

Envisioning Futures of Cultural Resistance Through Women's Resistance to Patriarchy in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Nervous Conditions has been subject to no shortage of critical analysis regarding the novel's portrayal of womanhood and colonialism.¹ However, few readings have addressed the potential significance of developments in the African literary scene in relation to womanhood and the postcolonial condition in the novel. Thus, in my reading of *Nervous Conditions*, I address these intersecting themes to demonstrate how the novel envisions methods of resistance against patriarchy as methods of resistance against cultural imperialism. First, with reference to the research of Peter Kalliney, I demonstrate how developments in *Nervous Conditions* mirror and critique the struggle to establish literary identity in postcolonial Africa, thus demonstrating how the novel critiques previous resistance efforts against cultural imperialism. With reference to Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, I then demonstrate how, as an alternative to previous efforts, the novel suggests that methods of resistance used by women against patriarchy can be

¹ Sally McWilliams, 'Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: At the crossroads of feminism and post-colonialism', *World Literature Written in English*, 31 (1991), 103–12; Carolyn Martin Shaw, "'You Had a Daughter, but I Am Becoming a Woman": Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps*', *Research in African Literatures*, 38 (2007), 7–27; Supriya Nair, 'Melancholic Women: The Intellectual Hysterical(s) in *Nervous Conditions*', *Research in African Literatures*, 26 (1995), 130–39. Further references are given as quotations in the text.

used in resisting cultural imperialism and forming postcolonial African literary identity.²

The first decolonising literary movement which *Nervous Conditions* mirrors and critiques is that of early postcolonial African writers who drew inspiration from Western modernist influences. To situate my argument, we must first turn to Peter Kalliney's 2015 article 'Modernism, African Literature, and the Cold War', which explores the clandestine CIA funding of African publications, particularly those publishing experimental modernist literature, through the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) during the era of the Cold War. The fundamental paradox of this being, as Kalliney points out and as is mirrored and critiqued in *Nervous Conditions*, that modernism was adopted by early postcolonial African writers as a means of non-partisanship in the Cold War binary between the USSR and USA, as a means of detachment through the 'aesthetic autonomy' offered by modernism:

many African writers of the 1960s generation believed that the modernist ideals of detachment and autonomy could adequately reflect a blend of Cold War neutrality, anticolonialism, and independence from the nation-state [...] The African writers under discussion here embraced the concept of autonomy to varying degrees because it signalled their desire for independence from the Cold War's ideological binaries. The interests of Mphahlele, Okigbo, Neogy, and Soyinka converged with those of the CCF.³

As Kalliney points out, in appropriating inter-war modernist aesthetics of the West in conjunction with African aesthetics, African writers of the early postcolonial period hoped to forge a literary tradition to rival that of the West. Modernist principles of intellectual freedom and detachment additionally allowed for a detachment from the Cold War superpowers, who

² See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

³ Peter Kalliney, 'Modernism, African Literature, and the Cold War', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 76 (2015), 333–68 (p. 362). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

resembled the former European colonial powers in the binary nature of their conflicting ideologies.

As is proposed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, colonialism functioned through the creation of self/other binaries to justify the colonial 'civilising' mission. As Kalliney suggests, in the Cold War's ideological conflict, the superpowers' rhetoric bore resemblance to the self/other binary used by colonial forces. Using the aesthetics of a pre-Cold War era offered a means to move away from the heritage of colonialism through an aesthetic transcendence beyond the binary conflict of the Western superpowers. Through appropriating Western modernist aesthetics from the inter-war period in African-led publications, African cultural and literary movements sought a formation of cultural identity in an aesthetic reclamation, resisting colonial heritage by what Bernth Lindfors refers to as 'beating the white man at his own game'.⁴ This appropriation of Western modernist aesthetics can be observed in the works of African authors in the era of early post-independence, prior to *Nervous Conditions*' publication – for example, the works of prominent Nigerian author Wole Soyinka, winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, contain Western modernist influences. As Ben Obumsele points out, in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, 'the form deriving from Yoruba creation stories is firmly fused with the Joycean myth of Ulysses and the creative artist'.⁵ In *The Interpreters*, Soyinka manipulates the formal techniques of Joycean modernism in order to add irony and critical reflection. An example of this, as Obumsele remarks, would be Soyinka's use of 'the stream of consciousness technique very flexibly with the aim of putting the audience in a position to contemplate the protagonists with critical insight' (Obumsele, p. 180). This encapsulates the aim of early postcolonial African writers: to use Western modernist influences, but with critical insight to use these Western influences as a force of empowerment, rather than subjugation, in

⁴ Bernth Lindfors, 'Beating the White Man at his Own Game: Nigerian Reactions to the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature', *Black American Literature Forum*, 22 (1988), 475–88 (p. 475).

⁵ Ben Obumsele, 'Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*: The Literary Context', *Research in African Literatures*, 49 (2018), 167–81 (p. 167). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the creation of postcolonial African literary identity.

It is within this literary doctrine that *Nervous Conditions* initially appears to be situated. In the early stages of the novel, Tambu, the narrator and central protagonist, reflects the individualistic tradition of Western modernism, as an individual setting out to seek an all-encompassing enlightenment and transcendence from her societal expectations. Tambu's idealising of her uncle, Babamakuru, as an autonomous figure of achievement mirrors the hope which modernist aesthetic autonomy provided to early postcolonial African writers: 'It was truly a romantic story to my ears, a fairy-tale of reward and punishment, of cause and effect. It had a moral too, a tantalising moral that increased your aspirations, but not beyond a manageable level'.⁶ The idea of increasing one's aspirations but staying within 'a manageable level' reflects the early postcolonial condition of African writers. The use of Western modernist influences and the idea of aesthetic autonomy allowed for African writers to pave out a postcolonial literary canon without entirely diverging from the literary and linguistic traditions of the West. In subscribing to what postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard refers to as the defining 'grand narratives' offered by Western modernism, Tambu initially displays a singular strive to ascend to the position of the emancipated figure of Babamukuru, providing a totalising solution to her condition.⁷ The narrative initially offered by *Nervous Conditions* is one of the modernist hero, of Tambu being an individual who transcends her traditional societal expectations in absolute resistance for emancipation and enlightenment.

However, the character who appears to most embody the ideals of Western modernism in the novel is Tambu's cousin, Nyasha, who initially presents the individualist, society-rejecting figure of Western modernism which Tambu is implied to be developing toward. It is in Nyasha's introduction in the novel that the novel's criticism of seeking emancipation in

⁶ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke, 2004), p. 19. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), p. 15.

Western modernist influences surfaces. On Tambu's first day in Babamakuru's house, Maiguru and Nyasha argue over Nyasha reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, a Western modernist author. The introduction of Nyasha's disordered eating, which increases in severity throughout the course of the novel, occurs during this dispute, in which it is revealed that Nyasha uses Western modernist books to substitute food:

'I could have sworn I bought that D.H. Lawrence in here. Have you seen it, Mum?'

'I don't see it anywhere.'

'But I'm pretty positive I bought it in here', insisted Nyasha, wrinkling her forehead and forgetting to eat.

(Dangarembga, p. 84)

For Nyasha, modernist literature is an escape, a means of 'forgetting' the need to consume the physical and metaphorical 'food' produced by the patriarchal, colonialism-reliant household she lives in. It is significant that this begins in England, as this is both the former colonising nation of Zimbabwe and where many Western modernist authors, such as Lawrence, originated:

'When we went to England', she was saying, 'it was terrible. It took me months to get used to the food. It has no taste, you know, and there was so little of it. I used to be hungry day and night.'

(Dangarembga, p. 84)

In the same manner as Soyinka, Nyasha uses modernist texts as her escape from being sustained by the West, to fulfil a 'hunger' for a new creative tradition. However, as the novel foreshadows, this 'rebellion may not in the end have been successful' (Dangarembga, p. 1).

The paradoxical nature of averting colonialism's shadow (as represented by hunger) through forging literary tradition and culture from that of the former coloniser itself (as represented by Nyasha's use of Western modernist literature in lieu of food) becomes apparent as the novel progresses.

The eating disorder and the subsequent breakdown that Nyasha suffers in *Nervous Conditions* reveal the pitfalls of reliance on Western modernism as a means of establishing cultural and literary autonomy, in a mirroring of the changing conditions and aesthetics in the postcolonial African literary scene. These developments in the literary scene were greatly influenced by the revelation of covert CIA funding via the CCF in various African publications which promoted Western modernist-influenced works, such as *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* (the former of which Soyinka was an editor of), through a front-page headline in The New York Times.⁸ This resulted in a crisis of cultural identity, and a radical transformation within the postcolonial movement and cultural productions in Africa. This shift gave way to another literary movement, which *Nervous Conditions* mirrors and critiques in its narrative: an absolutist decolonising rejection of Western influences. As Kalliney points out, 'this damage [from revelations of CIA involvement in African publications] substantially widened the ideological distance between metropolitan and postcolonial intellectuals, a distance that seemed unbridgeable for decades' (Kalliney, p. 363).

In reaction to these revelations, a hard line defining postcolonial discourse in distinction from Western influence was drawn. In this 'unbridgeable' distance, many African authors, notably Chinweizu and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, became increasingly intent on ridding their work of Western influences. To appropriate the aesthetics of the West was no longer considered a means of transcendence, but rather a relic of subjugation. Chinweizu, a leading figure in black

⁸ Elizabeth M. Holt, 'Cairo and the Cultural Cold War for Afro-Asia', in *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties Between Protest and Nation-Building*, ed. by Chen Jian and others (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 480–93 (p. 490).

orientalism and prominent critic of Soyinka, argues alongside Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike in *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* that ‘euromodernists [...] have assiduously aped the practices of 20th-century European modernist poetry’.⁹ This suggests that the influence of European modernism in the works of authors such as Soyinka are the result of continued cultural oppression. Instead, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike argue for African authors to draw from pre-colonial African literary traditions: ‘in the case of African novels it is important to realize that its indigenous antecedents should be sought in [Africa’s] traditions’ (Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike, p. 29). This ‘traditionalist’ decolonising approach is shared by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ argues that transcendence from colonial alienation can only be achieved through writing in African languages:

A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character. It is then that writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence [...] there are no ‘national’ accolades, no new year honours, only abuse and slander and innumerable lies from the mouths of the armed power of a ruling minority – ruling, that is, on behalf of U.S.-led imperialism [...] African languages addressing themselves to the lives of the people become the enemy of a neo-colonial state.¹⁰

Ngũgĩ’s reference to ‘new year honours’ and ‘U.S.-led imperialism’ in particular emphasises the colonial nature of American infiltration of the African cultural sphere. Ngũgĩ argues that the United States are in opposition to self-determination and suppress cultural productions

⁹ Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature. Vol. 1: African Fiction and Poetry and Their Critics* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1983), p. 163. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1994), p. 30.

calling for ‘revolutionary unity and hope’, thus suggesting the United States act as a neo-colonial power. For Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu, in order to move away from the neo-colonial tainting of the African cultural sphere and elevate African literature to true independence, one must wholly cut ties with Western linguistic and literary tradition.

Despite *Nervous Conditions*’ similar scepticism toward reliance on Western modernism, Dangarembga’s English-language bildungsroman rejects Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu’s absolutist approach to resisting cultural imperialism. Criticism of Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu’s decolonising approach can be seen in *Nervous Conditions*’ narrative through Nyasha’s eventual breakdown, as the rhetoric of Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu is reflected in her rampage against the Western influence in which she sought her escape: ‘She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth (“Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.”) [...] “They’ve trapped us.”’ (Dangarembga, p. 205). In shredding her book, Nyasha displays a violent resistance to the cultural influence of the West and the ‘lies’ of aesthetic autonomy. Additionally, her voice taking on ‘a Rhodesian accent’ suggests a desire to return to a pre-colonial state, reflecting Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu’s desire to draw influence from pre-colonial African tradition rather than Western modernism (Dangarembga, p. 204). However, this violent reaction is short-lived:

Then as suddenly as it came, the rage passed. ‘I don’t hate you, Daddy,’ she said softly. ‘They want me to, but I won’t’ [...] ‘Look what they’ve done to us,’ she said softly. ‘I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you.’

(Dangarembga, p. 205)

This highlights a significant issue with Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu’s mode of postcolonial resistance: as a ‘hybrid’ figure, bound to Western influence, how is Nyasha to wholly cut ties with Western influence? As such, the colonial impact, which the absolutist anti-colonial traditionalism of Ngũgĩ and Chinweizu and the Western modernism of early postcolonial

African writers both sought to transcend, is inevitably present. To subscribe to either camp, Nyasha should 'hate' Babamakuru. Babamakuru's use of violence against Nyasha and his position as the headmaster of a mission school render him the figure of replicated colonial influence and control. Throughout the novel, Nyasha's resistance against Babamakuru progressively takes a more hard-line approach, as she resists eating the food provided by him, and disobeys his rules to the point of suffering physical beatings. However, as Nyasha affectionately refers to him as 'Daddy', in an English manner connecting Babamakuru with colonial influence, it is revealed that she cannot hate him, as he forms an essential part of her identity. Thus, Nyasha's attempts to resist his influence (which serves as a representation of colonial influence) in an absolute fashion prove impossible, with the attempt to do so leaving her trapped in a nervous condition of self-erasure via starvation.

Thus, both Nyasha's eating disorder and breakdown serve to critique previous efforts to resist cultural imperialism in their attempt to entirely transcend colonialism's impact, be it through appropriating Western modernism or through taking an absolutist decolonising stance against Western influences. *Nervous Conditions* instead proposes that hybridity, rather than attempted transcendence, should be used to resist cultural imperialism. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, the use of colonial structures in order to create a 'hybrid' identity is a more effective form of cultural identity formation than the attempt to create an essentialist form of culture free from colonial influence, as 'any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures [...] frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures' (Bhabha, pp. 83–4). According to Bhabha, cultural hybridity 'entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy', creating an ambivalence within the colonial narrative of a distinguishable self/other boundary (Bhabha, p. 5). For Dangarembga, these ambivalent, hybrid methods of resistance are existent within the ways which women tackle patriarchy, and thus the methods of women are envisioned as future

modes of resistance against cultural imperialism.

This potential resistance is demonstrated in how Tambu is envisioned as developing methods of resistance against apparatuses of colonialism using the influence of her adult female relatives' resistance methods to patriarchy, in a successful alternative to Nyasha's failure to recognise the potential of women's resistance methods. Tambu's envisioned method of resistance embraces, rather than rejects, a condition of hybridity and non-absolute resistance. As Supriya Nair points out in 'Melancholic Women: The Intellectual Hysteric(s) in *Nervous Conditions*', postcolonial approaches to resistance, such as that of Ngũgĩ, often focus on the experience of men and fail to sufficiently account for women, as reflected in Nyasha's dismissal of the resistance methods of African women. Nair remarks that, on the other hand, 'Unlike Nyasha, who is largely disgusted with the status of the women in the family, Tambu senses their strength in their particular methods of resistance and learns from each one while forming her own distinct identity' (Nair, p. 137). As Tambu comes to realise, resistance need not come in the absolute form which previous means of postcolonial cultural resistance attempted.

The adult women of *Nervous Conditions* display methods of resistance which are effective in their sophisticated hybridity, and which are envisioned as methods of postcolonial resistance in Tambu's future. An example of a woman's resistance against patriarchy, which Tambu 'learns from' but Nyasha fails to, is that of Maiguru, who stages a short walk-out in resistance of the patriarchal household conditions she is subjected to:

Maiguru had been away for only five days, but 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. Although she still called Babamukuru her Daddy-sweet, most of her baby-talk had disappeared. 'It's such a waste,' lamented Nyasha, noting the difference. 'Imagine what she might have been with the right kind of exposure!' And then she confessed that she was

having one of her rare pangs of guilt, because deep down she was glad that her mother had come home.

(Dangarembga, p. 178)

Maiguru's walk-out lasts for only five days, and she goes to the house of another man (her brother). As a woman, she is unable to walk out and carry out resistance of an absolute nature. In the eyes of Nyasha, this is 'a waste' in comparison to her own absolute, solidifying efforts of complete resistance via bodily erasure, as Maiguru is still a 'victim of her femaleness' (Dangarembga, p. 118). Yet, Nyasha feels 'guilt', which implies an irreconcilability between the absolute resistance she seeks and her condition as a postcolonial African woman. Maiguru's resistance has the effectiveness which Nyasha's attempted resistance lacks as Maiguru is aware of the limitations of her condition. For example, she refuses 'to spend another Christmas catering for a family of two dozen', and she convinces Babamakuru to allow Tambu to attend Sacred Heart, thus having an impact without taking a hard-line approach to resistance (Dangarembga, p. 185).

However, Maiguru's resistance does not provide a totalising narrative of female resistance— the novel celebrates diverse femininity; the power of women's resistance against patriarchy is shown to transcend boundaries for a range of female figures. The resistance of Lucia, Tambu's unmarried aunt, is additionally a source of successful non-totalitarian resistance against patriarchy, through a different but equally sophisticated form of resistance to that of Maiguru. By getting Babamakuru to find her a job, Lucia uses Babamakuru's desire to establish himself as a strong patriarchal figure in order to establish her own freedom and independence. Instead of having to marry Takesure, Lucia gains financial independence as a single woman and secures prospects of upward mobility for herself through enrolment in night classes. Thus, Lucia's method of resistance proposes enacting change through taking advantage

of the oppressive system itself. Instead of celebrating this, Nyasha focuses only on the injustices of the patriarchy: ‘And what about poor Lucia! She’s been grovelling ever since she arrived to get Daddy to help her out. That sort of thing shouldn’t be necessary. Really it shouldn’t’ (Dangarembga, p. 162). However, Lucia focuses on the opportunity offered by her manipulation of oppressive structures, rather than the injustice of their existence: ‘Babamakuru wanted to be asked, so I asked. Now we both have what we wanted, isn’t it?’ (Dangarembga, p. 162). Lucia’s resistance does not dwell on unjust structures and what ‘shouldn’t be necessary’, but instead proactively seeks to manipulate these structures to her advantage.

Tambu’s development of a hybrid colonial resistance is influenced by these women’s methods of resistance to the patriarchy. As Nair points out, ‘the response Tambu’s ‘own story’ makes to Ngũgĩ’s text is that the colonial student need not necessarily be a passive receptacle, reified by the experience of colonial education’ (Nair, p. 38). Instead of attempting a total rejection of colonial structures, as Nyasha suggests, Tambu takes advantage of them, as Lucia does of patriarchal structures. The women of *Nervous Conditions* constantly have to navigate sources of oppression through their hybrid forms of resistance. Tambu is suggested to be influenced by this in her future resistance against colonial structures, as she is envisioned to be using these forms of resistance following her experience at Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, the white-majority convent school for which Tambu wins a scholarship and begins to attend toward the end of the novel: ‘Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story’ (Dangarembga, p. 208). In this open-ended conclusion to the novel, foreseeing a hopeful but uncertain future, critical reflectiveness and tactful rebellion, of ‘question[ing] things’ rather than seeking emancipation through rejection, all subtle but effective methods used by the novel’s women against patriarchy, are envisioned as methods of tackling colonial structures. Tambu’s ability to ‘set down this story’ imagines

her using methods of the women who influenced her in her empowered literary future. Thus, the either/or of colonial structures and decolonisation, central to the rhetoric of modernist-influenced writers and decolonising writers alike, is broken down by the methods which the women of the novel use against patriarchy.

Dangarembga therefore proposes a method of postcolonial cultural and literary identity formation which uses women's methods of resistance in transcendence of oppressive binaries. In this English-language bildungsroman, the use of Western influences by African writers is recognised as being potentially beneficial; hybridity is an inevitability of the postcolonial condition, and writing in English in Western formats can be advantageous: 'If you were clever, you slipped through any loophole you could find' (Dangarembga, p. 182). However, unlike early postcolonial modernist-influenced African writers, Dangarembga does not treat Western structures as a means of resistance and identity formation in themselves. Methods to resist patriarchy should be applied to resisting the cultural imperialism of the West, working to dismantle it 'quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully' using the sophisticated, hybrid methods used by women against patriarchy (Dangarembga, p. 208).

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