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Subverting Patriarchy: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Nyasha's Rebellion in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract: This paper examines Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) through the lens of postcolonial feminism, with particular attention to Nyasha's rebellion against patriarchal and colonial authority. The novel situates women in Zimbabwe at the intersection of two systems of domination colonial power and indigenous patriarchy that postcolonial theorists Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford describe as "double colonization". Her repudiation of conventional gender norms, her enquiries on familial authority, and her battle with body image collectively signify her resistance to the imposed silence on women. Having resided in both England and Zimbabwe, encounters cultural discord and emotional anguish in her quest for identity. The aim of this study was to investigate whether Nyasha's mental breakdown and defiance are not signs of weakness but rather powerful acts of dissent against the limitations of the colonial and patriarchal system. This study set out to examine how Nyasha's liminal identity, shaped by her childhood in England and her return to Zimbabwe, exemplifies what Homi Bhabha refers to as "hybridity," stating in *The Location of Culture* that colonialism creates hybrid identities distinguished by resistance and adaptability. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory particularly the views of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty the study interrogates how the subaltern female body becomes a contested site of power, discipline, and resistance and addresses a neglected aspect of postcolonial feminist inquiry.

Nyasha's rebellion takes multiple forms: her refusal to submit unquestioningly to patriarchal authority, her critique of colonial mission education, and her embodied struggles with eating disorders that reveal the psychological cost of resistance. Dangarembga does not romanticise this rebellion; rather, she portrays it as tense, sorrow, and "nervousness," a phrase that recalls Sartre's reading of Fanon to define the fractured condition of the colonial subject. The research employs close textual analysis combined with discourse analysis to trace how language, silence, and the body function as sites of subversion.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Postcolonial Feminism, Nyasha, Gender Oppression, Resistance*

Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga, a Zimbabwean author, filmmaker, and activist, is renowned for her contributions to African literature, especially her debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*, published in 1988. This novel is acclaimed as a potent feminist and postcolonial work that underscores the challenges faced by African women under colonial governance and patriarchal oppression. Postcolonial feminism elucidates how women in formerly colonised nations navigate both gender and colonial subjugation. Intellectuals such as bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have demonstrated that Western feminism frequently neglects the perspectives of women from the Global South. Hooks asserts that feminism must be inclusive and grounded in authentic experiences, particularly those of marginalised individuals. In this context, *Nervous Conditions* becomes an essential literary text that reveals how African women negotiate multiple layers of domination while asserting their agency.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is the debut novel of her trilogy. It is set in colonial Rhodesia in 1960. The title of the story is taken from Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he writes, "The status of native is a nervous condition." It points out the effect of colonialism on native people, and the statement relates to the colonial situation in Rhodesia. The novel reveals the story of two Shona community girls, Tambu and Nyasha. In a male-dominated society, they struggle to raise their voices against patriarchy, and the protagonist Tambu struggles to get an education as a Black child. The novel discloses the story of Nyasha, Babamukuru's daughter, as a hybrid child. Characters such as Tambu's mother, Shingayi; Nyasha's mother, Maiguru; Lucia; Nyasha; and Tambu herself are victimised by the patriarchal Shona community in colonial Rhodesia. These women characters represent the conditions of African women.

Nyasha's Rebellion against Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary authority and power; they control everything and members of the family, especially women. The character Babamukuru resembles this system and control over everything. Being an educated woman, Maiguru was controlled by her husband, Babamukuru. One of the most remarkable and intellectually stimulating characters in the narrative is Nyasha, Tambu's cousin. Nyasha, having resided in England for several years, returns to Rhodesia with a changed perspective, becoming a symbol of cultural conflict, defiance, and feminist struggle. While Tambu endeavours to assimilate into the system by education and compliance, Nyasha explicitly challenges and defies the responsibilities assigned to her as a daughter, a female, and a being caught between two distinct cultures. Tambu later reflects that "rebellion may not in the end have been successful" (1), yet Nyasha's defiance remains one of the novel's most powerful critiques of patriarchal domination.

Through Nyasha's character, Tsitsi Dangarembga critiques how colonialism and patriarchy work together to silence women's voices and choices. Nyasha, who challenged her father's authority. She argued with her father and resisted being controlled. During the argument with her father, she tried to express herself; Babamukuru told her, "You must learn to be obedient." (115). Being a patriarchal mindset, his attitude reflects his belief that women should be voiceless, submissive and traditional.

Nyasha's uprising takes place in a society where traditional patriarchal rules still control women's lives and colonial powers have imposed alien values. Her struggle with mental health issues that represent her deep internal conflict, her refusal to be quiet, and her overt conflicts with her father, Babamukuru, are all examples of her defiance. Tambu's later realisation, "The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition" (115), reinforces the idea that Nyasha's resistance represents a wider systemic oppression of African women. This struggle directly echoes bell hooks' powerful definition of patriarchy, which illuminates the oppressive system Nyasha fights against:

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (hooks 30)

Nyasha's rebellion against patriarchy is most exemplified by her interactions with her father, Babamukuru, who embodies internalised colonial power in the African household. Her rejection of the submissive role expected of daughters and women in general is both vocal and aggressive. Nyasha's rebellion is directed not only at her father, but also at a larger system that seeks to define and confine her womanhood. According to scholar Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, postcolonial feminist subjects typically suffer as a result of their resistance, not any inherent weakness. Nyasha exemplifies this with her mental collapse, which functions as both an appeal for help and a rebellion of silence.

Nyasha's Hybrid Identity

Nyasha's character in *Nervous Conditions* is a fascinating representation of the postcolonial hybrid subject, particularly given the cultural dislocation she experiences through her education in England. Jennifer Williams argues that the colonised subject becomes "fragmented, split between her/his own subjectivity and the coloniser's objectivity" (273), a condition that profoundly shapes Nyasha's fractured identity. Scholar Panade (2022) observes her as "Babamukuru's anglicised daughter who has lost her sense of being African", and she is "estranged with her indigenous language and culture (66–67)." This becomes evident when Tambu observes how Nyasha struggles with her mother tongue: "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 (42).” Nyasha herself recognises this crisis of identity when she confesses, in a moment of emotional clarity:

We shouldn't have gone... now they're stuck with hybrids for children... I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there. But it offends them-I offend them. (Dangarembga, 78)

This powerfully justifies Nyasha's hybrid condition as a site of tension, alienation, and rebellion. When she returns to Zimbabwe, she is torn between two competing worlds: the traditional African culture personified by her father, Babamukuru, and the liberal Western principles she learnt abroad. This intermediary position classifies her as a hybrid person, as articulated by Homi Bhabha, in which identity is not static but is produced within the "third space" of cultural hybridity. As Tsitsi Dangarembga explains in an interview:

Tambudzai is so sure that this is the framework of her very being that there is no way that she would be able to forget it. Nyasha is different she is terrified that she might forget her culture, and that forgetting is equated with loss of self. (Dangarembga, interviewed by Wilkinson 191–192).

Nyasha's rebellious character is shown in her angry words, “They've trapped us.” But I won't be trapped” (201), connects with Frantz Fanon's thesis of “colonial alienation,” which explains how colonialism separates colonised people from their cultural roots. Williams extends Fanon's argument to gender, noting that colonial trauma "invaded the colonised body" and that the colonised woman is "doubly colonised, by the system of colonialism and... indigenous patriarchy" (274). Colonialism in the novel emerges as a significant issue, revealing the impact of "Englishness" through the tension between traditional African ideals and colonial impositions. Her statements highlight the perils of cultural assimilation and mimicry, reflecting Homi Bhabha's claim in *The Location of Culture* that colonialism creates hybrid identities distinguished by resistance and adaptability. Nyasha expands on her criticism by lamenting, "It's bad enough when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end" (147). This comment emphasises her understanding of how colonialism pervades not only structures but also awareness, undermining cultural identity from within.

Nyasha's disobedience has enormous implications, according to postcolonial feminist theory. Academics such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue that “Third World women are not a monolithic group but resist domination in diverse and context-specific ways” (77), and Nyasha brilliantly shows this complexity. She is not a victim or an unreasonable person; she is a young lady attempting to balance the opposing influences in her life: colonial education, African tradition, femininity, and personal liberty. Her resistance, which culminated in a breakdown, should not be interpreted as failure, but rather as a critique of the limited opportunities available to women like her.

Nyasha's Body as an Embodiment of Resistance

Nyasha's physique acts as a platform for her internal and external problems. Her eating disorder, defined by hunger and vomiting, reflects her desire to gain control in a situation when she feels weak. As Sceats argues in *Food, Consumption and the Body*, "The prevalence of eating disorders within western culture indicates at least an insecurity about embodiment, the nature of being and the boundaries between the self and the world" (1). This insight illuminates Nyasha's struggle, since her crisis of embodiment is shaped simultaneously by colonial dislocation and patriarchal pressure.

Her breakdown goes beyond medical issues and becomes a feminist act of rebellion, highlighting the impact of cultural expectations on female bodies. This mental conflict is reflected in the physical manifestation of her eating disorder. According to Susan Bordo, eating disorders in women are "protest embodied" against the limitations and demands placed on the feminine body by society (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 1993). Nyasha's body is where she fights against internalised oppression and external expectations, demonstrating how her physical anguish is inextricably linked to cultural and ideological disputes.

Nyasha's eating condition, which is defined by episodes of hunger and vomiting, indicates her attempt to assert control in a domain where she sees herself as weak. Her breakdown reveals the profound impact of cultural expectations on female bodies and goes beyond simple medical issues to become a feminist act of defiance. Nyasha's body resists conventional interpretation, as Bordo argues, and "the body becomes a text of femininity" (203). This interpretation is further enhanced by Judith Butler's theory that the body acts as a site of political resistance. Nyasha's anorexia is an expression of uniqueness against dominance structures as well as a rejection of consumption, both literal and symbolic.

Conclusion

Nyasha's rebellion in *Nervous Conditions* represents the intersection of colonial alienation, gender discrimination, and embodied resistance. Rather than being a passive victim, she resists patriarchal authority, colonial absorption, and reclaims her body as a centre of resistance. Through postcolonial feminist theory, Nyasha emerges as a multidimensional subject whose disintegration represents critique rather than defeat. Her struggle exemplifies how young women in postcolonial nations navigate identity, autonomy, and survival, eventually turning quiet into rebellion and personal anguish into political resistance.

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