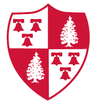

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The Perversion of Dignity in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

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Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to study Tsitsi Dangarembga's allegory of aid which exploits the recipient's precarity in her first novel *Nervous Conditions.* More specifically, I would like to explore how such aid dehumanizes the recipients it purports to help by imposing the giver's goals and agenda on the recipient. I argue that because aid is after all underwritten by an ethics of power, the recipient's helplessness in the acceptance of this gift, i.e., the precarious socioeconomic conditions which necessitate the acceptance of such aid, subject the recipient to the giver's will, up to and even in the pursuit and realization of the giver's goals and mission. Following Kant's ideas on humanity and dignity, I argue that the recipients of such aid thus effectively become the means of attaining the giver's goals. I discuss the novel's portrayal of formal education, which is anchored to the mission; the missionaries select recipients who demonstrate academic potential, and a willingness to endure and obey their norms of success. He or she is consequently plucked out of the community, and fostered in the mission. And because the recipient is powerless in his or her choice to refuse the missionaries' gift, he or she is inevitably tethered to the giver's will and whims. By privileging education, the mission and its emissaries are portrayed as just another facet of social and hegemonic control posing as charity.

The second part of my thesis explores some ways the recipients maintain their dignity in spite of such hegemonic control. I propose that Dangarembga's novel humanizes her characters' suffering, hence their humanity. In the voice of Tambu, the characters' stories of survival elevate their humanity as they navigate their precarity, and negotiate the terms of a life worth living. Following Tambu's journey from the village to Sacred Heart, which detours into the lives of the characters in the novel, Dangarembga invites us to envision the characters' humanity as we

engage in the novel's politics. She does not allow her characters, and the reader, to lose sight of their worth as human beings. They live, in spite, or maybe because of the socioeconomic conditions which threaten to control them. Thrust in this limelight, the characters demonstrate their humanity in their continuous search for meaningful forms of self definition, and survival. And therein lies their dignity.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

"The Perversion of Dignity in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*"

by

Lilian Nyanchama Mayaka

A Master's Thesis Submitted to The Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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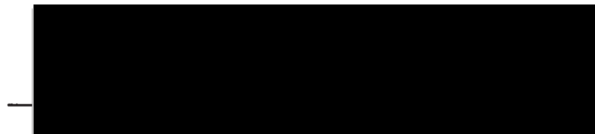
Department of English



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“The Perversion of Dignity in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*”

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2019

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Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* resists the neat divisions, as if divisions are ever neat, of female/male, educated/ un-educated, independent/dependent polarities which some critics focus on. And while such tropes are in fact invaluable areas of research, in the field of postcolonial studies, however, the subjects of such inquiry form the backdrop of research which subsumes individual interest in favor of the group's political representation. Such research displaces the individual, and by extension his or her humanity. But because postcolonial research is after all a political field of study, the task of the postcolonial critic, then, becomes that of maintaining the humanity of his or her subjects of inquiry amidst the other socio-political matters of inquiry. My thesis purports to represent the characters' interests, their suffering, a reading which remains true to Dangarembga's wish to "tell my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men" (208). She warns the reader to be wary of collapsing the characters' stories in the aggregate. Rather they must be understood individually, and the critic must observe how these individuals shape the events, or are shaped by events, in the larger palimpsest narrative of the novel

My argument stems from Robert Muponde's astute ideas on the colonizing nature of aid in the novel. Muponde argues that as with the missionaries' charity to the Africans in the novel, "the gift Babamukuru provides [to Tambu and her family] is a colonizing one as it takes over and objectifies the lives of the powerless, and exploits its resources (the children of the poor and powerless Jeremiah) in the name of modernity and progress. The colonizing gift induces all the debilitating symptoms of nervousness associated with the colonial condition" (391). Babamukuru replicates the missionaries' charity with his family in his recruitment of Jeremiah's

children to propagate the same roots of loyalty and dedication he shares with the missionaries. While Muponde does not elucidate the "nervous conditions" affecting the characters in the novel, we can infer that his helplessness to effect change in his life, and that of his family and the community's, his self-abnegation for the appeasement of the missionaries lest he lose favor with them, are all contributing factors.

Muponde also believes that in saving Jeremiah's family, Babamukuru creates binding ties with Jeremiah's children, thus almost certainly guaranteeing their indebtedness to him. This sort of giving, argues Muponde, is enacted for the purposes of "gathering privileges, as well as a recognition and consolidation of hierarchies" (392). The same is true of Babamukuru's indebtedness to the missionaries. Because of his ties to them, he becomes their tool and proxy in their agenda to civilize and save the African characters from their nativeness. And because the aid in the novel is "made in circumstances where it cannot be refused" (396), the characters have little choice but to co-sign the missionaries' terms and conditions, hence the missionaries' goals and values. Babamukuru, and later Tambu, is powerless in the pursuit of his personal goals and wishes. This paternal aid robs him of his will as he is helpless in the pursuit of his own goals and values.

For the purposes of this thesis, I analyze briefly the writings of Immanuel Kant on the dignity of humanity to understand the key parts of his argument which pertain to mine. Kant's ideas are clarified by Meir Dan-Cohen in his article "A Concept of Dignity." I purport to use Dan-Cohen's pragmatic analysis of Kant's dignity to examine how aid in the novel manipulates its recipients to achieve the giver's goals.

Kant's argument on this subject is not straightforward; it is couched in his ideas on

humanity. Kant argues that:

> The human being, and in general every rational being, exists as [an] end in itself, not merely as means to the discretionary use of this or that will, but in all its actions, those directed toward itself as well as those directed toward other rational beings, it must always at the same time be considered an end … These are not merely subjective ends whose existence as the effect of our action has a worth for us; but rather objective ends, i.e., things whose existence in itself is an end, and specifically an end such that no other end can be set in place of it, to which is should do service merely as means. (45-46)

For Kant, all beings are rational, that is logical. This is a key characteristic trait which sets man apart from other organisms, which therefore endows him or her with dignity. Moreover, one's humanity is not subjective to each individual, i.e., the extent to which it might differ from subject to subject. Rather, all beings are ends in themselves, and cannot be deployed as a means of attaining another's personal gain. But what does it mean to exist as an end to oneself? Meir Dan Cohen translates Kant here, and clarifies this clause by arguing that for Kant "all human action makes sense, has a point; it is … meaningful. What makes action intelligible, what gives it meaning, is that it is done for the sake of something or other. That for the sake of which an action is taken is its end … In this sense all action consists in the projection and attempted realization of purported values" (14). To author and pursue a goal is to deem such an undertaking meaningful, hence to be an end to, or for oneself. For example in writing this thesis, I hope to realize my goal, which is to earn my degree, a goal I deem meaningful, which I have authored, and which is therefore my end.

In regards to Kant's third clause on humanity not "serving merely as means," Dan Cohen

explains that by virtue of authoring, charting, and pursuing our goals and values, we

> View ourselves as self-governing, and thus autonomous. And this interpretation of our autonomy as a matter of being the authors of our lives naturally leads to a further idea, of being our own authority … This is the sense in which, in pursuing any value at all, we must recognize ourselves as the ultimate authority. The key to the authority relationship is the notion of *deference*: those subject to an authority are expected to defer to its wishes and demands. Since each person must recognize herself as a definitive authority, she ultimately defers to herself. Obeying her own commands, as it were, she expresses her self-respect as well. (15)

Therefore to serve "at the discretion of this or that will" is to be subject to the authority of another, and so become the means through which another achieves his or her goals. My analysis of Kantian dignity, by way of Dan Cohen's understanding here is to illustrate the pertinence of the tenets of Kantian dignity to my research. Let us sum up our understanding of this concept as discussed above: our dignity, and by extension identity, is asserted, and performed in the pursuit, and realization of our self- authored goals and values. The converse is also true: that is, to be denied, or robbed of one's dignity is to be denied the authorship of one's goals and values, and to become subject to another's will.

It suffices to say, then, that based on the tenets of dignity discussed above, colonialism, the physical and psychic domination of third world peoples, induced the debilitating conditions which contributed to the loss of dignity experienced by third world subjects. But the issues facing the characters in the novel are not conspicuously colonial in the sense of the physical domination of subjects. It is set in the 1960s at the height of the independence movement

throughout Africa, and was published in the 1980s. Tambu describes the remnant white settler population as missionaries, or "good wizards" who are different because:

> They were holy. They had come not to take but to give. They were about God's business here in darkest Africa. They had given up their comforts and security of their own homes to come and lighten our darkness. It was a big sacrifice that the missionaries made. It was a sacrifice that made us grateful to them, a sacrifice that made them superior not only to us but to those other Whites as well who were here for adventure and to help themselves to our emeralds. We treated them like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise. (105)

Tambu describes the missionaries and expatriates as a selfless people who are not after their own enrichment but for the good of the Africans. They are saintly, which makes them superior to those other Whites who colonized and exploited Africa, and of course superior to the Africans by virtue of this epithet, as well as their race. But the narrator's observations in this passage are satirical. She contends that even these missionaries who have chosen to continue in "God's work" perpetuate an economic and social hierarchy which victimizes the Africans, and pits the missionaries against them. It is a hierarchy which is disguised as charity, like the scholarship Babamukuru receives. Tambu informs us very early that the missionaries use Babamukuru as a pawn, that the gift he receives from them is given under circumstances which "yield harvests that sustain the cultivator" (19). The missionaries use Babamukuru to propagate their ideas. This scholarship is not innocuous, i.e., it does not free one of one's economic burdens through hard work and endurance in the linear way Tambu thinks of burdens and their removal. As the novel

unfolds, so too does Tambu's understanding of the helplessness induced by the missionaries' aid.

"There [is] telling what price he's paying"

Though Babamukuru is a highly educated and respected member of his community, the missionaries treat him like a child who must be guided and taught, even in matters pertaining to his personal life. It is an unmanning relationship which belittles his role in his family as "the big father, one's father's elder … who assumes the role of Father over the whole family … (Muponde 388). As father of many Babamukuru is revered, and esteemed highly. He is looked upon for guidance in matters small and big, and his word is understood as something akin to law as we shall soon see. But the missionaries belittle this role, let alone his adulthood. They displace the integral role he plays in his family and community, and by extension displace him. This effectively renders the power he has amassed for himself tenuous, even impotent.

His success, therefore is hollow, a symbol not of the power he has acquired, but of the status bestowed to him by the missionaries, which can be easily retracted if he does not obey. They are able to compel him, for instance, to earn a master's degree, which compels him to leave for England despite his reluctance to do so. And though he did not wish to leave, and to uproot his children for an alien land, he could not say no because the missionaries "would have been annoyed with his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them … [therefore he had] no alternative but to uproot himself for a period of five years in order to retain the position that would enable him, in due course, to remove himself and both his families from the mercy of nature and charitable missionaries." So although leaving for England would upend his life, and that of his family's, Tambu observes that the missionaries' offer is a "form of suicide … [and

should he refuse] they would have taken under their wing another promising young African in his place" (Dangarembga 14). The missionaries' scholarship put Babamukuru in a dilemma. If he'd refused to go to England they would have been insulted by his ingratitude, and a form of career, maybe even socioeconomic suicide in the sense that the missionaries might sever their ties to him. So he leaves for England but rationalizes this opportunity as a chance to empower himself so as to stand on his own,and not rely on the missionaries' aid.

It is also worth noting that the decision to earn a master's degree is the missionaries' and not Babamukuru's. Tambu informs us that he did not wish to leave home, having left as a child for South Africa (14). This, along with the fact that he was now a family man are reasons enough to compel him to stay, but he obeys the missionaries' edict nonetheless and leaves. The missionaries disrespect Babamukuru by denying him the freedom to chart, and author his life, to exercise his will. But having learned to endure and obey the rules and values asked of him at the mission since childhood, or rather facing no alternative but to endure and obey, he knows no better, to put it crudely. In deed Dangarembga's use of the word "alternative" throughout the novel illustrates the sheer lack of them. In fact, it *is* a continuous reminder that the characters face little alternative but to submit to the powerful in order to survive. The missionaries bully Babamukuru into submission, who bullies his brother Jeremiah, who bullies the members of his family so they "could stay in the picture at all" (50). It is a self-perpetuating hierarchy of victimization which exploits the characters' alternative-less lives, or put it Nyasha's way: "we are grovelling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him" (205). This grovelling as a condition for the aid robs Babamukuru of his dignity, and esteemed place in the community, as we have seen above. But, as with the scholarship to England, this

grovelling is the price he has to pay for his success. It is a non-alternative because his refusal to obey would have meant returning to the squalor in his home. At the mission he learns filial obedience, and an unyielding resolve as a result of the long periods of submission, and self-abnegation he endured at the mission. Tambu explains the nature of his personhood thus:

> Luckily, or unluckily for him, throughout his life Babamukuru had found himself … as provider to many in positions that enabled him to organise his immediate world and its contents as he wished. Even when this was not the case, as when he went to the mission as a young boy, the end result of such periods of submission was greater power than before. Thus he had been insulated from the necessity of having to consider alternatives unless they were his own. Stoically he accepted his divinity. Filled with awe, we accepted it too. (88)

Babamukuru learns to the art of submission to those in power, not to question. Being unable thus to author and execute his wishes and values, he is robbed of the ability to perceive, and conceive of alternatives due to the steely expectations taught him by the missionaries, which he internalizes, and later imposes on his own family. In other words, just as Babamukuru's values, and goals are set for him to follow and obey by the missionaries, he, too, imposes them on his family, effectively robbing them of their dignity and self-respect. Tambu conflates Babamukuru's "bullying" with power, which, she tells us, was awe inspiring, therefore alluring, and its effectivity.

The novel also suggests that the missionaries' charity is motivated by a need to expiate their colonial guilt, and not just the recipients' precarity. Nyasha explains to Tambu how, for instance, Mr. Baker, Nyaradzo's father, and a sort of family friend, is able to earn a place for

Chido at the prestigious white private school his sons attend. Mr. Baker is able to do so by having "a word with the headmasters … you know how it is, bwana to bwana: the boy needs the cash, old man! He's a good boy, what. Pity to waste him. We'll see what we can do. So Chido gets his scholarship and Mr. Baker feels better about sending his sons there in the first place" (108). Viewed in the larger context of the missionaries' charity, Mr. Baker's seeming generosity is a telling instance of the giver's self-centeredness. He is less interested in Chido's, or Babamukuru's wish for his son, than he is with his own feelings of guilt for sending his sons to this prestigious all white private school. Chido is no more than a means to justify his sons' continued attendance at this school. And as with Babamukuru's studies abroad, Chido's admission to this private school is imposed on him. Tambu informs us that Babamukuru "had intended him [Chido] to stay on at the mission to counteract the unAfrican exposure he had been subjected to in England" (108). Mr. Baker usurps Babamukuru's authority as Chido's father, and Babamukuru is once again placed in a compromising position where he is compelled to be grateful to the missionaries' for their "favors." Then there is the issue of Babamukuru's scholarship, which Tambu reminds us was motivated by the missionaries' need to alleviate their anxiety because they were "so anxious that this intelligent, disciplined young couple be trained to become useful to their people" (14).

There is much to be said, too, of gratitude, or rather its performance. The novel portrays its manifestation in the deification of the giver, which he or she is portrayed to have earned. The missionaries are worthy of this deification, for instance, because of the " big sacrifice" they made in coming to "darkest Africa" to improve the lives of Africans, unlike their colonial counterparts "who had come … to take" (105). In giving "up the comforts of their more advanced homes," the

missionaries' "self-denial and brotherly love did not go unrewarded. We treated them like minor deities …" (105). But having already discussed that Tambu's observation here is satirical, and knowing that the missionaries' deification is of course hierarchical, Dangarembga seems to further suggest that when stripped of their purported charity, the missionaries are in fact colonists who use aid as a means of "improving disguise", and their recipients exemplars of this guise. Dangarembga appears to point out the hypocritical nature of the missionaries' ideals of brotherly love and self-denial.

The Christian values espoused by the missionaries can only be self-serving therefore, in that they proselytize submission to authority, and the acceptance of one's status in life. Values like "respect and love " (99-100) only serve to the missionaries' ends after all because they quell dissatisfaction and resistance by extolling obedience to one's superiors. Babamukuru's filial obedience to the missionaries and what they represent is a blueprint of the successful foreclosure of dissent inculcated by these values. Like Tambu, he internalizes these ideals, and comes to epouse them with great conviction. Tambu, for instance, comes to understand "sin" in the absolutist: "Sin had become a powerful concept for me during my year at the mission, where we went to Sunday school and to church every Sunday without fail and were taught every time that sin had to be avoided. It had to be avoided because it was deadly. I could see it. It was definitely black, we were taught" (152). One can argue here that Tambu internalizes the nature of sin as a racial one, i.e., black is sinful as white is pure. And generous people like the missionaries and Babamukuru are good by virtue of their generosity. To defy these "deities" would be sinful, as in fact Tambu refers to the missionaries (105). Tambu is hard pressed to call this phenomenon brainwashing. But as she settles down at Sacred Heart, she vows "to question things and refused

to be brainwashed" (208) anymore.

Babamukuru's charity to his family is the missionaries' charity writ small. Like the missionaries, his charity denies Jeremiah's family their dignity of being by imposing his will on them, and using them to achieve his own ends. In a way Jeremiah sacrifices his family to Babamukuru in the same manner he finds himself bound to Babamukuru (162). They become Babamukuru's subjects, fodder for the execution of his will and projects by recruiting Nhamo, and later Tambu. Tambu's mother likens his charity to "fattening my children only to take them away, like cattle are fattened for slaughter" (187). To what end is an education, she seems to ask, when it is beneficial to someone else? Uneducated though she is, Tambu's mother perceives the injustice of her predicament, the loss of dignity she suffers at the hands of Babamukuru, when he educates "my children" but reaps the benefits himself. Babamukuru's charity attempts to sow the same ties which bind the recipient to the giver. Like the scholarship he offers Tambu which he makes clear is "not an individual blessing but one that extended to all members of my [Tambu's] less fortunate family, who would be able to depend on me in the future as they were now depending on him" (89). Powerless to argue otherwise, Tambu accepts this responsibility. But at the mission Tambu begins to understand the nature of the power the missionaries wield over Babamukuru, and the power he wields over her even more powerless family. She begins to see that her uncle's seemingly generous gesture is also ensnaring. Her respect and gratitude for him, coupled with his education and the power he has amassed sap Tambu of her will. She explains the dilemma thus:

> Babamukuru who was nearly as divine as any human could hope to be imposing the limits. Through him, because of him, black would remain definitely sombre and white

> permanently clear … my vagueness and my reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position. (166-7)

The significance of Babamukuru's magnanimous gesture of generosity looms large for Tambu, as does Babamukuru. This coupled with the power he represents comes to define, and limit Tambu's will. She begins to see clearly how he is able to rob her parents of their dignity by exploiting their helplessness to achieve his own ends, like the Christian wedding he decrees that they perform. Tambu's parents are of course helpless to refuse the Christian wedding Babamukuru imposes on them, a wedding Tambu concludes is an insult to her family as well as "a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world" (165). Having understood that the Christian wedding is a nullification of the marriage Tambu's parents share, hence her and her siblings existence, she defies Babamukuru and does not attend the wedding. She is, of course, punished for this insolence, but she "went about these chores grimly, with a deep and grateful masochistic delight; to me that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity" (171). Tambu reclaims her dignity by standing up for her convictions, indeed to her*self*. Unlike Babamukuru who lacks the courage to stand up the missionaries, she understands the punishment as a sign of responsibility, the price she must pay for reclaiming herself, and sense of dignity. This event marks Tambu's burgeoning understanding of the trappings of the power her uncle is able to wield over her family, and the trappings of the more concentrated power the missionaries wield over everyone.

Jeremiah's abject poverty compels him to grovel to Babamukuru, who shows his lack of

respect for Jeremiah by bullying, and subjecting Jeremiah to his will, effectively denying Jeremiah his dignity as a man, and his due respect as father and head of his household in the same manner the missionaries treat him. Babamukuru infantilizes him, and devalues him, even in the company of Jeremiah's own children. He talks down and reprimands Jeremiah as though he were a child, as when he scolds Jeremiah for his alleged licentiousness with Lucia in the company of everyone: "Jeremiah," he scolded, "see what problems your irresponsibility has landed us with. Now what is to be done? You are giving us a headache trying to sort out your affairs" (148). Babamukuru takes it upon himself to "fix" Jeremiah's life, for instance the Christian wedding, which he surmises would be a panacea for Jeremiah's vices. And although Jeremiah is in fact a lazy man, Babamukuru denies him the opportunity to effect his ideas for his family's progress. As ineffectual and ludicrous as they may sound, he is robbed of his voice and authority in his own home.

But Tambu's own respect for her father is little. Her portrayal of him comically denies him agency in the simple, flat role she casts him of a foolish man, and father, one who acts even more foolishly in Babamukuru's company. She tells us, for instance, that her father is ill equipped to think matters through. And "with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest," (15) he falls prey to "words like 'always' and 'never' [which] were meaningful to my father who thought in absolutes, and whose mind consequently made great leaps in antagonistic directions when it leapt at all" (25). He is by all accounts an irresponsible man, lazy, one who takes to begging because "this was something that my father had developed an aptitude for, having had to do it often. He was very good at it by that time" (31). Babamukuru capitalizes on these qualities, and robs Jeremiah and his wife of their humanity by "reduc [ing them] to the

level of the star[s] of a comic show, the entertainer[s] (165).” He even “robs” Jeremiah the opportunity to “father” his children by taking Nhamo to the mission, and thereafter Tambu when Nhamo dies.

Then there is the issue of Tambu’s mother who Tambu says “was so thoroughly beaten and without self-respect …” (125) such that her voice counts for little. The same is true of Jeremiah. In a way the characters are almost all beaten, and have been subjected to a loss of their self-respect. The missionaries beat down Babamukuru, who beats down Jeremiah, who beats down his wife, and because this hierarchy is self-perpetuating, the characters are must dance to the tune of another’s will. Tambu’s decision for selecting to attend Sacred Heart is motivated by her attempts to *earn*, and *buy* back her parents some dignity: “It would be worth it to dress my sisters in pretty clothes, feed my mother until she was plump and energetic again, stop my father making a fool of himself every time he came into Babamukuru’s presence. Money would do all this for me. With the ticket I would acquire attending the convent, I would earn lots of it” (186). Torn though she is, Tambu’s decision to attend Sacred Heart where she is one of two African students invited to attend is also a non-choice. She must go because should she elect not to, the scholarship would pass on to somebody else. So she does, for herself and her family who will continue to be devalued lest she *learns* a way re-dress their poverty. But she carves out the path she must take at Sacred Heart. She will use what she must, and dispense with the superfluous.

“Towards a [common] humanity”

Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*

In this section, I discuss some ways the characters perform and maintain their dignity in the face

of the hegemonic factors at large in the novel. There is a correlation, I have argued, between aid which imposes the giver's will and goals on the recipient, and the loss of dignity the recipients of such aid suffer as a result. And according to the foundational principles of Kantian dignity which formulate this thesis, the recipients of such aid suffer a loss of their dignity because they are helpless to pursue their goals, and instead become the means of achieving the giver's goals.

But one of the truly remarkable features of *Nervous Conditions* is the novel's transcendence of its political character in its rendition of the characters' humanity: their flaws, defeats, triumphs. Dangarembga allows her characters- Babamukuru, Nyasha, Tambu's father, Maiguru and Lucia, to share their individual stories of suffering. Dangarembga humanizes their experiences by allowing the reader to become privy to their suffering. Tambu invites us in her search for meaning in the events which shape the narrative by "recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death" (1). Her journey becomes ours as well as she seeks to explain why we should not judge her too harshly when she declares that she was "not sorry when her brother dies" (1). Rather she calls on us to position ourselves in her predicament, and the other characters'. We are compelled, as it were, to re-enact the characters' plight, their motivation as she attempts to explain why we should exonerate her, if not understand her "callousness" (1). In his introduction to the novel, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that Tambu "challenges us to hear the story that leads up to her brother's death because she believes that once we have heard it, we -- whoever we are--will not find her callous or unfeeling" (xi). Dangarembga puts us in a position which enables us to envision the characters' humanity, thereby putting the onus of restoring the characters' dignity on us as well. And because Tambu is "a character who reveals her concerns as she tells her story, with all the details specific to its

time and place … it does not matter if you know nothing at all of Zimbabwe's cultures, politics and history" (xi). The stories the characters tell transcend their place and time. They are ahistorical in the sense that they refuse to be tethered to one, any historicist referent. They are therefore survivalist narratives of hardship and triumph, the constant churn of everyday lives seeking to mitigate the circumstances.

I am inclined, therefore, to disagree with Lindsay Aegerter's observation that "by decentering the self [Tambu] in her autobiographical novel, Dangarembga demonstrates that the story of an African life is necessarily the story of African lives" (234). What Aegerter suggests here is that Tambu's and the other characters' stories share a common, African experience. It is just that sort of historicist reading which installs a binary that forecloses the characters' ability to signify their universal humanity. She elides the characters' individuality, and presumes that Tambu's African story can only perform its "Africanness."

Aegerter's reading certainly goes against the novel's own metanarrative, i.e., the human will to live. Dangarembga bestows on us the responsibility of evaluating the characters on a presumed universal, humanity index. Appiah notes that Dangarembga "writes with the confidence that the story she has to tell will make sense to readers from many places, with many preoccupations, and that she can tell it without betraying the authenticity of Tambu's voice. Tambu has not been shaped to make her accessible to any specific audience, whether inside Zimbabwe or outside" (xi). Dangarembga hopes that her readers might resonate with the story of the privileged male that is her brother and uncle, or that laughable family member like her father Jeremiah who inspires our pity, and forgiveness. Read thus, Tambu's story forces us walk with the characters, to wrestle with the forces they face. We are compelled, therefore, to restore the

dignity of being to these characters who we come to understand, and presume to know as a result of the similar, albeit different circumstances they find themselves in. Survival does not have a face. It is us, and the characters are anything but survivors.

The characters are also very much involved in the search for the meaning of their lives, one defined by and for themselves, and the contours of what such a life might entail. Appiah urges the reader to not lose sight of "the central moral issue of the book, the question of how the postcolonial Western educated woman and her sisters, daughters, mothers and aunts, peasants or workers, wage-earners or wives, shall together find ways to create meaningful lives, escaping their burdens of their oppression as women, but also as black people, as peasants and as workers" (x). While some characters like Nyasha thrive on contradiction and conflict in the search for a self that is not convenient for anyone, some characters adapt a pragmatic approach towards the socioeconomic hegemonic forces at play in the novel. Tambu, for example, understands the ocular, i.e., the symbolism of the wealth at the mission or rather the missionaries' tricks which Nyasha cautions her to be wary of. Armed with this information, and after witnessing Nyasha's mental breakdown, she is able to chart the course of her education undistracted, thus effectively becoming the means to her own end.

Jeremiah's story inspires sympathy, and pity. He, of all the characters, suffers most acutely from the hegemonic conditions which make a mockery of his being, and his status as a father. He *is* very much a victim of the socio-economic inequalities in the novel. And though, as we have discussed above, his character lacks nuance, his story attempts to explain the nature of his personhood, and the plight of the African man, or of those characters whose circumstances are not as fortuitous as Babamukuru's. Jeremiah explains that Babamukuru "was lucky. He got

the chance. He went to the mission at an early age. The missionaries looked after him so well, you know, that the books, ha-a-a, the books came naturally" (5). Jeremiah sees Babamukuru's success as the result of his good fortune and favor with the missionaries. Fostered in an environment which breeds success, and away from the want and lack of the village, Babamukuru's intelligence is nurtured, and his success a natural process of those circumstances. Jeremiah, on the other hand, is bred in an environment where one "cannot dream" (5). Babamukuru's decision to educate Nhamo and later Tambu at the mission is motivated, you recall, by this understanding of the role one's environment can play in shaping one's future. Jeremiah, therefore, makes the claim that if he were chosen by the missionaries, he too, might have been successful.

Jeremiah's character also demonstrates the complexity of the role and expectations of a "man" in the novel. By the novel's standards, Babamukuru is the quintessential father, and provider of many largely because of his western education. The other male characters appear to derive, or define their gender roles through this prism, i.e., the level of education, and whether or not their children or families "wear decent clothes" or "live in a comfortable home. " (45). It is an unfair evaluation system, one which emasculates characters like Jeremiah and Takesure for failing to measure up to Babamukuru and the missionaries' standards. Through the lessons Tambu learns from her grandmother, Tambu is aware that "my father and brother suffered painfully under the evil wizards' spell … it troubled them so much that they had to bully whoever they could to stay in the picture" (50). Jeremiah is very much a victim of this spell which disempowers him by taking away his children, and denying him the dignity of being as a result of his helplessness. He is also very much a victim of his own doing, i.e., his laziness, but

we cannot help but perceive Jeremiah as a man who, having been backed into a corner, has little choice but to beg and survive.

His begging robs him the dignity and respect of his family, even though he does not seem to be self-conscious of this quality of his being. It is a role he becomes quite good at, begging. Hamza Mustafa Njozi argues that characters like Jeremiah have little qualms about begging for sustenance because they embody a utilitarian approach to life. For Njozi, utilitarianism is "a doctrine which regards human comfort as the ultimate good. It is a philosophical outlook that encourages human beings to take positions which will maximise their comfort and minimize their suffering. As a method, utilitarianism judges the correctness of ideas in terms of their results or consequences. The appropriateness of a decision is gauged on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis" (2). This philosophy is of course antithetical to the principles of Kantian dignity which have thus far laid the groundwork for my argument. This philosophy certainly rationalizes the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful in order to maximize the latter's happiness. But given the acute lack of alternatives for self-improvement in the novel, I maintain that the characters have little choice but to find ways to survive. Lucia sums this sentiment well when she tells Tambu that: "a woman[and man] has to live with something … Even if it is a cockroach" (155).

Lucia is unapologetic in her search for a meaningful life. She is the only woman in the novel who embraces her sexuality. In fact Lucia is perhaps the only woman in the novel who suffers less from the conditions of nervousness which afflict most of the characters. Tambu informs us that this might be a result of her "shrewd … years of dealing with men … although she had been brought up in abject poverty, she had not, like my mother, been married to it at

fifteen. Her spirit, unfettered in this respect had experimented with living and drawn its own conclusions. Consequently, she was a much bolder woman than my mother" (129). Lucia is very much her own woman because she has experienced life outside of the confines of the traditional roles of daughter and wife in the novel. But she is also a character who is willing to traverse the prescriptive social boundaries enacted for her. It is this aspect of Lucia's that enables her to confront life, and Babamukuru in her search for stability. But she also understands that she has to resort to a grovelling performance in order to secure this job. This, she concedes, is a win-win situation for her, and Babamukuru (162). And her gratitude towards Babamukuru does not stop her from leading a life on her own terms.

Nyasha's character, too, does not lead her life through the prism of her father's expectations. But like Lucia, she has the benefit of having [an]other experience outside Shona's values, and Zimbabwe. As a result she speaks with authority when she tells Tambu that: "you can't go on all the time being whatever's necessary. You've got to have some conviction, and I'm convinced I don't want to be anyone's underdog … It's not right for anyone to be that. But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that's the end of you" (119). Nyasha points out the convenience of assuming an identity that is outside one's wish, and being. And even though her "English ways" are out place in Shona, she is relentless in her efforts to carve out a place for her on her own terms. It is through Nyasha's endless search for self-definition that Tambu is able to reclaim her dignity. She informs her parents that "I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you" (205). Nyasha will not be defined on terms other than her own. Tambu is able to heed Nyasha's warning after witnessing her deterioration, hence Tambu's resolve to be cautious of the "brainwashing" she might experience at Sacred Heart

(208).

Dangarembga appears to sanction this philosophy that prioritizes the individual's psychic well being. The occasion of Babamukuru's return from England compels Tambu to ponder the implications of her worth in a family which excludes her on the basis of her sex, and from the hegemonic company of her anglicized cousins (38). It dawns on her that the circumstances which prevent her from almost earning an education are as dissonant as the circumstances which earn Babamukuru his scholarship. This is to say that in the same way Babamukuru's intelligence alone does not merit him an education, she, too, is almost denied one due to her status as a girl. It is a frightening revelation, one which, "whispered that my existence was not necessary, making me no more than an unfortunate by-product of some inexorable natural process" (38). It is these circumstances she refers to as improper relations because they do not privilege her status as a girl, any more than they privilege Babamukuru, a man. The missionaries' gift to Babamukuru is dispensable, hence making him dispensable, and even more so for her. But this feeling is quelled a few pages later when in the company of aunts and uncles, she remarks that she is able to "recognize myself as solid, utilitarian me … [as a result of] the camaraderie of the cooking … [which] that same natural process had carved out for me" (40). Tambu's feelings of anxiety and superfluity are expelled in the company of her aunts and her people, and she finds comfort in her*self*. Unlike the company of her cousins' and brother's, Tambu's place in the kitchen amongst her female relatives is reassuring because it is not hierarchical. Their company does not raise existential questions of her worth because she identifies with them. She sees herself as she is, unencumbered by the value and status of an education.

Tambu's writing reclaims her dignity by prioritizing her needs and feelings, certainly the

needs of the women whom we learned very early “were not considered a priority” in her family (12). Her story prioritizes hers and the women’s stories by declaring from the beginning of the novel that while her “brother’s passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but my escape and Lucia’s; about my mother’s and Maiguru’s entrapment; and about Nyasha’s rebellion” (1). Unlike her brother whose life was prioritized by his sheer maleness, Tambu’s writing earns her the dignity of being by willing, and authoring her story. Note here that I am not referring to this work as feminist. Neither am I disputing that it is not. Rather by prioritizing the women in her story, I mean that she zooms in on their individual characters and narrates their individual stories which are largely subsumed under the weight of womanhood (16).

Conclusion

I mentioned before that the task of the postcolonial critic ought to represent his or her subject’s individual interest. *Nervous Conditions* is an example of one such masterful writing which attempts to lend voice to those characters who so often become the poster child(ren) for certain tropes. It is very easy to write Jeremiah off as a character who is lazy and must therefore work as hard as Babamukuru, just as it is easy to assume that Babamukuru’s success is the result of hard work and endurance, and or that Babamukuru is the epitome of success. Dangarembga demonstrates that such tropes elide the individual’s suffering, or at least presume to understand it. The success of *Nervous Conditions* remains in its powerful depiction of the characters’ humanity. As we leave the novel it is not very clear what futures await the characters. And perhaps that is all for the good. To presume that a narrative ought to deliver a satisfactory ending

is just as disingenuous.

And while I have discussed at length the consequences of aid which exploits the recipient's precarity, and lack of choice, and which forecloses the recipient's will, the novel remains hopeful in its characters' persistent search for solutions, and self-definition. The characters refuse to be displaced by this aid, to be objects, by creating meaning in their lives. Through their stories of suffering and survival, Dangarembga's characters choose to be part of the conversation regarding their well-being, thus authoring their dignity.

Tambu's story also transcends the hegemony installed by the paternal aid we encounter in the novel, the circles of inclusion and exclusion, and the hierarchy of victimization, and exploitation we have discussed at length. This position enables her to tell their stories, not critique their beings, so that even Babamukuru is as much a victim, if not more, of the conditions threatening all the characters. The experiential lessons she learns from either trope, and through the characters' stories have a ring of "truth" because they do not proselytize. Rather in telling, and witnessing, she allows herself, and the reader a chance to "process" these "events." They remain that, events, which is why "my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men" (208) is of more import than the events which happen to, and around the characters. Tambu's decision to continue her studies is therefore a nuanced one in that she secures her own path towards financial security, which privileges her being, even as she fraternizes with the forces threatening her deracination. Armed with the knowledge that the missionaries' scholarship, and most importantly Sacred Heart and what it represents are but events in her life, she resolves to remain "human being" first, and recipient, second.

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