# Colonial Education, Language, and the Nervous Condition: Tambudzai's Postcolonial Bildungsroman in *Nervous Conditions*

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In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga offers more than a young woman's tale of aspiration and adversity. Her protagonist, Tambudzai Sigauke, narrates with the dual vision of a child and an adult—at once driven by the allure of an English education and later disillusioned by its corrosive effects on identity and community. The novel follows Tambu's journey from the patriarchal homestead to the initial comfort of the mission school and her uncle Babamukuru's house—where she sees (through her cousin, Nyasha) the first of colonial education's worst effects—and then on to Sacred Heart, the exclusive boarding school where the roots of what would become her rejection of the system grow. This research essay explores the fraught relationship between formal education and the learning of English within colonial structures and institutions in Dangarembga's novel, focusing in particular on how the adult narrator's sociocultural sensibilities guide her retrospective narration of childhood and shape her ultimate self-realization. The essay claims that Dangarembga uses Tambu's Bildungsroman, her novel of education, to expose language and education as the terrain of colonial identity conflict, and to reimagine growth not as assimilation but as the painful reclamation of self.

Tambudzai's narrative is not confined to just revealing her personal growth and evolution. The "so what" of Tambu's story is made apparent when she is viewed as a character who is uniquely dynamic and whose life intersects with the lives of the other four women in her family,making the novel representative of the experiences of women in the colonial era. Dangarembga's novel explores the odd effects of the combination of patriarchy and colonial influence on women's growth, all the while highlighting the role of language and how its application can act as a catalyst to either breaking free of or succumbing to nervous conditions—the colonially-imposed psychological imbalance that weighs on the native and which threatens to destroy mind and self. Tambudzai's narrative not only tells her own story; after all, as she announces in the first paragraph of the novel, her story is "about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion—Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful" (Dangarembga 1). It is about showing different, parallel sides of the same story where the variance of certain factors (like education and the willingness to assimilate) leads to far greater differences in their relative success (with Tambu's statistics, only two out of five made it to freedom—speaking, of course, of a freedom that is more than just physical). By placing these experiences side by side, Dangarembga presents to us a historically apt revelation of the circumstances and the odds Tambu managed to beat in her journey of self-reclamation. Examining the novel as a postcolonial Bildungsroman and through the lens of Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic theory in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)—from which the novel draws its title—and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's reflections on language as culture, I will trace the trajectory from Tambu's initial embrace of colonial schooling to her resolute, unapologetic refusal to remain its passive subject.

From the moment Tambu learns of her brother's death, she equates schooling with survival. Narrating as an adult, she confesses: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling" (Dangarembga 1). This startling opening to the novel foreshadows her gaze: education is not mere personal advancement, but is entwined with loss and liberation. Tambu's rural homestead, marked by poverty and patriarchy, offers little hope for a girl, but the local mission school glimmers as a beacon. Yet, as she ascends first to the mission, then to the Sacred Heart convent, she encounters the sharp edge of that promise. The language of instruction, the cultural norms enforced, and the curriculum taught are not neutral: they embody the values and worldview of the colonizer.

Dangarembga's decision to have Tambu narrate retrospectively, with adult discernment steeped in Shona communal sensibilities, allows her to annotate youthful ambition with mature critique. When Nyasha, her cousin, collapses under the weight of Englishness late in the novel, mental health in disarray, Tambu's recollection reveals a system gone awry in more ways than one: "I did not stay to see her improvement. […] [I]n three weeks' time I would have to be back at school. [...] I was upset. I felt Nyasha needed me but it was true: I had to go to school" (Dangarembga 202). Here, the adult Tambu laments her childhood self's complicity: schooling eclipsed human connection. Her reflection uncovers the dual nature of colonial education as both ladder and prison. She had ascended all the limitations of the farmstead with it but now could not seem to free herself for the things that mattered most.

The classic Bildungsroman charts a protagonist's journey from isolation to societal integration, with personal growth culminating in harmonious social acceptance. Tambu's development, however, deconstructs this model. As she climbs the colonial ladder (from homestead to mission to convent), her alienation deepens. Her cousin Nyasha, educated in England, becomes both guide and cautionary emblem. From the moment Nyasha's family returns from England, Tambu watches her cousin, from her short dress and inability to speak Shona, , to her constant rebellion against her father, up until her psychosis. She watches as Nyasha, in a furious rage, acts out: "Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ('Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.') [...] 'Look what they've done to us,' she said softly. 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you'" (Dangarembga 201). Nyasha's linguistic mastery of English brings neither power nor comfort, but a split self—her Shona voice silenced, her English voice a constant reminder of exclusion. Tambu watches, learns, and finally diverges: she refuses the system's neat assimilation.

The novel's title is an explicit invocation of Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, where Sartre famously writes: "The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*" (Sartre 20). This "nervous condition" names the psychic fracture riven by colonial rule—a split identity torn between ancestral belonging and imposed foreignness. In his analysis of Dangarembga's novel in his book *Human Rights, Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter maintains that the nervous conditions are seen in Nyasha's *anorexia nervosa* and in Tambu manifesting signs of aphasia (Slaughter 235). However, I argue that Tambu's narrative embodies nervous conditions as more of a psychological split—not one resulting in disruption of physical function but rather in suppression of the mind: she is neither entirely the girl of the homestead nor wholly the English-educated scholar. Yet her story charts the slow, "fitful" emergence of a self that refuses both confinement and erasure. Tambu herself marks her refusal of patriarchal society's and

colonial education's entrapment as a "long and painful process," not due to any health challenges it posed but as a result of the weight of her mental expansion (Dangarembga 204).

Acclaimed Kenyan novelist and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in his essay collection *Decolonising the Mind*, asserts: "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngũgĩ 13). For African writers, he argues, to adopt colonial languages without critique perpetuates cultural domination. Dangarembga dramatizes this thesis: early in Tambu's schooling, English is a source of empowerment granting access and status ("his education made him almost an elder"), but later it evolves into a "weapon" of psychological control (Dangarembga 202). Thus, language becomes the battleground upon which Tambu's self-definition is contested and ultimately reclaimed.

Frantz Fanon's work provides a psychoanalytic account of colonial trauma, arguing that liberation is as much mental as material. As he writes: "The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods for destroying the settler" (Fanon 93). Fanon insists that decolonization requires violence—not only physical, but psychological: a rupture from internalized inferiority. Although Dangarembga's novel narrates no armed insurrection, its emotional ruptures—Nyasha's breakdown, Tambu's fledgling dissent—function as psychic revolts and lead to (at least, in Tambu's case) an assertion of self that resembles Fanon's therapeutic violence against the colonial mind. As she states in the last paragraph of the novel:

> I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed. (Dangarembga, 203-204)

The use of plant imagery and the covert nature of their growth, seemingly overnight, captures the subtlety of her revolt. Initially, she "banished" doubts to remain in the system's good graces; over time, those doubts sprouted into a questioning that could no longer be suppressed. The adverbs "quietly, unobtrusively, and extremely fitfully" chart the uneven rhythms of epistemic liberation. This moment's significance and deviation from typical Bildungsromans is another means by which the novel reveals that the "socioeconomic discourse of development and the form and the ideology of the traditional *Bildungsroman* are themselves implicated in the patriarchal and racist structures of colonial domination" and defines the novel's genre subversion (Slaughter 231). Tambu's entire raison d'etre stems from a subtle defiance of what she should be and how it alters her course from one traditionally mapped out. The narrative style, then, can show no less, and in the truest representation of Tambudzai Sigauke, doesn't follow conventional patterns. By the novel's end, Tambu stands apart from both patriarchal tradition and colonial expectation. She claims English as the medium of her voice while simultaneously repudiating the system that imposed it, thus demonstrating the transformative potential of language when wielded by a self-aware subject.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a masterful deconstruction of the postcolonial Bildungsroman, revealing how formal education and Englishness, lauded as paths to freedom, become instruments of psychic bondage. Through the adult narrator's sociocultural insights, Dangarembga unveils the "nervous condition" at the heart of colonial subjectivity—an affliction diagnosed by Sartre and Fanon and theorized by Ngũgĩ as a cultural struggle waged in language itself. Tambu's journey from dazzled pupil to critical agent charts a procedure of

decolonization that is internal, fragmented, and triumphant in its refusal to conform. In refusing the easy assimilation promised by the “sunrise on her horizon,” Tambu emerges not as a passive product of colonial schooling, but as author of her own becoming—resolutely human, unapologetically hybrid, and profoundly free.

## Works Cited

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