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Insurgent Quietude: Silence, the Female Body, and Postcolonial Power in Tsisi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

هدوء تمردي: الصمت، الجسد الأنثوي، والسلطة ما بعد الاستعمارية في رواية الظروف
العصبية لتسيبي دانغاريمبغا

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Abstract:

This article investigates silence in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) as a complex, embodied form of resistance rather than a sign of passivity. Set in 1960s–70s Rhodesia, the novel foregrounds the female body as a site where colonial and patriarchal pressures converge, producing “nervous conditions” that constrain agency. Existing scholarship often privileges speech and narrative articulation as markers of liberation, neglecting non-verbal strategies of dissent. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the study examines Tambudzai's reflective silence, Maiguru's muted intellectual dissent, and Nyasha's anorexic refusal, showing how withdrawal, restraint, and bodily breakdown operate as communicative acts that subvert hegemonic power. By reframing silence as insurgent quietude, this article challenges speech-centered models of resistance and highlights the corporeal, affective, and performative dimensions of female agency in postcolonial contexts

Keywords: silence, female body, postcolonial feminism, insurgent quietude, embodied resistance

المخلص

تستكشف هذه المقالة الصمت في رواية الظروف العصبية لتسيتسي دانغاريمنغا (1988) كشكل معقد ومتجسد من المقاومة، وليس مجرد علامة على الخضوع. تدور أحداث الرواية في روديسيا خلال الستينيات والسبعينيات، وتبرز الجسد الأنثوي كموقع تتقاطع فيه الضغوط الاستعمارية والأبوية، ما يفضي إلى "ظروف عصبية" تحد من القدرة على الفعل. غالبًا ما يركز البحث السابق على الكلام والسرد كمؤشرات للتحرر، متجاهلاً استراتيجيات الاحتجاج غير اللفظية. استنادًا إلى النظرية النسوية ما بعد الاستعمارية، تحلل الدراسة صمت تمبودزاي التأملية، وتمرد مايجورو الفكري المكتوم، ورفض نياشا من خلال فقدان الشهية، لتظهر كيف تعمل الانسحابات، والضييق، والانهيئات الجسدية كأفعال تواصلية تقوض السلطة المهيمنة. من خلال إعادة تأطير الصمت كـ "هدوء تمردي"، تتحدى المقالة النماذج التي تركز على الكلام وتبرز الأبعاد الجسدية والعاطفية والأدائية للوكالة النسائية في السياقات ما بعد الاستعمارية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصمت، الجسد الأنثوي، النسوية ما بعد الاستعمارية، الهدوء التمردية، المقاومة المتجسدة

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the realms of feminist and postcolonial criticism, silence is a deeply contested concept that resides at the intersection of perceived powerlessness and insurgent agency. Historically, silence has been equated with oppression, erasure, and the systematic marginalization of the subaltern, often serving as a tool for cultural and linguistic imposition under imperial and patriarchal rule. Yet, the field of African women's writing increasingly positions silence as a potent aesthetic and political tool that operates alongside, rather than in opposition to, resistance. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

exemplifies this complexity by complicating the conventional voice/silence binary, demonstrating how "keeping silent" can function as a meaningful political event. This text establishes a significant scholarly tension, suggesting that the subaltern body can communicate a politics of resistance through absences, gestures, and physical breakdowns that transcend the threshold of verbal speech.

Set in 1960s and 1970s Rhodesia, the novel explores the "nervous conditions" of those navigating the interlocking systems of colonialism and Shona patriarchy. Through the journey of the protagonist, Tambudzai, and her cousin, Nyasha. Dangarembga illustrates how the female body becomes a

primary site of conflict where external control and internal rebellion intersect. While traditional activism is often associated with the public act of "speaking up," the characters in the novel utilize strategic withdrawals and embodied protests—such as Nyasha's anorexia and Maiguru's intellectual repression—to subvert and escape hegemonic structures. Consequently, the novel demands an analytical framework that listens to what is withheld rather than explicitly spoken, positioning the voiceless body as an active participant in the struggle for self-actualization and identity in a male-dominated environment.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

Scholarly engagement with *Nervous Conditions* has consistently positioned the novel as a foundational text in African postcolonial women's writing, particularly in relation to questions of gender oppression, colonial subjectivity, and female education. Since its publication in 1988, critics have largely approached Dangarembga's narrative through a postcolonial feminist framework, emphasizing the intersection of patriarchy and colonial domination in shaping women's lived experiences. Florence Stratton's influential study *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) situates *Nervous Conditions* within a corpus of African women's texts that expose the gendered exclusions embedded in both nationalist and colonial discourses. Stratton argues that Dangarembga foregrounds women's marginalization by revealing how cultural and colonial structures collaborate to discipline female ambition and autonomy. Similarly, Elleke Boehmer (2005) reads the novel as emblematic of postcolonial women's writing that resists masculinist nationalist narratives by centering female consciousness and domestic spaces as sites of political struggle.

A dominant critical paradigm emerging from this scholarship is the notion of "double oppression" or "double colonization," a concept widely used to describe the compounded subjugation of African women under both imperial rule and patriarchal

authority (Mohanty 1988; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002). Within this framework, critics emphasize how female characters in *Nervous Conditions* are constrained by rigid gender roles that confine womanhood to domestic labor, obedience, and reproductive function. Rino Zhuwarara (2001), for instance, argues that the novel exposes the structural violence of Shona patriarchy by illustrating how women's aspirations are systematically curtailed within the family unit. Such readings underscore the ways in which gender oppression operates not as an isolated force, but as one deeply entangled with colonial power relations.

Alongside feminist analyses of patriarchy, a substantial body of scholarship has focused on colonial education and cultural alienation as central thematic concerns in the novel. Critics frequently describe Western education as paradoxical: while it offers African subjects access to social mobility and intellectual empowerment, it simultaneously functions as a mechanism of ideological control and cultural estrangement. Celia Wallhead (1995) notes that education in *Nervous Conditions* produces "ambivalent subjects" who internalize colonial values even as they become increasingly aware of systemic injustice. This tension is particularly evident in Tambudzai's educational trajectory, which has been widely interpreted as both a means of survival and a source of moral compromise. Boehmer (1995) similarly contends that colonial schooling fractures indigenous identity, creating subjects who are caught between cultural worlds without fully belonging to either.

Within this critical context, Nyasha has received sustained scholarly attention as the novel's most visibly fractured figure. Numerous critics interpret her psychological disintegration through a Fanonian lens, reading her as a "native intellectual" whose exposure to Western culture results in profound psychic conflict (Fanon 1967). Drawing on *Black Skin, White Masks*, scholars such as Dangarembga's early reviewers and later commentators argue that

Nyasha's anorexia and breakdown symbolize the internalization of colonial violence at the level of the psyche (Zhuwarara 2001; Boehmer 2005). Her refusal to eat has often been read as a manifestation of cultural estrangement and identity crisis, emblematic of the destructive consequences of colonial assimilation. While these readings powerfully illuminate the psychological toll of colonial domination, they tend to frame Nyasha's suffering primarily as pathology rather than as a potentially meaningful form of resistance.

More broadly, much of the existing scholarship on *Nervous Conditions* privileges speech, articulation, and consciousness-raising as the novel's primary modes of resistance. Tambudzai's retrospective first-person narration is frequently interpreted as a decisive act of reclaiming voice, enabling her to "name" the intersecting systems of oppression that shaped her upbringing. This emphasis aligns with wider feminist critical traditions that equate agency with articulation and political awakening with the ability to speak (hooks 1989). Critics often celebrate Tambu's narrative authority as evidence of successful emancipation, positioning the act of storytelling itself as a form of "speaking back" against what have been described as the novel's "ritualized atrocities" of gendered and colonial violence.

However, this critical emphasis on voice and speech has resulted in a relative neglect of silence as a meaningful analytical category. While silence is frequently mentioned in passing—often as evidence of repression or marginalization—it is rarely theorized as an intentional, embodied, or strategic practice. Feminist theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) have famously interrogated the politics of voice by questioning whether the subaltern can speak at all, while others have cautioned against equating speech with empowerment in contexts where articulation is itself regulated by dominant epistemologies (Mahmood 2005). Yet these insights have not been fully integrated into critical readings of *Nervous*

Conditions. As a result, forms of resistance that operate through withdrawal, restraint, bodily refusal, or emotional containment remain undertheorized.

This study addresses this critical gap by re-examining *Nervous Conditions* through the lens of embodied silence. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, it argues that silence in the novel does not merely signify erasure or victimhood but functions as a subversive strategy through which marginalized women negotiate agency within constraining structures. By focusing on Tambu's contemplative restraint, Maiguru's quiet intellectual dissent, and Nyasha's corporeal rebellion, this paper reframes the voiceless female body as a communicative site that articulates resistance through absence, breakdown, and gesture. In doing so, it challenges dominant critical paradigms that privilege speech as the primary marker of emancipation and contributes to broader feminist debates on alternative forms of political expression in postcolonial contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and the body

3.1. Silence in Feminist Theory

In traditional feminist and postcolonial criticism, silence is predominantly framed as a marker of victimhood, erasure, and suppression. It is frequently conceptualized as a symptom of the "epistemic violence" perpetrated on subaltern bodies or as a result of a patriarchal "nervous condition" that systematically mutes women's experiences to maintain dominance. Within these frameworks, quietness is often dismissed as a narrative void or a marker of powerlessness and passivity, where the subject is seen as unable or unwilling to participate in the public political sphere. This view aligns with historical conquest and cultural erasure, which institutionalized the silencing of native and female voices to suit imperial agendas.

However, feminist theorists have complicated this view by reframing silence as a deliberate tactic, a strategy of survival, and an active refusal to comply. Luce Irigaray, for instance, conceptualizes silence as a form of "mimicry"—a subversive strategy that feigns

obedience to the master while planting the seeds of his undoing. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak defines the subaltern's silence as a "politically charged space" where the voice of the marginalized is often mediated or erased, making the choice of silence a potent mode of critique. Using Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, silence can be interpreted as a "calculated action" determined by the absence of a proper locus of power, allowing the weak to negotiate their agency within territory they do not own. For theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Trinh T. Minh-ha, silence is a gendered intervention that resists both colonial discourse and indigenous hierarchies.

Despite these developments, these ideas remain underutilized in many readings of *Nervous Conditions*, which tend to over-emphasize formal education and verbal articulation as the primary indicators of liberation. There is a critical tendency to prioritize the protagonist's journey toward "breaking the silence," which often misinterprets the characters' quiet endurances and physical breakdowns as narrative voids rather than embodied resistance. This scholarly focus on the sayable often ignores the novel's capacity to show how the "voiceless" body communicates through absences, breakdowns, and gestures. Consequently, the novel's portrayal of physical pain as an "insurgent gesture" remains a relatively under-explored theoretical terrain that could redefine resistance as an embodied language of survival and empowerment.

3.2. Postcolonial Feminist Lens

This study is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, which interrogates the gendered operations of colonial power and challenges the universalizing assumptions of Western feminist paradigms. Central to this framework is the concept of double colonization, whereby women in colonized societies are subjected simultaneously to imperial domination and indigenous patriarchal authority (Mohanty; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin). Postcolonial feminist

scholars emphasize that gender oppression cannot be understood in isolation from race, class, culture, and colonial history, insisting instead on an intersectional analysis of power that accounts for the material and discursive conditions shaping women's lives. As Mohanty argues, Western feminist discourse has often homogenized "Third World women," overlooking the specificity of their social locations and the complex negotiations through which agency is exercised. Consequently, postcolonial feminism resists liberal feminist models that equate emancipation with visibility, autonomy, or vocal self-assertion. Rather, it foregrounds forms of resistance that operate within constraint, recognizing that agency may be expressed through accommodation, refusal, or silence. By adopting this lens, the present study approaches the women of *Nervous Conditions* not as failed subjects of liberation but as actors whose strategies of survival and dissent are shaped by the intersecting pressures of colonial rule and patriarchal control.

3.3. The Body and Silence as Discourse

Building on postcolonial feminist critiques of agency, this study conceptualizes the female body as a discursive site through which power is both imposed and contested. Feminist theorists have long argued that women's bodies under colonial and patriarchal regimes are subject to intense surveillance, regulation, and discipline, functioning as terrains upon which social norms are inscribed and enforced. Within such regimes, silence cannot be understood merely as the absence of speech but must be approached as a meaning-producing practice that operates through bodily gestures, restraint, withdrawal, and physical refusal. Drawing on Spivak's interrogation of subaltern voicelessness and Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency as inhabiting, rather than transcending, normative structures, this paper treats silence as a form of embodied discourse shaped by historically specific relations of power. In *Nervous Conditions*, the body becomes a medium through which resistance is articulated when

verbal expression is constrained or rendered ineffective; silence materializes in acts of withholding, emotional containment, and corporeal breakdown. By reading silence alongside the body, this framework reveals how non-verbal expressions—such as physical pain, disciplined stillness, or bodily collapse—function as communicative acts that expose the limits of colonial and patriarchal authority. This approach enables a re-reading of the voiceless female body not as passive matter but as an active site of signification, where resistance is enacted through embodied languages that challenge dominant epistemologies of speech, reason, and visibility.

4. Silence and the Female Body as a Site of Conflict

4.1. Colonial and Patriarchal Intersection

In *Nervous Conditions*, women's bodies are situated at the intersection of colonial modernity and indigenous patriarchal control, creating a site of continuous regulation and surveillance. Colonial education, Christian moral codes, and Western gender norms impose new forms of discipline, while Shona patriarchal structures enforce domesticity, obedience, and reproductive labor. The female body is thus doubly constrained: it is both a vessel for internalized colonial ideals and a medium through which traditional gender expectations are inscribed. Silence emerges within this context not as a neutral state but as a socially enforced response to these intersecting pressures. Women are expected to conform, defer, and restrain both speech and emotion; yet, this silence is psychologically negotiated, as characters like Maiguru and Nyasha demonstrate—withholding speech, emotion, or compliance strategically to maintain some measure of autonomy. By framing silence as a product of structural coercion, the novel highlights the ways in which external power relations shape internal experience, rendering the female body a contested site where social control and individual resistance intersect.

4.2. Emotional Repression and Bodily Consequences

The internalization of these dual pressures frequently manifests in psychological and physical strain, illustrating the corporeal costs of silent endurance. Silence, in this context, functions as both a containment strategy and a mechanism of survival: by restraining speech and regulating emotional expression, women attempt to navigate and survive oppressive structures without provoking direct confrontation. However, such repression exacts a profound toll on the body and psyche. Nyasha's anorexia and emotional breakdown, for example, reveal the embodied consequences of constrained agency, where resistance is inseparable from physical suffering. Similarly, Maiguru's quiet withdrawal and Tambu's introspective silence demonstrate that repression produces both subtle forms of dissent and moments of psychological tension. By linking silence to bodily and emotional experience, the novel emphasizes that resistance can be non-verbal, embodied, and performative, bridging structural constraints with individual acts of survival. This understanding establishes the groundwork for a character-centered analysis, where Tambu, Maiguru, and Nyasha exemplify distinct, embodied strategies of negotiating patriarchal and colonial domination.

5. Tambu: Contemplative Silence and Narrative Control

5.1. Tambu's Controlled Silence

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambudzai's silence is neither passive nor indicative of subservience; rather, it functions as a strategic mechanism of observation and internal negotiation within oppressive patriarchal and colonial structures. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Tambu frequently restrains her speech, not from ignorance or fear alone, but as a deliberate practice that allows her to assess power dynamics, anticipate conflict, and navigate social hierarchies. For instance, her interactions with her uncle Babamukuru reveal a careful balancing act: she conforms outwardly to expectations while internally evaluating the contradictions and limitations imposed upon her. By situating her

consciousness within a retrospective first-person narration, Dangarembga grants Tambu a mediated form of agency, where silence is transformed into reflective control and delayed action (Stratton 1994; Boehmer 2005). This controlled silence enables Tambu to learn, adapt, and plan her incremental assertion of autonomy, illustrating that vocal compliance and silent observation are not mutually exclusive but can coexist as complementary strategies of resistance. In this way, Tambu's behavior reframes the familiar trope of female compliance: what might initially appear as acquiescence is, in fact, a form of tactical agency embedded in self-awareness and careful calculation.

5.2. Narration as Delayed Voice

Tambu's first-person retrospective narration transforms her silence into a deliberate, reflective form of agency, allowing her to articulate critique and insight without immediate confrontation. Early in the novel, she observes, "I was not sorry to leave. I was angry, angry at the whole world" (Dangarembga 8), capturing the tension between internal emotion and external restraint. While Tambu frequently withholds speech in daily interactions, her narration enables her to reinterpret and recontextualize events, turning silence into a productive space for analysis and self-positioning (Stratton 1994). This reflective mediation aligns with Spivak's assertion that the subaltern's voice is often exercised through forms of expression other than direct speech, such as storytelling, writing, or memory, which can circumvent dominant structures of authority (Spivak 308). Tambu's careful, measured recounting of her experiences—whether describing her struggles with education, family expectations, or interactions with Babamukuru—reveals how silence can coexist with intellectual and moral articulation. For example, when reflecting on her academic ambitions, she notes, "I knew that if I worked hard, I could prove myself—but I had to choose my battles carefully" (Dangarembga 24). Through such internal deliberation, Tambu demonstrates that silence is not erasure but strategic,

conscious postponement of voice, transforming moments of restraint into a foundation for eventual empowerment. By foregrounding the introspective and selective dimensions of her narrative, Dangarembga illustrates how the voiceless female body and silent mind collaborate to navigate oppression, offering a model of subtle, non-confrontational resistance (Boehmer 2005; Mahmood 2005).

6. Nyasha: Bodily Refusal and the limits of Colonial Speech

Nyasha represents the most extreme and unsettling articulation of silence in *Nervous Conditions*, not because she lacks language—indeed, she is articulate, Western-educated, and intellectually combative—but because speech ultimately proves inadequate to mediate the contradictory demands imposed upon her body. Caught between the disciplinary regimes of colonial modernity and Shona patriarchy, Nyasha internalizes a conflict that erupts somatically rather than rhetorically. Her anorexia, insomnia, and eventual breakdown materialize what cannot be stabilized within available discursive frameworks.

Critics have often read Nyasha's illness as a symptom of cultural hybridity or psychological dislocation. While such interpretations are persuasive, they risk reducing her corporeal collapse to pathology alone. This article instead reads Nyasha's refusal to eat as a form of embodied dissent—a negation of the regimes that seek to regulate her appetite, comportment, and gendered obedience. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theories of the body, her starvation emerges as a catastrophic but politically legible gesture: a withdrawal from systems of nourishment that mirror colonial and patriarchal authority.

Nyasha's silences—her sudden withdrawals from conversation, her physical convulsions, her inability to articulate rage in moments of crisis—signal the exhaustion of language under structural domination. In this sense, her body becomes the final site of inscription for political protest, transforming corporeal breakdown into what might be termed

insurgent quietude. Unlike Tambu's cautious narrative control or Maiguru's strategic domestic restraint, Nyasha's resistance is neither sustainable nor socially legible; it exposes the lethal costs exacted by colonial gender formations. Yet precisely because it collapses into illness, her refusal dramatizes the limits of liberal models of agency and foregrounds the violence that accompanies demands for assimilation, productivity, and feminine decorum.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Nervous Conditions* demands a reconceptualization of silence within feminist and postcolonial criticism. Rather than functioning solely as a marker of oppression or narrative absence, silence in Dangarembga's novel operates as a spectrum of embodied political practices through which women negotiate colonial pedagogy, patriarchal discipline, and nationalist aspiration. Tambu's restrained narration, Maiguru's calculated withdrawals, and Nyasha's anorexic refusal reveal differentiated strategies of insurgent quietude that complicate celebratory narratives of vocal emancipation.

By foregrounding the body as a critical archive of political meaning, the study challenges dominant theoretical models that equate resistance with speech, visibility, or overt rebellion. In doing so, it extends Spivakian debates on subalternity by demonstrating how agency may persist in corporeal, affective, and self-destructive forms that unsettle liberal-humanist frameworks of empowerment. Dangarembga's novel thus contributes to African feminist aesthetics a grammar of resistance rooted not in declarative utterance but in physical withdrawal, narrative delay, and bodily crisis.

Attending to these modes of articulation has broader implications for postcolonial literary studies. It urges critics to remain attentive to the political significance of non-verbal practices, particularly in contexts where colonial epistemologies have rendered speech both compulsory and insufficient. Silence, as *Nervous Conditions*

ultimately suggests, is neither pure submission nor transparent rebellion; it is a volatile terrain in which power is registered, contested, and sometimes fatally inscribed on the female body.

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