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**Deconstructing and Navigating the Institutions of Education and Language  
in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions***

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**Abstract**

This essay focused on the institutions of education and language to articulate the relations between the colonial, the patriarchal and the question of national culture focusing on the Shona society in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. It located the novel's strength in how the author's writing develops a political drive that questions colonial and native patriarchal ideologies. This study defined the narrative as a literary resistance and suggests a redefinition of the 1960s-1970s Zimbabwean national culture that subdues women. Furthermore, while the narrative can be read as an expression of national consciousness, this essay argued that the author employed a multidimensional approach to the reading and study of the predicament facing Rhodesia, contemporary Zimbabwe, and Africa at large.

**Key Words** –Culture, Language, Identity, Education, Nation(alism)

**Introduction**

Tsitsi Dangarembga examines the questions of colonial education and language and the way in which they represent subtleties of culture and identity transformation in Rhodesians, particularly in women. The narrative suggests that to change and improve characters' lives, education and cultural change is necessary. Although male characters are affected, we are more interested in female characters as they

are doubly affected by colonization and their national culture. To better their lives and reshape their identity, these women need to challenge cultural powers. During the postcolonial period, contemporary Zimbabwean women writers like Dambudzo Marechera and Yvonne Vera examined themes related to colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwe but did not fully integrate questions of education and language in their narratives. These writers were more committed to responding to colonialism's "frozen representations" and to male nationalist tradition. Dangarembga, however, thought of the institutionalization of education and language as one question that needs more attention.

### **Education as Modernity and Estrangement**

*Nervous Conditions* seems to suggest that the liberation of Zimbabwean women cannot happen without education and language, which are often used to define culture and identity. And so, characterization in the narrative through women's voices tells more about their victimization, at least in terms of schooling and equal cultural treatment. Thus, Tambu the narrator/protagonist represents her culture as being connected to the nation. Hena Ahmad argues that "a culture cannot exist without the nation's support" (Dangarembga, 1998, p. 80), which in one-way troubles Tambu.

Ahmad's statement is debatable for various reasons. First, culture is a lived experience of "ordinary" men and women and is shaped in their everyday interaction with everyday life practices to a large degree independent of geopolitical matters. Second, in its support of the culture, the nation must not be biased by masculinizing it. Culture can well serve citizens while connected to the nation and without discrimination. And finally, the actual culture that Tambu and Zimbabwean women dream of is different from "the actual nature of so-called democratic cultures of government" (Osei-Nyame, 1999, p. 60). They imagine a culture which is not politicized, masculinized or influenced by the nation's practices. Furthermore, although both culture and nation can go together, it is the responsibility of the latter to preserve the former.

Ahmad problematizes how the nation approves forms of female oppression thereby leading Tambu, much like the other female characters such as Lucia and Nyasha, to rail against daily politics based on cultural practices. These cultural enactments represent sources of awareness and motivations for these characters to think about school as a path to emancipation. This is reflected in the narrator's words as she starts questioning her cultural environment. She recounts:

My mother said being black was a burden because it made you poor, but Babamukuru was not poor. My mother said being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband. But I did not think this was true. Maiguru was well looked after by Babamukuru, in a big house on the mission which I had not seen but of which I had heard rumors concerning its vastness and elegance. Maiguru was [...] altogether a different kind of woman from my mother. I decided to be like Maiguru (Dangarembga, 1998, p. 16).

Tambu grows up in a world full of social injustice, and she witnesses cultural treatment that denies the Zimbabwean woman individual identity. Thus, it is only when she reaches school age that she realizes that she does not represent much in the eyes of the Shona community. In fact, if Tambu's mother, Ma'Shingayi, is trapped and does not do much to escape, Tambu herself struggles hard to find a way

out. The contrast between mother and daughter in terms of determination, ambition and belief seems to be immense. Ma'Shingayi is from a generation of illiterate women whose lives extend from the pre-colonial period to the end of colonization. Their lives have been shaped by their traditions and customs, while the new generation of children like Tambu during the post-colonial era, either gets a Western education or fights for it.

This battle is manifested in the first pages of the novel when the narrator begins discerning the way in which culture favors the education of boys to the detriment of girls. She begins by problematizing the existing relations between her brother Nhamo and her. "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling" (Dangarembga, 1998, p. 1), she declares. Her narrative voice treats the brother humorously. It does not pull punches in the depiction of Nhamo's metamorphosis through the narrative. Tambu satirizes how the boy can use the prestige value attached to English aptitude to his benefit as he often pretends losing his Shona language but speaking it when needed and using his status to get away from chores.

However, this allegation demonstrates the commitment of the young girl, ready to embrace the modern world through education. She sees herself as a challenger of the cultural boundaries set against women's potential progress towards modernity, change, enlightenment, and self-improvement. Yet, to us, the girl's reaction is not hardhearted because this response represents an outright truth for what it means to take shape as a woman in this Shona environment. Her being a woman deprives her of most human rights. This occurs to the boy's comparative advantage (Dangarembga, 1998, p.1) in many areas of daily life, even setting gendered rules, Tambu notices, regarding arrangements at the Nyamarira river for who swims where.

This awareness is the backbone of women's struggle. Tambu is presented as a conscious individual who feels that the gap between women and men needs to be bridged. This insight is further complicated by the growth of her desire "to receive the finest education in Rhodesia" (Dangarembga, 1998, p.186). Her futuristic vision to gain knowledge like her brother is fueled by the back and forth trips of her uncle, Babamukuru, from the mission to the homestead. Explaining the underpinning of her reaction, she says:

'I shall go to school again,' I announced to my parents.

My father was sharp with me, thinking that I expected him to obtain the money somehow, perhaps by working. 'Your nonsense, you are about to begin it! I can tell. You know your Babamukuru will not be home for a while yet'.

I will earn the fees,' I reassured him, laying out my plans for him as I had laid it out in my own mind. 'If you will give me some seeds, I will clear my own field and grow my own maize. Not much. Just enough for the seeds. (1998, p. 17).

This conversation exposes men's understanding or perception of Zimbabwean women's education in the 1960s and early '70s. However, the dialogue underscores an ambition motivated by a high sense of consciousness. Tambu's recollection of the productive moments with her "grandmother who had been an inexorable cultivator of land, sower of seeds, and reaper of harvest" (Dangarembga, 1998, p. 17) foregrounds a degree of willpower, even if fragile. For a fact, her skills can help her finance her studies.

The other aspect of the discourse discloses the distance that the girl takes from male reliance. Tambu relies neither on the father nor the uncle, who in a way embody Zimbabwean culture/nation. The central concern of the text, at this point, is the way in which Tambu “can pursue her dream of education and upward mobility without becoming an agent of colonial hegemony and suffering losses similar to those suffered by Nhamo and Babamukuru” (Sugnet 1997, p. 42). Her radical voice, we argue, signifies a unique way of championing social change and national progress from women’s perspective within contemporary Zimbabwean culture.

An additional dimension of colonial education is how the narrative transfers the story of Babamukuru and his wife, Maiguru, into the national story. Although both are products of colonial education, the difference between Babamukuru and Maiguru is masked by the harmony which the belief of marriage imposes on them. Babamukuru’s representation as a dominant figure comes into play with his status of what I call the “intellectual” of the homestead. Being the only man to receive an education, he becomes the powerful man and leader of the family. Tambu narrates the way in which the missionaries had offered him a scholarship to train in England, and offered a scholarship to his wife, too. Babamukuru belongs to the “new crop of educated Africans” (Dangarembga, 1998, p. 63), which with other advantages —eldest child and son, father and husband, headmaster and provider to many people – entitles him the status of leader.

All this will be contested later by Tambu and the other female characters who see in Babamukuru a threatening colonial danger. We will come back to this later, but we argue that one of the narrative’s goal is to look critically at powerful characters like him by depicting the relations between their authority and its ambiguous positioning with regards to the discourse of colonization. Of course, Babamukuru’s authoritarian nature is associated with his “Englishness” (Dangarembga, 1998:202) and colonial education. Even so, the nationalism that he embodies is doomed to failure because his aspirations are those of the colonized bourgeois. This makes us think of *The Wretched of the Earth* where Frantz Fanon (1961) warns the new crop of educated Africans against pitfalls of national consciousness. But how is this colonial education tied to language in this Shona community?

### **Beyond its Lexical Meaning: Language and its Power**

Language represents an essential element in the Shona culture. It represents an important distinctive feature of identity and wields political power. The complication that language brings up in postcolonial literature, especially works written in English, has been studied by various scholars including Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986), Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), and Noam Chomsky (1979). They wrote *Decolonizing the Mind*, *The Dialogic Imagination*, and *Language and Responsibility*, respectively. These texts written in almost the same period address the function and politics of language in contemporary African literature. While Bakhtin asserts that “discourse is saturated with low intentions,” (1981, p. 384) Chomsky claims that “questions of language are basically questions of power” (1979, p. 191).

The power of language to disrupt/uproot or set free is noticeably established in Dangarembga’s novel. The narrator describes the aspect of deracination and the assimilationist behavior that formal schooling in English can bring about. Furthermore, the introduction of schools is examined in how it can affect the conventional patriarchal and agricultural customs of Shona society. As can be read through the

narrator's description during a visit by Babamukuru at the homestead, the question of language complicates the life of both men and women. Tambu problematizes the choice of language between English and Shona. The dilemma arises when they must choose one or the other to hold a familial dialogue:

Maiguru recited an English prayer which Nyasha joined at the end to say "Amen" and I repeated this after them because I had not known beforehand when the prayer ended.

Babamukuru came in through the back door as we finished saying grace.

'Good evening, Baba,' Maiguru greeted him in Shona.

'Good evening, Daddy,' Nyasha said in English.

'Good evening, Babamukuru,' I said, mixing the two languages because I was not sure which was most appropriate (Dangarembga, 1998, p. 80).

This context clearly describes English as a disruptive language which brings confusion to the Shona community. The confusion arises when the narrator starts hesitating between speaking her native language and English, "the language of the criminal" (Kincaid, 1988, p. 32). As literary critic Homi K. Bhabha theorizes to problematize identity, the postcolonial communities strategize in blending the colonial culture and language to create a hybrid space of self-empowerment. I contend that using various and conflictual mediational ways encourages the occurrence of "communal space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 17), henceforth creating stunning zones of reconciliation.

Although the text discusses the language-related experiences of Tambu and Nyasha primarily, they are obviously not the only individuals concerned with issues of language. We see that "Maiguru, Chido, and Nhamo are equally affected by the collision of language" (Gorle, 1997, p. 189). This language concern is also read allegorically as the British colonizer's language attempting to erase our African languages. Such linguistic occurrences certainly affect the Shona language and opens a space for English to impose itself through Western education. This idea of African national languages suppression is further exemplified by Ngugi in *Decolonizing the Mind*. While describing the blatant colonization that occurred, he described language as a powerful medium and carrier of culture:

Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words [...]. And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture [...]. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference (1986, p. 11).

The several facets of culture change through language, as seen in Ngugi's description, expose the consequences of a foreign language on "natives" in the postcolonial world. These facets tell the hidden intentions that language conceals. Beginning with his own experience about the rich aspects of the

Gikūyū culture, Ngugi explains how a colonial language can disrupt a people's background education. According to him "language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner" and that while "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation, language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (1986, p. 9) during colonization. The case of Kenya can be applied to Zimbabwe since both countries were dominated by the British. In the case of *Nervous Conditions*, it was more about spiritual subjugation as seen with the character of Babamukuru. He is among those whom the school fascinated their soul, causing damages to the Zimbabwean culture.

Although Ngugi does not promote an exclusive use of African languages to the exclusion of others, he believes that multilingual societies are better placed to resolve today's world's complexities. In reading the narrative, we realize that, as opposed to Ngugi, Dangarembga does not propose solutions to the readers. She continues to present various descriptions of social and linguistic deracination, leaving us the search for solutions.

Moreover, another aspect of the issue of language, culture, and identity is manifested in Tambu's relationships with Nyasha. Both sharing some perceptions does not ultimately mean that they share the same strategies of resistance. Although their friendship develops, it does not enable a quick change for Tambu to benefit from the cousin's life experience. One of the difficulties appears in Tambu's trouble understanding Nyasha's reactions toward Babamukuru whom she sees as a colonial puppet. An issue of language and communication seems to be separating the two cousins here. They are from the same extended family but from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Tambu has received a rural upbringing whereas Nyasha carries a Western education. The difference represents a source of recurrent misunderstanding especially when Tambu speaks Shona fluently and identifies as Shona. Therefore, "the two girls remain rooted in their very separate identities" (Gorle, 1997, p.185). At the beginning of the novel, Tambu consciously associates language with identity and nation. This is mostly noticed through her comments during the celebration of the Sigauke family's return from England:

'We are dancing,' I invited Nyasha, who took a long time to understand.

'They don't understand Shona very well anymore,' her mother explained. 'They have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone.'

What Maiguru said was bewildering, bewildering and offending. 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, [...]. Now they had turned into strangers I stopped being offended and was sad instead (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 42).

The narrator's account is pregnant with regret and sadness. To her, turning into English simply means dropping one's culture or acknowledging the superiority of the British. Then, language is more than just a means of communication. It involves a certain form of nationalism and had "served as an instrument of cultural resistance" (Sivanandan, 2004, p. 49). By qualifying the cousins as "strangers," Tambu implies that they are "others" to her and to the Shona people by extension. Of course, this critique could

be conceded to Tambu since she never left the homestead —her early home —where she went to school at Rutivi before landing to the mission at age thirteen.

The special structure here is a device that helps understand the story while it unfolds. The use of the possessive adjective “our” in “Shona was our language” expresses a collective identity. The narrative device which consists of alternating the “I/me” and “we/our” pronouns/adjectives is significant in reflecting how characters express their personal or collective emotions in the novel. Although the narrator’s connection with Nyasha at the beginning of the narrative raises “her consciousness about the politics of language, culture, gender, and colonialism, [...] Tambu retains her own sense of Shona decorum” (Gorle, 1997, p. 185). She maintains an authentic cultural behavior by staying firmly grounded in the Shona culture. At the mission, the fluency of her English still reveals a domestic accent.

In fact, Tambu’s own deracination begins voluntarily; however, when she starts undergoing unbearable conditions at Babamukuru’s house, the excessive male domination that is exercised in the family starts to reach her. Nevertheless, her scholarship at Sacred Heart saves her from a potential patriarchal experience. Viewed in the perspective of how she makes it there in terms of colonization and white intellectual exclusiveness, “admission to this elitist institution is nothing short of a remarkable personal achievement for Tambu” (Okonkwo, 2003, p. 60).

While her consecration proves her determination to fulfill her dreams, it also raises concerns about her traditions/roots. Her mother, Ma’Shingayi, has always warned her against “Englishness” and how it can shatter one’s identity and set families apart. Ma’Shingayi advises against possible changes in Tambu’s character by asking despairing questions. She says: “Tell me my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 187).

The shift from urban to rural space with another first-person narrator constitutes a narrative device that blurs the geographical distance between mother and daughter. Readers feel that both Tambu and her mother narrate events from personal perspectives but the author combines them in a unified discourse representative of the entire Shona community. This narrative device can also be found in *The Belly of the Atlantic* by Fatou Diome (2006) where Salie’s and Madické’s voices seemed to be speaking from different perspectives but form the same address in raising awareness about national and global issues.

Naturally, the Shona society’s fear derives from the native’s anxiety over seeing the colonizer’s culture invade or even pull to pieces the local culture. Yet, Dangarembga’s narrative technique fuses both characters’ concerns together as Tambu never wanted to undergo changes under the influence of the Western culture.

### Conclusion

Today, the prevailing trend in postcolonial literary criticism has been to reframe how we think about writing by contemporary African women writers including Tsitsi Dangarembga. It is in this context that we present or situate this contribution to postcolonial critical literature. For Dangarembga, writing is a way to create and effect positive social change. Furthermore, she is conscious that writing represents a subversive and political act to attain liberation from colonial and neocolonial powers, and to break free

from patriarchal systems. Given the feminist politics of representing advocated by this author, we ultimately see a will to rewrite hegemonic relationships between nation and gender.

It is proven that because of a deep-rooted masculinization of the Shona and by extension the Zimbabwean culture, education is ultimately the path to self-growth and identity redefinition. The narrative suggests that to uproot the national culture that has long worked to men's advantage and to women's disadvantage, women have to receive education in contemporary Zimbabwean. Similarly, language issues are discussed from different perspectives. While English is proven to be a language of deculturation, assimilation, and/or domination, Shona is key to national identity. While problems of education and language are pervasive in the narrative, female characters must cope with many similar issues in their everyday lives.

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