, making him more specific, real, complex, and possibly female.

While Sartre’s native is a vague generalization, Dangarembga’s has a real time and place, though we must look closely in order to notice. The characters are caught in a specific historical and social framework, one that is useful to know when looking at their lives. *Nervous Conditions* is set in Southern Rhodesia, a British colony largely inhabited by a people called the Shona. The bulk of the story is in the sixties, a time of political tension and change. Southern Rhodesia became a British colony following the Berlin Conference in 1885. The purpose of the conference was to split Africa amongst the European powers—not exactly who received the land, but who had a right to pursue it.

The man who orchestrated the British colonial project in Africa was Cecil Rhodes. In order to acquire the area later called Rhodesia, he sent Charles Rudd to negotiate a treaty with King Khumalo Lobengula. The terms of the agreement, known as the Rudd Concession, was that British prospectors could have access to Lobengula’s land for a short period of time in exchange for a thousand rifles and a monthly payment of a hundred pounds. Lobengula was expected to simply sign the document without a fight, but he turned out to be much more intelligent and wily

than the British had expected. The reaction of the British was anger and force. Peter Gibbs, a member of the negotiating team, writes that “hour after hour, week after week, month after month, the king argued with remarkable success with the Cambridge men. He tore to shreds their thesis on the advantages of granting Rhodes the concession. The pillars of learning made so little headway that Rhodes felt compelled to force the issue” (qtd. in Mungazi 55). Wary of being ensnared by the Europeans, Lobengula was eventually convinced to sign by a missionary confidant who was secretly being paid by Rhodes to influence the king. The British took the agreement as a license to do as they pleased. Within five years, Lobengula was dead and a new colonial government, the British South Africa Company, was in place.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu relates the story of the colonizer’s arrival in the way her grandmother told her about it. The imagery she uses divulges the feelings and the power struggle that they 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. (Dangarembga 18)

The Europeans that came to Africa came with many assumptions of their own cultural, intellectual, and moral superiority to the Africans. In their minds, Africans were savages and members of primitive, inferior cultures. They were incapable of reason, virtue, order, industry, and other European qualities. Perhaps most significantly, they were “lacking in the supposed normality of the West” (Stenger 178). The British immediately installed themselves in a role of paternalistic authority over the Africans, but the decisions they made on behalf of the Shona

were not dictated by the Shona's needs or wants, but by the needs of the settler community and their reluctance to release the natives from under their control.

The government and the businesses that came to take advantage of Southern Rhodesia's resources did not do much to hide their manipulative intentions. However, along with speculators, missionaries rushed to the area following colonization. Their intentions were undoubtedly more pure than the other settlers', but they found that while they in Africa as representatives of the God of the Bible, they were also representatives of their country and their Western culture that ascribed so much to Christian practices. V.Y. Mudimbe, an African philosopher and professor who has written extensively on colonialism and postcolonialism, says in *The Invention of Africa*, "The more carefully one studies the history of mission in Africa, the more difficult it becomes not to identify it with cultural propaganda, patriotic motivations, and commercial interest, since the missions' program is indeed more complex than the simple transmission of the Christian faith" (qtd. in Stenger 11). Missionaries and colonialism both aimed to convert Africa, "[seeking] the destruction of pre-colonial societies and their replacement by new Christian societies in the image of Europe" (Stenger 20).

As the world changed through time, colonization changed with it. The rights of Africans slowly became more important in politically correct society, and the government of Rhodesia changed their official policies to reflect the pressures put on them from the outside world. However, the purpose of their presence in Africa remained economical, and so the new constitutions resulted in very little real change. By the early 1970s, as Tambu starts attending Sacred Heart, other African countries like Kenya and Algeria had fought successfully for their independence and black nationalists had gained substantial political support from even the British government—the colonial government of Southern Rhodesia, worried about what would

happen if they were forced to have a system of majority rule, would soon declare itself independent of Britain, triggering a ten year war between nationalists and the government and leading eventually to the creation of Zimbabwe.

Babamukuru, the patriarch of Tambu's family, gives us a picture of what the colonial system had done to the Shona culture by this point. He seems jump right out of Fanon's theory. As the transition from colonial government to nationalist government begins, it is men like Babamukuru who receive government positions. The general opinion of these men is not always positive—they are seen as products of the British Commonwealth “which had become not only very proficient at facilitating the transfer of wealth to their former masters, but also one that had generally assumed colonial means of repression, and in some cases even worse” (Beza 5). Babamukuru has an extremely strong personality and his powerful position and strong-willed control of his family makes him a foil to most of the other characters in the book. It's important to understand his character because it is by comparing others to him and looking at their reactions to him that we understand the other characters in the novel.

Babamukuru, in accordance with this description of his generation, links others in the novel to colonialism. It is easy to see Babamukuru as a kind of droid produced by the mission, less of a man than a colonizing force constantly acting upon the other characters. Some argue that he and the other educated men in the book “are products of colonial capitalism and education and are, in fact, complicit with colonialism . . . At whatever cost, they will help in keeping the colonial enterprise alive, particularly if it means food on the table” (Singh 128). However, when we look at the possible motivations that drive him, we can see that while he is indeed a force to be reckoned with, he is not purely a convert of the Western world. He is a hybrid of the mission and the Shona community.

We can see this when he takes Tambu to Sacred Heart for the first time. As he drives through the grounds and helps Tambu find her room, he is clearly ill at ease. As Tambu is caught up looking at all the wonders of the predominantly white convent, Babamukuru becomes quiet and sullen. He scolds Nyasha for noticing and commenting on the wealth that surrounds them. He seems to feel acutely that he is in a place where he has no power, where he must bow politely to the obvious racism of the school when a nun explains that though the other students live four to a room, the six African girls, inconveniently, must find a way to share a room between all of them. He seems most caring and sympathetic in this scene as he helps Maiguru make Tambu's bed (198). This scene shows that he, too, is out of place in the world of the British, no matter how much he has been exposed to it. He feels the disconnect between what he wants to be and what he simply cannot achieve.

The traditional standards for Shona men were quite different from the way that the mission expected the men, especially those who were under its employment, to behave. Before they were introduced to western culture, Zimbabwean men achieved maturity and gained respect from their community by being independent politically and financially, the head of a large home and farm. The most respected men were patriarchs of huge family networks, which they achieved by giving *lobela*, or bridewealth, for their wives, receiving *lobela* for their daughters, and helping their sons give *lobela* for their wives (Summers 76).

The missionaries' main objective was conversion of the natives—religious, cultural, and intellectual. In order to achieve this, they “tried to maintain control and oversight over all activities of their African employees Regardless of [their] ages, missions viewed them as employees subject to white missionaries' paternal control, not as fathers or patriarchs” (76). Men under the mission's employ were expected to be obedient to the missionaries and act in

accordance with all of the rules set by the mission having to do with everything including marriage, dancing, and concerts as well as “accept their social, economic, and political inequality with whites” (88).

Men (and women) had to give up their cultural ceremonies, rites, and roles in order to be seen as loyal to the mission. Many missions would punish students and employees based on their compliance with expectations—for “consenting to concubinage of their daughter . . . for dancing the ‘chula’ dance . . . for following the pagan custom of cleansing the village” (qtd. Stenger 163). Giving or receiving *lobela* was out of the question. Polygamy was out of the question. They could even be expelled from mission land for these offences. By enforcing these rules, missionaries worked to replace the African culture with their own, making rituals like church attendance and marriage the automatic reflex of those living in mission communities.

The conflict of standards between the mission and their own communities could be quite a dilemma for Shona men. When they conformed to the expectations of the mission entirely, they found that they lost “their sources of authority and adulthood” in the native community. A man who “followed [the mission’s] rules . . . would remain, regardless of age, a mission dependant or, in local terms, a mission boy” (88). Many found that the respect they sacrificed in the community was not worth their position at the mission, and would defy mission rules in order to salvage whatever they could from their community.

Other men some developed effective techniques for participating in both communities. Some simply hid unapproved activities like beer drinking from the mission. Others compromised, working “to develop a model of legitimate African male authority within the white-ruled society of Southern Rhodesia” (Summers 79). Some created a new hybrid household that fit the expectations of the mission while still showing themselves capable in the community.

They married an educated, Christian woman and along with their own children, the couple hosted relatives and students who needed to board near the mission school. In this household, which “could rapidly become as complex as some polygynous households and could rival missionary establishments for size, the husband acquired a realm of authority . . . which fit into more ‘traditional’ community norms of what it took to become an important man, with clients and household” (88).

We can see how Babamukuru created a similar role for himself in order to bridge the gap between native and western. While his immediate household at the mission is quite small, comprising of himself, his wife Maiguru, his children Chido and Nyasha, his niece Tambu, and one servant, his authority over his extended family—his brothers and sisters and their children—is phenomenal. He is undeniably the leader of his family, and he rules it with an iron fist. At one point, even the threat that Tambu may tell her uncle is enough to stop Jeremiah, her father, from hiring the local medicine man.

Babamukuru’s identity is rooted in his past and his place as a member of the older generation of the novel. He finds both success and identity in his position at the mission, but also finds them in the influence he has over his family. He is the first member of his family to interact with the western world in a significant way and takes on a hero-like place in the oral history of the family. Tambu tells us about her grandmother’s stories, in which the white wizards come and ruin the prospects of the family in a series of events. But following the appearance of the holy wizards at the mission, Babamukuru starts his journey as the family’s savior:

She walked, with my uncle, with Babamukuru, who was nine years old and wearing a loincloth, to the mission, where the holy wizards took him in. They set

him to work in their farm by day. By night he was educated in their wizardry. . . . They thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator. . . . My uncle became prosperous and respected, well enough salaried to reduce a little the meagerness of his family's existence. (19)

With this background, it's easy to see that the mission is the basis of Babamukuru's interaction with his family. It is "the central mechanism through which, the social, moral, and educational status of his extended family could be achieved" (Searle 57).

Babamukuru's role in his family as the oldest male is quite traditional, and is only strengthened by his prominence and success at the mission and his ability to provide for them financially. He is their provider and hero—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). His role as a patriarch and his role at the mission are not entirely separate, but affect each other in complicated ways.

Babamukuru's domineering behaviors are the symptoms of his nervous condition—his struggle to define himself according to the standards of both his family and the mission. While he himself has clearly done a fairly good job of placing himself between the two, it is in his attempts to ensure his acceptance by maneuvering those around him that he damages himself and others. As a representative of the mission, his life must be an example to the community of the proper way of conduct, and his family, as they are under his provision, must reflect him. He sees each member of the family that he leads as a representation of himself at the mission. Many of the kindnesses he shows them are in hopes that they will better reflect himself. In addition, he

tries to control Nyasha, who is very much a product of his life in the white man's world, so that she will properly reflect him to the Shona community at the mission and to his family.

In addition to being the most colonized, Babamukuru is the most masculine character in the novel, the man that we can rate all the other men against. He defines masculinity, and therefore femininity, for the rest of the characters of *Nervous Conditions*. He is achieving, reasoning, and commanding, controlling, asserting, protecting, possessing, and providing for women (Mugambi 205). But he takes all of these attributes, which are both positive and human, rather than masculine, and takes each to the extreme so that "what would have been his reasonableness freezes into intransigence and inflexibility. His idea of controlling and protecting his children degenerates into a neurotic tyranny over, and even violence toward them" (206).

Babamukuru is not central to the novel in and of himself, but in how others react to his self placement and nervous condition—particularly the women characters. At the beginning of the novel, Tambu explains that *Nervous Conditions* is about the women in her family—herself, her aunt Lucia, her mother, her aunt Maiguru, and her cousin Nyasha. Each woman negotiates their womanhood in relation to Babamukuru differently, "[ranging] from passive acceptance, through admiration, aspiration, and emulation, to active and confrontational challenge" (Mugambi 210).

Everyone in Babamukuru's family is subject to him, but the women are undeniably the least autonomous. Not only are they expected to conform to his standards, but they are also subject to all of the other men in the family. Tambu, when she is still at home, is trapped under her father's lazy, selfish rule. Though Babamukuru is sending him money to send her to school, Jeremiah insists that she does not need to be educated. Babamukuru's wife "Maiguru was educated," he told her, "and did she serve Babamukuru books for dinner" (16)? As Tambu

struggles to earn her own money to go to school by growing a plot of corn, she must fight against her father's tendency to use all family money on beer, her brother's theft of her mealies, and her mother's complaisance and lack of encouragement. Her mother persuades Jeremiah to let Tambu try growing the corn by telling him, "And did she ask for money? . . . She is asking for seed. That we can give. Let her try. Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done" (17).

The women's conditions are the most important of the novel. Unlike the men, the women in Tambu's family are unable to simply define themselves in relation to Shona culture and Western culture, but they must also define themselves in relation to men, of whom Babamukuru is foremost. However, the form of Babamukuru's masculinity is not static and is not a binary to the femininity of the women. He does not maintain an equally harsh stance against all women, and he is not always the self-assured, powerful man that he wishes. He, like the other characters, reacts according to the situation and to the behaviors of others. For example, he is not as extreme with Lucia, Tambu's rebellious and nonconformist aunt, as he is with Nyasha, who is more confrontational in her rebellion. The same scene at Sacred Heart that separates him from colonialism equally separates him from machismo. He is forced to adjust his behaviors in relation to the nuns at Sacred Heart, suggesting "that even the performances of masculinity or femininity are subject to broader frameworks of power relations, and it is not always accurate to assume that because patriarchy is in power, all men are powerful all the time" (Mugambi 207).

But by applying the ideas of theorists like Judith Butler and Arthur Brittan, Helen Nabasuta Mugambi claims in her essay "Reading Masculinities in a Feminist Text" that the lines between masculine and feminine in *Nervous Conditions* are much softer than they may seem at

first glance. She points out that Dangarembga does not conform to the typical male/female binary, but “systematically orchestrates a range of masculinities against femininities [and] simultaneously undermines the essence of each by dramatizing their capacity for volatility” (201). She creates in the novel a “pluralized masculinity” to which different characters react differently.

Historically, the attitudes of white missionaries and Shona men towards women have not been all that different. As African men adjusted to the presence of the British and became more and more involved in mission life, women remained in more or less the same place they had always been, no matter what their level of education. Part of the reason behind this was the idea that Western civilization, if introduced too quickly to Africans, could lead to their corruption. So while African men were seeking to maintain whatever they could of their former culture, missionaries were afraid “that rural stability would collapse if women were allowed too much freedom. ‘We acknowledge our sins of ignorance,’ confessed the AMEC missionaries, ‘in preaching this very liberty in which the women have too quickly come for their own good at this transitional period in their lives, and we recommend that we preach to them Paul’s injunction: let wives be subject to their husbands.’” (Ranger 306).

African men, as possessors of their women, were reluctant to give them the freedom of Western culture. Just as the mission was reluctant to let the men out from under their control, African men found much of their identity in the control they had over the women. Change in the status of women was “seen as a threat to national identity, based as it is on the artificial binary of indigenous/Western, tradition/modern, good/evil, dualities, as if to be truly an African woman is to remain ‘essentially’ African, therefore ‘pure,’ and if not, then the female body is seen as diseased or contaminated” (Singh 125).

Many mission publications idealized women in a way that reflects Maiguru's character in *Nervous Conditions*. One mission in particular singled out Daisy Hlatywayo as a prime example of what an African woman should be:

Daisy Hlatywayo was a phenomenon within the American board mission—a woman constantly pointed to as an ideal African woman. Born to the first local couple married by Christian rites, she attended Mount Silanda all the way up to standard VI, becoming one of the first women in the country to achieve certification. After teaching at several schools, she went to Hope Fountain in 1929 for training as a home demonstrator. . . . After marriage, in addition to raising his children and their own, she administered a complex household full of foster-children staying with her for their education, and continued to work as a demonstrator, doing midwifery, health demonstrations, and dispensary work, and talking about domesticity to mothers' groups" (Summers 82).

Maiguru, like her husband, received a Master's degree when they were in England. Yet, because she is a woman, she continues to teach at the mission—a job requiring much less education than she has received. She is very unsatisfied with her life. Her income is spent by her husband in maintaining his status as benevolent patriarch to his family. The holiday and family gathering meals that are so appreciated by Tambu's parents and siblings should perhaps be seen as a gift from Maiguru, not Babamukuru.

However, Maiguru is generally accepting of her position, excepting a short episode when she leaves for a week to live with her brother. This one short episode, though it was short lived and ended as soon as Babamukuru heard where she was, was somehow satisfying to her. Tambu

says that “the change had done her good. She smiled more often and less mechanically, fussed over us less and was more willing or able to talk about sensible things” (178).

When we compare Maiguru to Babamukuru, members of the same generation and recipients of the same good will of the Western world, we see that though they are very similar, gender plays a huge role in their ability to satisfactorily position themselves among the different cultural expectations that press upon them. Maiguru is unhappy and unable to reconcile her identity. Nyasha and Tambudzai, who have been instilled with Western ideals of growing freedom for women, are disappointed by the prospects they see in the life of Maiguru, the ideal Shona woman. If this is as good as it gets, is it worth striving for? The prospects of the girls successfully negotiating their identities as Shona women living in an increasingly western world seem dim. Developing the nervous conditions that their parents have been unable to escape seems imminent.

Indeed, through the course of the book we see through Tambu’s eyes the slow disintegration of Nyasha who, because of her childhood exposure to life in England as well as her youth, is unable to cope with all of the different demands that are placed on her. Hers is the most apparent condition of the novel. It shows itself in violence and challenge directed toward her father as well as an eating disorder and slow mental breakdown. Her condition evolves from a variety of origins:

“She is Fanon’s ‘native’ *par excellence*, physically decimated by the ‘nervous conditions’ that he posits as a central and destructive element in the psychology of the colonized. However, as Dangarembga makes clear, it is the *intersection* of the educational opportunities provided by the mission with the patriarchal elements of Shona culture that make her suffering so acute” (Searle 58).

She feels pressure from her own ideals, school, the other children at the mission, her cousins, parents, and aunts and uncles. Each expects different things from her, and each are disappointed in different ways. She is absolutely incapable of performing to all of their specifications.

Nyasha has little real attachment to Shona tradition, and is most uncomfortable when expected to perform by cultural codes that are, to her, alien. Her Shona is stuttering, she forgets all of the greetings, and she simply does not have the same views of her father and elders as she is expected to. Upon her return to Rhodesia, Tambu can hardly believe the change in her and is afraid that she has lost the childhood friend that she remembered so well. She is especially shocked that her cousins no longer speak Shona:

I had not expected my cousins to have changed, certainly not so radically, simply because they had been away for a while. Besides, Shona was our language. What did people mean when they forgot it? Standing there, trying to digest these thoughts, I remembered speaking to my cousins freely and fluently before they went away, eating wild fruits with them, making clay pots and swimming in Nyamarira. Now they had turned into strangers. I stopped being offended and was sad instead. (42)

A huge part of Nyasha's nervous condition springs from the difference between what her family expects of her and how her identity and background allows her to behave. But she also reverses this and expects others to behave according to her own background. While her parents are expecting her to perform like any Shona girl and daughter of theirs should, Nyasha places Western expectations upon them. She wants her mother to stand up to her father and demand the rights that all of her school readings and her experience in Britain tells her she should have. She cannot respect her mother for accommodating her father so thoroughly. And when Maiguru does

stand up to her father, she is surprised and proud. But when Maiguru returns home after five days, she is disappointed. “It’s such a waste,” she says. “Imagine what she might have been with the right kind of exposure!”

The central conflict of the novel is that of Nyasha against her father. The largest problems in their relationship are their cultural differences. While Babamukuru identifies himself largely according to Shona tradition, Nyasha attempts to define herself, and therefore others, by Western standards:

For while Nyasha’s insistence on parental honesty and individual freedom reflect the same commitment to personal enterprise and Christian values that Babamukuru imbibed through his own hard-earned and ambitious ascent to social prominence, the transgressive sexuality of the novel renders it affronting to him, and does not fit with his preconceptions of womanly decorum. Babamukuru fears that Nyasha’s preference for Western dress and behaviorisms, including her determined outspokenness, will compromise his reputation as an upright gentleman. (Searle 58)

Her position as his daughter causes his actions towards her to be especially controlling. In his traditional evaluations of her, she must “be kept pure for the modern marriage market; if she can’t marry well, she might lose her social and economic standing; therefore, it is with Nyasha that Babamukuru’s patriarchal control takes extreme forms” (Singh 131).

Nyasha is hyperaware of the issues related to feminism and colonialism that surround her, but is incapable of reconciling her knowledge with her life. She wants to discount her father’s expectations, but they are still important to her. She’s disappointed when her mother returns home after arguing with her father, but is also thrilled that she is back. She doesn’t trust the

things that she learns at school, but “becomes obsessed with passing the exams which will test her on the colonizer’s version of knowledge even while she is aware that this education is a ‘gift’ of her father’s status, and the ‘knowledge’ itself is questionable” (qtd. Hawley 184). Her eating disorder is a physical embodiment of this inability to believe, feel, and act upon her intellectual convictions. She is a victim of the systems and people that she thinks she understands so well. She feels out of control, and “since there is no other object that can be controlled so directly as her own body, Nyasha attacks it as metonymic of the colonial product” (Hawley 185).

According to Mugambi, the reason that her struggle against her fathers is so taxing to her mind and body and shows so little success is that she uses his own tactics against him. She uses the same negative qualities that he has—absolutism, arrogance, and aggressiveness—to fight him (214). For example, she refuses to observe the mealtime rituals that reinforce Babamukuru’s position in the family—rituals like waiting until he eats to begin eating her own plate or allowing him the seat at the head of the table. Instead, she sits in his chair and is the one to begin eating the meal. That her tactics involve adopting Babamukuru’s own masculine qualities as her own and symbolically displacing him (215) makes Nyasha’s actions even more threatening to his authority that he places so much of his identity in than only outspoken questioning would.

In contrast to Nyasha, Lucia is somehow able to defy the expectations of her family without hurting herself. She is unafraid to stand up for herself and the other woman, and refuses to depend on the men of the family. Mugambi says that while “Nyasha, the inflexible, theoretical, ‘men-must-be-fought’ inexperienced feminist, hurls and hurts herself against the granite of masculinity, Lucia, the practical tactician, scores empowerment points (even from Babamukuru, who appears to compliment her gender border crossings) by flexibly fighting each masculine challenge as it arises” (Mugambi 215). Lucia invades “men only” family meetings

and is not afraid to be disrespectful, but she is also able to allow Babamukuru to provide for her by finding her a job at the mission.

Unlike Nyasha, Tambu has the same cultural background as her uncle, and often she sees the world in nearly the same light as he does. She has grown up with him and his opinions as the center of the world. She calls her grandmother's version of his history "a fairy-tale of reward and punishment, of cause and effect. It had a moral too, a tantalizing moral that increased your aspirations, but not beyond a manageable level. . . . Life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules" (19). We can see in the rest of the novel that Tambu has internalized the moral of Babamukuru's life, but she slowly becomes increasingly aware of the complications of the real world and the impossibility of siding with her uncle on all issues.

One of the areas in which Tambu's perspective widens significantly throughout the novel is education. The education that the mission offers is the only part of white culture that Tambu has access to. The setting of the novel is limited to interactions within Tambu's family and within the mission near Umtali where her uncle Babamukuru lives. She only gives a short description of the effects that westerners outside of the mission have had on her community:

While I was still young, to enable administration of our area, the Government built its district council Houses less than a mile away from the places where we washed. . . . It was not long before the entrepreneurial among us, noticing that there were always more people gathered at the Council House than anywhere else in the village . . . built their little tuckshops . . . there beside the Council Houses. . . . Thus our washing place became thoroughfares for people going to magrosa for

all sorts of reasons. In the interests of decency bathing was relegated to further up the river. (4)

Tambu's experience reflects the level of interaction that government agents and settlers had with the native population in Rhodesia. Her experience also reflects the allure that education has upon the native. For many Africans, especially women, "saw missions as places of opportunity and escape" (Summers 91). Education was something that would make them like the colonizers—successful, powerful, and free from poverty. When she is still living at home, Tambu drinks up her brother's stories of the grandeur that he experiences every day because he is being educated in Umtali. Education became the thing that would save her.

However, Tambu slowly learns that education is both positive and negative. It "promises the possibility of escape from poverty and entrance into an unfamiliar and intriguing world of texts and learning. Yet, it also entails inevitable separation from family and a measure of complicity with the imperial power that controls the education system; frequently this fractures the individual's sense of self" (Searle 60). As she grows used to her surroundings at the mission, Tambu begins to notice increasingly notices a gap between the education she is getting and the way the white children at the mission are educated. After going through all of the classes at the mission, white children went to the good boarding schools, while Shona students settled for significantly less. She tells us that the only reason her cousin Chido was going to a good school was because Mr. Baker, his friend's father, felt guilty that he could send his son to such a good school while Babamukuru could not. Many missionaries and other officials would not have been as sympathetic, which is implied whenever Tambu observes the educational system, especially in the ratio of white students to black students in the higher level schools. Many whites used the difference between the lifestyles and probably futures of black and white children as a way to

back up their views. One government official wrote, “If [their education] has to be delayed, the native children are in no worse a position than they have been in the past. If however, we cannot meet adequately the growing needs of the European population of school age, these children are handicapped for the rest of their lives” (Ragsdale 76).

As her views toward education slowly change, so do her views of her uncle. Tambu moves from wanting her life to emulate her uncle’s to seeking his approval in all of her actions when she moves to the mission. Her relationship with Nyasha, though they are best friends, is sometimes complicated the value that Tambu places on Babamukuru’s opinion of her. But as Tambu becomes more comfortable at the mission and comes to understand her family’s place there better, she observes many incongruities that slowly affect her more and more. She comes to understand that her sex is keeping her from the achievement that Babamukuru has accomplished and that her dreams of following in his footsteps are impossible to fully realize.

The other women of the family have a profound effect on Tambu’s thinking as the book progresses. She generally avoids conflict herself, but as her mother, aunts, and cousin come into conflict with her idol Babamukuru, she is forced to choose a stance. At some point near the end of the novel, she finally verbalizes her disillusionment with all the ideals that her uncle has stood for. She has lost her hope that “Western education, Westernization, and individualism as the epitome of liberation and happiness” (Singh 133).

It seems at first that she is rather uncomplicated and the conflicts she observes have little affect upon her, yet she discovers that she is slowly developing a nervous condition of her own. It pops up occasionally throughout the novel—the earliest instance is when she grows her own plot of corn to sell so that she can attend school. And when Babamukuru sponsors a “real” wedding for her parents, she is torn between her loyalty to him and her distaste for the entire

event. No matter how she wishes otherwise, the day of the wedding she wakes unable to move from her bed. As she narrates, Tambu is also constantly referring to a future condition that she must deal with as a result of her choices to participate in Western education, distancing herself from her family and her Shona background.

In *Nervous Conditions*, the characters' relationships with the mission as a whole are not what are problematic (though we see symptoms of larger historical and cultural conflicts), but their relationships with the education that they receive from the mission and its outposts are. The mission's negative impact on the Shona characters is shown not by its characters or actions, but in how they choose to represent it and the place it takes in their minds.

Nervous Conditions is, in the end, inconclusive. She doesn't solve the nervous condition, but presents it, explores it, and questions its causes. In her essay "Women Writers and Gender in the Sub-Saharan Novel," Odile Cazenave points out a trend that many African women writers follow, saying that they "don't necessarily envision a promising future for African societies, as did the earlier generation of politically committed African writers. They don't provide answers, but they keep asking" (Cazenave 97). In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga presents a concept of the nervous condition that is complicated and believable, but she does not tell us if there is hope for recovery. At the end of the novel, there is no hint as to whether Nyasha and her father will ever resolve their conflict. Babamukuru does not become significantly less austere.

Maiguru and Tambu's mother are in the same places they have always been. And Tambu is still coming to terms with the different cultures in which she is trying to participate. Far from recovering from her condition, we know through her foreshadowing that she has yet to fully encounter it.

And yet, there is some hope. As the characters of the novel become increasingly aware of the choices they must make in relation to colonization, there is a sense that they will be better able to appropriate themselves. In view of the future as we know it will happen, there is also hope of finding a new national Zimbabwean identity that is fully satisfactory. Perhaps being Shona can be as honorable as being Western. Perhaps the past can “no longer . . . be seen as ‘savagery,’ but as a source of character” (Ranger 281) as Zimbabwean nationalists come to their own.

We as readers can see through Dangarembga’s characters that the native does not fit easily into categories of black and white or male and female, but choose to participate in a variety of human characteristics that are interpreted by the people around them. We separate the reader’s world into polarities like empowered masculine and subjected feminine, but “what the novel dramatizes is not simple masculinities but *distorted notions* of maleness. The author is also proposing that there are neither masculine nor feminine qualities but only positive/empowering performances and negative/debilitating performances” (Mugambi 216-17). The characters all fall along a spectrum as they consider gender identity as well as racial and cultural identity. It is by trying to mold themselves into the expectations of opposed societies that they damage themselves and others.

By comparing Babamukuru, Nyasha, and Tambudzai, we can draw significant conclusions about the conditions of Dangarembga’s native. Babamukuru is unquestionably the most negative character of the novel. While he is the most secure in the identity he has created for himself, he is unaware of the choices he has made and the oppressive effects they have on others. By solving his own problems, he has created many more for others. Nyasha, on the polar opposite side, is aware of all of her decisions and the situations that they react to. But she is

unable to reconcile her awareness to her life. And Tambu is, even at the end of the novel, coming to terms with the world very slowly.

Babamukuru and Nyasha have strong personalities and demand the attention of other characters and readers alike, but *Nervous Conditions* is “Tambu’s story – implying that a change in consciousness (as has certainly happened to Nyasha and is beginning to happen to Tambu at book’s end) is the preferred route of escape, and that this consciousness need not imply a hopeless embrace of suicidal activity” (Hawley 186). As the characters become more aware of their nervous conditions and the way that they show themselves, they will grow as individuals, as a family, and as a nation.

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