

A DECOLONIAL FEMINIST READING OF *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*

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Abstract This paper explores Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* through the lenses of postcolonialism and decolonial feminism, focusing on the intersection of colonialism, missionarization, and gender oppression. It examines how African women face dual subjugation under colonial rule and indigenous patriarchy, a concept often termed "double colonization". Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Tamale, and Homi Bhabha, the analysis situates the novel in debates on hybrid identities, liminality, and resistance. Through characters like Tambu and Nyasha, Dangarembga critiques colonial and traditional systems while imagining alternative modernities rooted in education and agency, particularly for Zimbabwean women navigating oppressive structures.

Keywords Postcolonial feminism, Decolonial feminism, Double colonization, Liminality, Missionarization, Zimbabwean women's agency.

Introduction

No narrator "can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence," wrote Judith Butler,¹ and Tsitsi Dangarembga's narratorial voice in *Nervous Conditions*² makes no exception. Growing up herself between England and Zimbabwe, Dangarembga wrote her debut novel with a strong sense of liminality and remarkable literary power, portraying women's struggle for agency against deeply entrenched patriarchal and colonial systems. *Nervous Conditions* holds the distinction of being the inaugural work of a Black Zimbabwean woman published in English, and it continues to be recognised as a foundational text in postcolonial feminist literature.

The present paper aims to explore Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* through the lenses of postcolonialism and decolonial feminism. It examines the intersections of colonization, missionarization, and gender oppression as they shape the lives of Shona and

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2025.30.1.10>.

¹ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 7.

² Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

Ndebele people, with a particular focus on the double colonization of women. The novel highlights how African women are doubly oppressed by colonial power structures and indigenous patriarchy, creating a dual system of subjugation. By analysing the novel's rejection of Eurocentric realism and its centring of marginalized voices, this paper seeks to uncover how Dangarembga critiques both colonial and traditional structures of power, while envisioning alternative paths to emancipation and self-definition for Zimbabwean women.

As a novel written in English – the language of both colonial power and global academic circulation – *Nervous Conditions* positions itself at a critical juncture between Zimbabwean national literature and the wider landscape of postcolonial feminist writing. Tsitsi Dangarembga, writing in the late 1980s, makes a deliberate choice to use English not as a submission to colonial authority, but as a subversive tool that allows the voices of Zimbabwean women to enter global discourse.³ In doing so, her narrative echoes a broader pattern seen in postcolonial women's literature, where authors reclaim the language of colonizers to articulate resistance, identity, and healing. Within Zimbabwe, *Nervous Conditions* marks a departure from the often male-centric canon, standing alongside works by Dambudzo Marechera or Chenjerai Hove, yet offering a distinctly feminine and intersectional critique of colonial and traditional authority.

Internationally, Dangarembga's novel resonates with other African feminist texts such as Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*⁴ or Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*⁵ which similarly explore the entanglements of gender, culture, and neocolonial modernity. What distinguishes *Nervous Conditions*, however, is its deep engagement with the psychology of "double colonization" and the subtle negotiations of power enacted by women at the margins. In interviews, Dangarembga has stated that she sought to write a narrative that centres women's lived experiences, beyond nationalist slogans or binary portrayals of colonizer and colonized.⁶ Her work thus participates in what Homi Bhabha describes as "the third space" of hybridity⁷ – a zone of tension but also of potential transformation. It is precisely in this space, between nation and empire, tradition and modernity, that *Nervous Conditions* constructs its feminist decolonial critique.

This research employs textual analysis as its primary methodology, focusing on the ways in which *Nervous Conditions* articulates themes of postcolonialism, decolonial feminism, and the double colonization of African women. The analysis is framed by key theoretical

³ Ibid.

⁴ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Allison & Busby, 1979).

⁵ Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas (London: Heinemann, 1981).

⁶ Tsitsi Dangarembga, interviews cited in secondary sources such as Chiamaka Ezenwa, "Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 49, no. 1–2 (2022): 170–87.

⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36.

contributions, drawing on the works of Frantz Fanon,⁸ Sylvia Tamale,⁹ and Homi Bhabha.¹⁰ Additionally, the concept of “nervousness”, as developed by Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*,¹¹ is used to explore the psychological and existential tensions experienced by the novel’s characters under colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Nervous Conditions Between the History of Double Colonization and Fiction

As Chinelo Ezenwa explains in her analysis of *Nervous Conditions*,¹² the history of British colonialism in Zimbabwe dates back to 1890 with the colonizers’ intrusion upon the Shona and Ndebele people, with Cecil John Rhodes leading the occupation of lands, driven by the discovery of gold deposits. Backed by the British South Africa Company, Rhodes appropriated land, labour, and resources, claiming political and mining rights to establish control over what became South Rhodesia. His administration exploited indigenous labour to support colonial businesses and lifestyles, seizing vast tracts of land, including 3,000 acres and gold claims.¹³ Missionaries played a crucial role in this process, providing tactical support that legitimized colonial practices under the guise of Christianity and “civilization”, further enabling the dispossession of indigenous peoples. As Ezenwa explains, European scholars often downplay this history, referring to land theft as “grants of land,”¹⁴ while ignoring the exploitative terms under which these lands were taken. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni critiques this narrative, arguing that the appropriation of land and labour benefited white settlers while African women suffered doubly under colonial and traditional patriarchies.¹⁵

Nervous Conditions is by definition a compelling novel that offers a nuanced exploration of the double colonization experienced by women in Zimbabwe. It not only illustrates the profound impact of colonialism and missionization on individuals, but also highlights the enduring consequences of these processes. The novel masterfully portrays the arduous journey of women in pursuit of agency against deeply entrenched patriarchal and colonial systems.

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

⁹ Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and the Feminist Imagination in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994)

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, „Preface” in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 7–34.

¹² Chiamaka Ezenwa, “Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*” in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 49, no. 1–2 (2022): 170–87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2022.0009>.

¹³ C. J. M. Zvobgo, *A History of Zimbabwe, 1890-2000 and Postscript, Zimbabwe, 2001-2008* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009), 15.

¹⁴ L. H. Gann, *A History of Southern Rhodesia: Early Days to 1934* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 32.

¹⁵ S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Re-thinking the Colonial Encounter in Zimbabwe in the Early Twentieth Century” in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007): 173–91.

Through the characters of Tambudzai, the narrator, and her cousin Nyasha, Tsitsi Dangarembga offers a poignant perspective on the intricacies of navigating oppressive structures.

Tambu's pursuit of education is portrayed as a means of empowerment, in contrast to Nyasha's resistance to the colonial and patriarchal constraints imposed by her father, Babamukuru, who symbolises authoritarian patriarchy. Tambu's narrative is therefore characterised by a journey of self-discovery and gradual empowerment, representing an assertion of agency within constrained circumstances. She challenges traditional gender roles and the dominant discourse of heteronormativity by pursuing education, despite societal expectations that prioritise her brother's ambitions. It is arguably for this reason that the opening of the novel is so impactful, yet so unsettling: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling."¹⁶ Tambu's candidness regarding her brother's passing underscores the notion that his death has presented her with a novel opportunity to pursue education, a prospect that had previously been precluded due to her gender. This striking opening defies the conventional expectation that women should prioritise domestic roles over intellectual pursuits, thereby creating space for a postcolonial framework, as well as an ecofeminist one.

Conversely, the novel critiques the perpetuation of patriarchal stereotypes through Babamukuru's control over his wife and daughter, reflecting the internalised oppression in postcolonial societies, but also through the role of missionaries, which will be discussed in more detail later. These characteristics represent notable differentiators in the author's voice in relation to other male literary voices from Zimbabwe. Dangarembga's narrative is distinguished by its feminine sensibility, centring the voices and experiences of African women, the so-called "ex-centric voices."¹⁷ This specific narrative allows voices that speak from the margin to displace the authoritarian position of the centre.¹⁸ The employment of the first-person perspective in the character of Tambu enables an intimate exploration of her thoughts and struggles, marking a departure from the preponderance of male-dominated narratives in Zimbabwean literature that frequently marginalize women: "My mother said being black was a burden because it made you poor, but at the same time she said being a woman was a burden because it made you useful to men."¹⁹

Themes such as menstruation, body image, family dynamics, and marriage are explored through a lens that foregrounds women's experiences. For instance, Nyasha's internal conflict regarding her changing body is indicative of a taboo topic, namely menstruation, which is seldom addressed in traditional Zimbabwean literature: "Nyasha was beginning to menstruate and found her budding breasts deeply offensive."²⁰ In contrast to the romanticized depictions of rural

¹⁶ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, 1.

¹⁷ T. L. D'haen, "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers" in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Luis Leal Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 191–208.

¹⁸ Ezenwa, "Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*", 172.

¹⁹ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, 15.

²⁰ Ibid., 97.

life or the anti-colonial struggles from a male-centric perspective commonly found in Zimbabwean literature, Dangarembga's work offers a more critical perspective by highlighting the intersectionality of gender and colonialism. By doing so, she provides a nuanced and insightful viewpoint on the ways in which traditional and colonial values intersect to oppress women.

Furthermore, by introducing the concept of women's education as a site of resistance, Dangarembga's narrative diverges from the primarily nationalist concerns prevalent among male Zimbabwean writers. By placing emphasis on the impact of colonialism on women's bodies and psyches, she effectively shifts the narrative focus. The novel critiques the perpetuation of inequalities by colonial education, while also offering opportunities for women to challenge traditional roles:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden. How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, as men do. You have to bear children and look after them and the husband. You can't just decide to do as you like. And when there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them.²¹

The exploration of subjects such as eating disorders in Nyasha's character (see Chapter 7) and the psychological impact of patriarchy represents a significant departure from the usual focus of Zimbabwean literature, thereby expanding the discourse beyond the conventionally physical and economic dimensions of colonialism.

Missionarisation, Colonization, Oppression

In presenting this narrative as a first-person account, Dangarembga aims also to highlight the detrimental impact of missionary ideologies and education on indigenous communities. As Ezenwa notes in her article, Tambu's "autobiography"²² is intricately interwoven with that of her community.²³ Through the medium of her narrative, she illustrates the interconnection of her personal experiences with those of her family members, particularly the women, who, under the colonial missionary regime, faced comparable hardships. The credibility of her account is enhanced by the juxtaposition of her personal journey with that of her community, transforming it from a mere account of personal maturation into a direct critique of missionary activities in Shonaland. This observation is clearly evidenced in the account of Grandmother Mbuya's tale concerning the "white wizards," otherwise referred to as the political colonizers and the white

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² Ezenwa, "Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*", 173.

²³ Katwiwa Mule, "Blurred Genres, Blended Memories: Engendering Dissidence in Nawal el Saadawi's *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 6, no. 2 (2006): 106; Arturo R. Rico, "Seeking Balance: African Autobiography as Philosophy in Malidoma Patrice Somé's *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*," *Research in African Literatures* 47, no. 1 (2016): 78.

missionaries, who are known to have appropriated lands from the indigenous populace. Ezenwa's interpretation of the tale is noteworthy, as it demonstrates that the term "white wizards" critiques the exploitative nature of colonialism, drawing attention to its deceptive promises of progress and "modernity" while exposing their violent underpinnings.²⁴ In the Nigerian scholar's interpretation, Dangarembga's use of this term challenges colonial binaries, particularly the flawed assumption propagated by missionaries that whiteness signifies goodness and development, while blackness connotes evil or inferiority. By linking colonization to "wizardry," the narrative highlights how the colonial project cloaked its destructive practices in a veneer of benevolence, using education, religion, and modernization as tools of control. This critique deepens through Grandmother's story, which recounts the direct impact of colonial exploitation on her family, including the dispossession of land and the killing of Tambu's grandfather. Franz Fanon's analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks*²⁵ provides critical context for understanding the deeper implications of Grandmother's tale. The dehumanising effects of colonialism on Africans are evident in the reduction of their value to their utility as labourers and their willingness to conform to servitude. Fanon's analysis elucidates how colonizers employed a dichotomous labelling system, categorizing Africans as either "good" or "bad" based on their degree of submission. Terminology such as "good nigger" served to symbolize the infantilization and obedience demanded by colonial authorities.²⁶ This label, as Fanon elucidates, does not signify moral character, but rather, it is a reflection of the colonizer's desire to enforce total control. In *Nervous Conditions*, this notion of the "good African" resonates with Grandmother's ironic description of Tambu's grandfather as "not a good man."²⁷ Within this context, his death can be interpreted as an act of colonial violence, possibly rooted in his refusal to conform to the role of the obedient labourer. His resistance to being infantilized or subjugated by colonial forces may have marked him as a threat to the colonial order, resulting in his elimination. Grandmother's narrative critiques this dehumanization, urging a reexamination of colonial moral frameworks and the concept of "goodness." The notion under discussion here is, naturally, inextricably linked to the work of missionaries. Dangarembga demonstrates throughout the narrative how white colonizers and missionaries formed an unholy alliance in the "pacification" and domination of Zimbabweans through the process of missionization: "Missionaries, like the colonizers, were very keen to point out that their arrival meant progress for the people, but they never talked about the cost of that progress."²⁸

As Ezenwa highlights, the novel demonstrates how Europe's "saving mission" resulted in "hybrid" individuals such as Babamukuru, Nyasha's controlling father.²⁹ Within the narrative context, the postcolonial "hybridity" may be interpreted as the "native nervousness" that Jean-

²⁴ Ezenwa, "Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," 176.

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁷ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁹ Ezenwa, "Rethinking Missionary Colonization in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," 173.

Paul Sartre discusses in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.³⁰ Following a similar logic, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity describes the colonized subject as existing in an "in-between" state, where the colonizer's failure to fully impose their system results in an ambivalent position.³¹ This liminal state reflects the "nervous" condition of postcolonial subjects, who are incomplete due to their struggle to conform to colonial norms. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* portrays characters in this liminal space, caught between colonial impositions and their own cultural identity.

The Dual Umbrella of Traditional and Colonial Authorities: Finding an Alternative Modernity

It is the ability to navigate the complex intersections of colonialism, patriarchy and traditional cultural values that renders Tambu, the heroine, as a figure of outstanding significance. Her journey is one of critical examination, reflecting not only the false promises of colonial intervention in terms of progress, but also the gendered inequalities perpetuated by nationalist rhetoric. Tambu is engaged in the construction of an alternative modernity for herself, through the deconstruction and rejection of the colonial narrative as its foundational principle. For this reason, the novel can be regarded as both a decolonial and a postcolonial text. Tambu's initial perception of education as a conduit for autonomy and empowerment is gradually superseded by her recognition of the colonial system's exploitative and deceptive practices. Education, presented as a means of advancement, was also employed to eradicate cultural identities and perpetuate European dominance. Her critical stance emerges as she interrogates the system's deeper implications: "Nyasha was right, and it worried me, the thought of what had happened to them, to us."³²

Moreover, nationalism, purportedly motivated by the aspiration to emancipate the colonized, frequently served to perpetuate patriarchal norms that effectively marginalised women's agency. Tambu's resistance to these expectations is manifested through her refusal to conform to the conventional roles assigned to women and her pursuit of education and autonomy can be interpreted as a personal quest for liberation. She challenges the prevailing notion that women's roles are confined to serving men and family, thereby advocating for a modernity that encompasses gender equity: "The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate."³³

It is important at this point to acknowledge that Tambu's opposition to traditional gender roles is reminiscent of Sylvia Tamale's decolonial theories, which critique the ways in

³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," in *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 7–34. Sartre suggests that the colonizer's failed attempts to "domesticate" or "animalize" the colonized results in a condition where the colonized person is neither fully human nor animal, existing in a liminal state. This "nervous" condition, characterised by being "beaten, undernourished, ill, terrified," reflects a sense of alienation and incompleteness.

³¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 162.

³² Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 47.

which both colonialism and postcolonial nationalism have perpetuated patriarchal systems, often sidelining women's agency and subjectivity.³⁴ In alignment with Tamale's critique, the novel demonstrates that the pursuit of women's liberation must extend beyond the mere challenge of colonialism to encompass a confrontation with the gendered structures that persist within postcolonial societies. Tambu's pursuit of education and autonomy can be regarded as a form of resistance against these overlapping systems of oppression, echoing Tamale's call for a feminist framework that challenges both colonial and nationalist patriarchal legacies.

The notions of dual subjugation and double colonization, whereby African women are subjected to the oppressive influences of both indigenous patriarchal systems and colonial governance, constitutes a pivotal element of *Nervous Conditions*. Colonialism imposes Western gender norms that further marginalize African women, as evidenced by the expectations placed on Maiguru, Nyasha's mother, who, despite having received an education, is relegated to a subservient role as Babamukuru's wife: "Maiguru was a woman who had been educated, and this was her great tragedy."³⁵ Despite her considerable educational attainment, she continues to be bound by patriarchal norms and the social constraints imposed on women, particularly within the context of her familial environment. Her educational background, instead of empowering her within the confines of her marital and domestic life, serves as a source of frustration, as it fails to safeguard her from the oppressive gender dynamics that prevail.

Moreover, indigenous traditions also constrain women, as illustrated by Tambu's mother, who internalises and perpetuates these norms, thereby discouraging Tambu's educational aspirations: "My mother's life was a continuous struggle, and she was always working to keep the family going, but it seemed that no matter how hard she worked, things never changed."³⁶ Despite her efforts, she is trapped in a cycle of poverty and gendered expectations, illustrating the intersection of colonial and patriarchal systems that limit her autonomy and possibilities.

Conclusion

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a powerful exploration of the complex intersections between colonialism, patriarchy, and the agency of women in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The novel critiques both colonial and nationalist discourses, centring on the marginalization of black women within these contexts. Dangarembga engages with these issues by focusing on the voices and experiences of women, reclaiming their agency while challenging their exclusion from both colonial and nationalist narratives. This dual critique is reflected in the way Dangarembga interrogates the tendency of nationalist movements to reproduce patriarchal structures and their failure to prioritize women's liberation.

³⁴ Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and the Feminist Imagination in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³⁵ Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Through the character of Tambudzai, the novel narrates a journey of self-discovery and resistance, positioning education as a means of empowerment while simultaneously revealing the contradictions of colonial systems that claim to offer liberation. The tension between colonial rule and indigenous patriarchy is crucial to the novel's critique, as it underscores how these intersecting forces perpetuate the oppression of women like Tambu, Nyasha, and Maiguru. Dangarembga's use of a first-person narrative allows for an intimate exploration of the psychological and emotional impact of these structures, particularly through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "nervousness"³⁷ and Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity.³⁸ The characters are positioned in a liminal space, caught between colonial impositions and their own cultural identities, embodying the tensions of postcolonial existence.

In this way, *Nervous Conditions* also aligns with the ideas proposed by Sylvia Tamale in her discussion of decolonial feminism. Tamale critiques the persistence of gender inequalities within postcolonial societies, pointing out how both colonialism and indigenous patriarchy work together to limit women's autonomy. Dangarembga's novel reflects this critique by highlighting the multiple layers of subjugation that women face in Zimbabwe, urging a rethinking of feminist and decolonial movements to include the voices of women caught between these oppressive forces. Just as Fanon describes the psychological effects of colonization, Dangarembga's characters endure both colonial and patriarchal trauma, demonstrating the necessity of dismantling both systems for true liberation.

Ultimately, *Nervous Conditions* offers a nuanced critique of the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy, suggesting that true liberation for women can only be achieved by dismantling both colonial and indigenous structures that limit their potential. By focusing on the lives of women, Dangarembga highlights the need for a feminist decolonial framework that addresses the dual oppression of African women, while offering a vision of alternative modernities shaped by the agency and resistance of women like Tambu.

³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," 8.

³⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 150.