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Self-Destructive Education in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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ENG 4470: Postcolonial Texts, Summer 2017

Nominated by: Dr. Alpana Sharma

Sarah recently graduated Summa Cum Laude from Wright State University where she majored in English Literature in the College of Liberal Arts. She is the winner of Sinclair Community College's Spectrum Award and Legacy Award for an English major. She intends to pursue a Doctorate and serve as a professor and an administrator.

Sarah Notes:

Reading *Nervous Conditions* and learning about postcolonial Zimbabwe was an alarming experience for me. Education is such a key part of my identity and has always been a benefit I pursued without question. For Dangarembga's characters, and thus presumably for other victims of colonialism, it's not clear whether those benefits of education are worth the enormous personal cost, and I wanted to explore that scary but important problem.

Dr. Sharma notes:

In this essay, Sarah examines Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions*, set during the colonial period in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). She argues that the novel portrays education in an ambivalent light: while it serves as a vehicle of liberation and progress for the black Rhodesian characters, it also reveals to them the injustices of colonial occupation. The essay uses excellent textual examples and good support from secondary sources to convincingly advance this thesis. I believe that Sarah makes us rethink the function of education in a critical light; when viewed in the African colonial context, education becomes a tool for ideological oppression.

Self-Destructive Education in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, the most evident colonial power structure is the education system. Education occupies a paradoxical position; it both promotes the values of the dominant culture and uncovers injustices of the culture toward its victims. Effects of such education are most prominently illustrated through the novel's point-of-view character Tambudzai, or Tambu, and her cousin Nyasha. Tambu's and Nyasha's education opens new opportunities for their advancement and expression yet also coincides with their disillusionment and suffering. The coexisting but contradictory "nervous condition" of oppression and liberation through education is made clear by splitting the two outcomes between two characters. While Tambu's character trajectory shows the benefits of colonial education, Nyasha's self-destructive, noncompliant development shows its dangers and serves as a tragic example of resistance.

Nervous Conditions is set in colonial Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe, and tells the story of a young girl named Tambu and her family. At first, Tambu lives on a farm in poverty with her parents and siblings, but when her older brother Nhamo dies she takes his place in attending a mission school and living with her wealthier uncle Babamukuru. Babamukuru became the headmaster of the school after he and his wife and children went to study in England for five years. His trip has tragic consequences for his daughter Nyasha, Tambu's best friend.

For Tambu, the oppressive western values of the educational system serve as a motivation for self-empowerment. Tambu learns quickly that education is not a realm of equal opportunity. Her brother Nhamo is given the limited resources her family possesses for school fees instead of Tambu because, he tells her, "you are a girl" (Dangarembga 21). While this realization of the gender preference toward males is frustrating for Tambu, it inspires her to work hard at growing her own maize to put herself through school (17). Here, Tambu never questions whether or not she truly wants and will benefit from the education that colonialism taunts her with; for her, it is a necessity worth her daily sacrifices. Her attitude towards academic opportunity is entirely optimistic.

The same system that awakens determination in Tambu disempowers her cousin Nyasha by creating barriers between her and her family. When Nyasha returns from Babamukuru's five-year trip attending British school,

her mother explains to Tambu that she and her brother “have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone” (Dangarembga 42). Nyasha’s plight alerts the reader to the impending separation from cultural roots that Tambu overlooks in her eventual triumph at obtaining her coveted chance at school. The language barrier that arises for the girls is a negative consequence, the heavy price for a perhaps indispensable academic experience. Critic Gilian Gorle acknowledges the complex problem of an education that can both empower, as in Tambu’s case, or deprive as in Nyasha’s by noting that “questions of linguistic hegemony and alienation are fundamentally fluid and must therefore defy neat resolution” (Gorle 180). For Gorle, the dominance of the English language that happens through colonial education is alienating, yet it cannot be easily dismissed since it is a part of a system that also offers opportunity. It seems then that the contrast between Tambu and Nyasha is an attempt to clarify or differentiate the otherwise irresolvable paradox of language and education in colonial contexts.

One of the major ways that the girls are exposed to the English language is through reading. Tambu’s reading choices are primarily fictional stories with pleasant resolutions; her reading results in optimism. In fact, Tambu uses these stories to connect her new experiences as an academic under Western influence with her heritage as a member of her Rhodesian family. Nyasha describes Tambu’s selections as “fairy tales” (94), echoing the description earlier in the novel of the family stories Tambu’s grandmother told (19). The connecting of these stories indicates a fusion of Tambu’s new and old identity into a cohesive whole. Her education is not tearing her out of Rhodesia by the roots. There is a place for her in the colonial world that she feels she can occupy comfortably.

Nyasha’s reading reveals a more threatened state of existence. The literature she identifies with is non-fiction: writing that explores violence, challenge, and international oppression. Dangarembga tells readers that Nyasha read “about Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki” and “had nightmares about these things ... but she carried on reading all the same” (95). Nyasha is far from comfortable in the world of oppression beyond her own that she is discovering through education. She is horrified and restless, experiencing the negative outcomes of being instilled with a desire for knowledge. The doors education opens for Nyasha are not merely doors of opportunity but doors of uncertainty.

Tambu learns from Nyasha to read critically, but still does not understand how to question as deeply as her cousin does. She still uses the word “enjoy” (95) to describe transitioning to some of the more realistic books Nyasha recommends. Tambu is still able to maintain a balance between the dangers and the benefits of her education, proving herself to be the ideal compliant subject. Nyasha, on the other hand, represents the most damaging outcomes of a colonial education that destroys identity and creates distress and resistance.

Tambu’s compliance and Nyasha’s resistance are further seen in their attitudes toward Babamukuru, the headmaster of their school and an influential, colonized figure. The education Babamukuru offers makes Tambu feel gratitude and respect toward her uncle. She is impressed by his success and “the great extent of the sacrifice he had made” (88). To her, he stands for the idea that “circumstances were not immutable, no burden so binding that it could not be dropped” (Dangarembga 58). This is the ideal that Tambu herself hopes to embody with the educational progress she makes.

Nyasha, however, is rebellious and resentful of the education in Britain that her father Babamukuru not just provided but imposed upon her. She fights his authority verbally and even physically; Dangarembga writes, “They went down on to the floor, Babamukuru alternately punching Nyasha’s head and banging it against the floor” (117). Babamukuru is unhappy with Nyasha’s independent mind despite his instrumental role in its development, and Nyasha is constantly questioning herself and her unstable position between her English education and her life in Rhodesia. She explains to Tambu “I know ... it’s not England anymore and I ought to adjust. But when you’ve seen different things you want to be sure you’re adjusting to the right thing” (119). Nyasha is unable to find the peaceful, adjusted identity that her cousin enjoys. She is still haunted by the British influence that threatens her membership among the Shona people.

Later on, Tambu follows Nyasha’s rebellious lead by refusing to attend her parent’s wedding in spite of Babamukuru’s insistence (169). This is a time when Tambu’s consciousness, like Nyasha’s, is split “into two disconnected entities that had long, frightening arguments with each other” (169) over the issue of the wedding, which is Babamukuru’s attempt to Christianize an already established union. Her identity is threatened more by Babamukuru’s delegitimization of her parent’s marriage than by the academic learning and

reading he has provided her with through the mission school. She still boasts a stronger sense of belonging within her family and her nation than Nyasha. Here, Dangarembga reveals the collectivist nature of Tambu's identity in contrast to the individualized identity that Nyasha has assumed in her more extensive exposure to British values.

Tambu's education molds her and leads her to further recognition and further opportunity when she obtains a scholarship to Sacred Heart College. Still more pleased than angered by her participation in the colonial education system, Tambu rejoices that "All the things that I wanted were tying themselves up into a neat package which presented itself to me with a flourish" (195). She is proud of her accomplishments and so excited by and focused on her studies that she "hardly noticed the omission" (199) when her cousin Nyasha continues to postpone her promised visit. Tambu is becoming more independent and more westernized, but at a distractingly quick pace. She lacks the excruciating self-awareness Nyasha possesses.

Nyasha's knowledge and critical thinking become volatile and threatening the more her education progresses, and rather than finding excitement and opportunity, she finds a more intimate suffering. Tambu's absence leaves her isolated in her struggle with her split identity, setting her back until her situation becomes pathological. Tambu is shocked when she finally returns on a holiday to discover that Nyasha "had grown skeletal" (202) due to anorexia. Nyasha has realized that her British education is now so deeply engrained that in order to destroy the colonial power in her life, she feels she must destroy herself.

In a heartbreaking moment of vulnerability, Nyasha expresses her ultimate inability to reconcile her education and her identity, proclaiming "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you" (205). While Tambu has carefully walked the line between two cultures, Nyasha has only managed to occupy an undefined space between the two; critic Christine Sizemore explains "Nyasha for all her insight and bravery has even fewer resources than Tambu. Nyasha is alone" (74). Sizemore sees Nyasha and Tambu as characters that powerfully contrast with one another, "a pair of girls, one of whom manages to establish a sense of self and find a space between damaging ideologies of gender and colonialism and one of whom succumbs to mental illness" (68). This means that Nyasha and Tambu may be navigating and working against the same system, but they do not share the same degree of success. Nyasha's tragic attempt to decolonize her body is

one behavior that Tambu does not imitate; it is the barrier between the loving cousins who, in so many ways, have grown and become educated together.

The mixed benefits and downfalls of systematic colonial education are split distinctly between Dangarembga's characters Tambu and Nyasha. It almost seems that the novel offers Nyasha as a warning against an overly heightened self-awareness and noncompliance. However, as much as readers may congratulate Tambu on her victory over the forces at play in her world, they cannot like Tambu at Sacred Heart ignore Nyasha, who though tragic also displays a compelling strength. She is a part of Tambu, and she demands to be noticed. Thus, while Dangarembga has initially used the stark contrast between the girls to simplify a complicated issue, the characters grow more complex and intermingled over the course of the novel, resulting in mixed and perhaps irreconcilable feelings for readers. Tambu preserves her identity and Nyasha destroys hers, but self-preservation and self-destruction are not categories. They are outcomes of the same institution, an institution that leaves a tragic paradox of growth and ruin in its wake.

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