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Close Reading Paper

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is taut with various tiny narrative moments that yield incisive cues of the conflict and complicity between individuality and collectivity. It's very much a story of circularity, stretching between two admissions that mark the novel as a story of not only Tambu, the narrator, but also the "four women" whom she loved. This gesture to a broader sociality that undergirds each of these women's individual struggle—escape, entrapment, rebellion—is actively reflected upon by the adult Tambu in Chapter Seven, as Lucia insists that Maigura take sides on the issue of her pregnancy. It's one of the rare scenes in the novel when all five women (Tambu included) are present as well as one which is not intruded by any male character. In the opening line of the paragraph, Tambu the narrator first analyzes the women's situation in the kitchen as it is: "What was needed in the kitchen was a combination of Maiguru's detachment and Lucia's direction." (140)¹ Through spatial and bodily terms, a vocabulary of violence, and the retrospective element of the narrator, this passage then interrogates notions of sociality, violence, as well as the possibility of positive subject formation. Narrated from the standpoint of an adult Tambu, such observations offer both a critique of the underlying forces of colonialism and patriarchy as well as the process of emancipation that will resound at the novel's end.

This scene in the kitchen—an exclusively female space—runs parallel to the *dare* of the family patriarchy over the case of Takesure and Lucia, which all the women, other than Tete

¹ This citation applies to all quotes from Dangarembga, unless otherwise indicated.

Gladys, are excluded from. This scene dramatizes Frantz Fanon's concept of sociality in *The Wretched of the Earth*, wherein the colonized's collective power lies. Fanon's vocabulary of "brother", "sister" or "comrade" (11) surfaces in this kitchen scene with the women's budding "fierce, sisterly solidarity" as their malcontent turns into collective anger. Yet, Lucia's failure to draw Maiguru into their revolt against patriarchy sets the stage for Tambu's analysis of this delicate, divisive "solidarity". Tambu uses spatial and bodily terms to express the internal and external fracturing that the women are undergoing in this passage as well as the subtle politics at work. On the one hand stands the "self", which is "retreat[ing]" from the visceral sensations of the matter—the "intima[cy]" of sisterly solidarity is juxtaposed with the previously latent divisions between woman and woman arising in the open, which elicits stinging, "salti[ness]" and sharpness. Yet, Tambu points out that this "self" is constituted of "images that the women had of themselves", "images that were really no more than reflections", reflections that the women have been "taught" to recognize as their own identity. This powerfully echoes Fanon's critique of the ingraining of individualism into the minds of the native when he claims that the colonialist bourgeoisie "hammered into the colonized mind the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity" (11). On the other hand is the "group", set apart "as women". Here, Tambu exposes the external fracturing of this socially enforced collective. The "frightening" (Tambu repeats this word twice) truth is that the "facts" constructing their identities are in fact "myths" used to control them, a myth of both colonialism and patriarchy, dividing them into "the Maigurus" and "the Lucias". Such fears push each woman to cling onto "the security of their illusions" rather than acknowledge that they have no positive subject formation of their own—Maiguru to her good wife, colonized elite image; Lucia to her promiscuous, backward native image. Instead of what Fanon calls the revelation that "personal

interests are now the collective interest" (11-12), the women are separated, physically and politically, by these myths in "extreme". It is no wonder that the passage ends with the astute, figurative observation of each woman in "solitary" defense of their mythical identities against one another, instead of uniting in resistance against the *dare*.

Projecting beyond the bodily and spatial terms used in parts of this passage, the female psyche is also a powerful site of resistance in the rest of *Nervous Conditions*. Inscribed by colonial and patriarchal practice, the mind and the body are where the subjectivity begins and where the internalized structures of violence and compartmentalization reside. In this passage, as in elsewhere in the novel, the body speaks for itself. The women's retreat into their psyche despite bodily discomfort (the sensations that Tambu describes), shows the disciplining or conditioning of the native female body, or even its easy complicity. Yet, the psyche as the starting arena for emancipation is highlighted in this passage with the allusions to the necessary (albeit "frightening") internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self—to differentiate between the autonomous self and the images projected onto the matrix of the subjectivity. This pivotal unentangling of "self" from "reflections" or "images", this rebuilding of self from "myths" sheds light on Tambu's nervous conditions throughout the novel. For instance, Tambu admits that it was "easier" to take "refuge" in the "image of the grateful poor female relative" (118) rather than to undergo an intense struggle between "two disconnected entities" (169) in her mind as in the case over her parents' wedding. This emphasis on the mind as a battlefield in this passage is further entrenched with Tambu's use of the metaphors of warfare. Instead of "expansion", the female psyche instinctively "[tightens] up". Instead of "advancing" onto alternatives, the women "[retreat] more resolutely" into the assumptions naturalized by colonialism and patriarchy. Instead of actually initiating "an offensive" by deconstructing the myths implanted in their

minds, the women are engaged in a “hopeless defence” of those very myths. For the reader, this passage makes clear the women’s defeat, as they engage more systematically and unwaveringly in upholding “illusions” harmful to themselves instead of uniting in their common suffering to resist their mutual foe.

Beyond the confrontation of viewpoints between the characters and the self-confrontation within each woman, the vocabulary of violence in this passage also draws the reader’s attention to the larger confrontation underlying the situation between these women and the controlling, structural forces of colonialism and patriarchy. Through careful diction, Tambu exposes the violence involved in the women’s subject formation process. Tambu first insidiously uses the word “taught” to imply the forced, unnatural state of self-identity for the women. Encountering the line “the woman had been taught to recognize these reflections as self”, the reader immediately wonders, ‘Taught by who?’ Three lines later, Tambu tears off the euphemistic veneer in a flourish by naming outright the “generations of threat and assault and neglect” that have “battered” the “myths” of colonialism and patriarchy into the women. The compounding effect of “threat”, “assault” and “neglect” hits the reader just like how they have pummeled the reality into one of division and mutual suspicion for the women. The violence has entered into the scene, front and center. Fanon’s argument on violence articulates the violence of colonization (and also patriarchy) on these women: “The supremacy of white (male) values is stated with such violence, the victorious confrontation of these values with the lifestyle and beliefs of the colonized (the female) is so impregnated with aggressiveness.” (8; parentheses added) As much as Dangarembga’s writing condemns the violent imposition of values by colonialism and patriarchy on the native female, the passage also bemoans and criticizes the ‘victorious confrontation’ of external values and the women’s internal beliefs, as the women retreat into their

externally defined, essentialized identities and accept defeat.

Bearing in mind that this passage is narrated from the standpoint of an adult Tambu, who extracts the reader from the shifting focalization of her younger self to reflect on the ironies and invisible forces beneath the women's interactions, it is crucial to consider why she chooses to analyze this very scene in such great detail for the reader. Despite her meditations on the polarization of the *maininis* and the myth of female solidarity, the adult Tambu does offer the tentative possibility of escape and resistance when she narrates that "everybody needed to broaden out a little, to stop and consider the alternatives". The question that underlies this passage is also one that resounds in the novel: How does one connect in a world that is so divisive? The answer may be elusive in this passage, but it surfaces in fragments: "a broadening" from the positions of both "the Maigurus" and "the Lucias" is necessary, as is "an encompassing expansion and a growth". This resonates with where the adult Tambu has reached at the end of the novel, as she "quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully...[begins] to question things" (208) and her mind thus starts to "assert itself" (208). At both points of the novel, Tambu calls this process one of "expansion". It would seem that more than simply advocating for a reconciliation of socially constructed extremities for the women's resistance against their divide-and-conquer oppressors, Tambu is also questioning how positive subject formation can first take place in the interstices between imposed Manichean oppositions and eventually transcend the conflictual, hostile and entrenched rifts in collectivity. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha voices similar questions: How are subjects formed 'in-between' domains of difference? How can they be more than the simple sum of their parts of difference (such as race/gender/class)? (2) Suggesting the solution as one of considering "alternatives", Tambu might be pointing a way of thinking beyond narrow subjectivities to an "intersubjective"

(Bhabha 2) experience of collective interest. Such an intersubjectivity would allow each woman to see beyond oneself to the political conditions of their reality, tapping into a collective experience that emerges from the “overlap and displacement of domains of difference” (Bhabha 2)—Tambu doesn’t envision an erasure of difference, but instead an “expansion” towards multiple subjectivities in the shared experience of being a native female.

The inability of the solitary native female, in hopeless defense of colonial and patriarchal illusions, to connect with others both like and unlike her is the final powerful image the reader is left with by the end of this passage. It is on such a poignant, powerful note that this passage on polarization, self-confrontation, and the attempt for female solidarity concludes. The failure to connect, to interrogate, to jump out of the fixed lines of seeing oneself in the world, to deconstruct and then reconstruct is not simply a lament, but also the adult Tambu’s critique of both these women and her younger self, blind to the numerous ironies around them, only now retrospectively rendered clear. Placing this passage in the larger context of *Nervous Conditions*, the reader ultimately has cause for optimism—the adult Tambu’s very act of narration is a testament to the actualization of the possibility of expansion, of resistance, of seeing ‘beyond’ that had eluded the women in this scene as well as her younger self, but for Tambu, no longer.

Works Cited:

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