

Educating the Colonial Subject: Women's Schooling, Patriarchal Power, and Cultural Dispossession in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

تعليم الذات المستعمرة : تعليم النساء والسلطة الأبوية ونزع
الملكية الثقافية في رواية ظروف عصبية لتسيتسي دانغاريمبغا

Éduquer le sujet colonial : scolarisation des femmes, pouvoir
patriarcal et dépossession culturelle dans Nervous Conditions de
Tsitsi Dangarembga

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Résumé

This article examines the ambivalent function of colonial education in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), focusing on the ways in which women's schooling is represented simultaneously as a promise of social mobility and as a technology of cultural dispossession. Through a postcolonial feminist reading of Tambu, Nyasha, Maiguru and Mainini, the study argues that colonial schooling does not simply oppose tradition and modernity; rather, it reorganizes the relation between gender, language, authority and desire. The mission school and the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart provide access to literacy, prestige and imagined emancipation, yet they also produce linguistic estrangement, racial humiliation and a disciplined admiration for Englishness. Nyasha's fractured embodiment, Tambu's strategic obedience, Maiguru's educated subordination and Mainini's maternal grief reveal the gendered hypocrisy of an educational order that promises liberation while reproducing colonial and patriarchal hierarchies. By combining Fanon's account of colonial alienation, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of linguistic domination, Spivak's theorization of subaltern speech and McClintock's critique of postcolonial nationalism, the article shows that Dangarembga's novel stages education as a contested site where African women negotiate agency, loss and survival.

Mots-clés

colonial education, postcolonial feminism, Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, patriarchy, linguistic alienation, Shona identity

الملخص

يتناول هذا المقال الوظيفة المزدوجة للتعليم الاستعماري في رواية ظروف عصبية (1988) لتسيتسي دانغاريمبغا، وذلك من خلال إبراز الكيفية التي تُقدّم بها مدرسة النساء، في الآن نفسه، بوصفها وعداً بالتقدم الاجتماعي وآلية لنزع الملكية الثقافية. وباعتماد قراءة نسوية ما بعد كولونيالية لشخصيات تامبو، ونياشا، ومايغورو، ومايني، يبيّن البحث أنّ المدرسة الاستعمارية لا تقيم تعارضاً بسيطاً بين التقليد والحداثة، بل تعيد تشكيل العلاقة بين الجندر واللغة والسلطة والرغبة. فالمدرسة التبشيرية وكلية الفتيات تمنحان الولوج إلى المعرفة والهبة وإلى أفق متخيّل للتحرر، غير أنهما تنتجان أيضاً اغتراباً لغوياً، وإذلالاً عرقياً، وتمثلاً للإنجليزية بوصفها معياراً للنجاح. ومن خلال تصدع جسد نياشا، وطاعة تامبو الاستراتيجية،

وخضوع مايفورو المتعلّمة، وحزن ماييني الأمومي، تكشف الرواية عن النفاق الجندي لنظام تعليمي يعد بالتححرر فيما يعيد إنتاج الهيمنة الاستعمارية والأبوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

التعليم الاستعماري، النسوية ما بعد الكولونيالية، تسيتسي دانغاريمبغا، ظروف عصبية، السلطة الأبوية، الاغتراب اللغوي، الهوية الشونا

Abstract

Cet article analyse la fonction profondément ambivalente de l'éducation coloniale dans *Nervous Conditions* (1988) de Tsitsi Dangarembga, en montrant comment la scolarisation des femmes est simultanément représentée comme promesse de mobilité sociale et comme dispositif de dépossession culturelle. À partir d'une lecture féministe postcoloniale des figures de Tambu, Nyasha, Maiguru et Mainini, l'étude soutient que l'école coloniale n'oppose pas simplement tradition et modernité: elle reconfigure les rapports entre genre, langue, autorité et désir. L'école missionnaire et le Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart donnent accès au prestige, à la littérature et à une émancipation imaginée, mais ils produisent aussi l'étrangeté linguistique, l'humiliation raciale et l'intériorisation de l'anglicité comme norme de réussite. Le corps fissuré de Nyasha, l'obéissance stratégique de Tambu, la subordination domestique de Maiguru et la douleur maternelle de Mainini révèlent l'hypocrisie genrée d'un ordre éducatif qui promet la libération tout en reconduisant les hiérarchies coloniales et patriarcales. En articulant Fanon, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Spivak et McClintock, l'article montre que le roman de Dangarembga fait de l'éducation un lieu conflictuel où les femmes africaines négocient l'agentivité, la perte et la survie.

Keywords

éducation coloniale, féminisme postcolonial, Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, patriarcat, aliénation linguistique, identité shona

Introduction

In colonial Rhodesia, education appears in *Nervous Conditions* as one of the most coveted routes toward social distinction. It is imagined by many characters as the passage from rural deprivation to salaried respectability, from material vulnerability to professional status, and from inherited limitation to the promise of a wider world. Yet Dangarembga's novel refuses to represent this passage as a transparent progress narrative. Education opens doors, but it also disciplines the bodies and desires of those who enter. It produces aspiration, but it also produces estrangement. Above all, it affects women in a specific way, because the colonial school does not operate outside patriarchy; it often modernizes, intensifies and legitimizes patriarchal power.

The present study therefore revisits the question of women's education under colonial rule by examining the tensions that shape Tambu's, Nyasha's, Maiguru's and Mainini's experiences. The article argues that colonial education in *Nervous Conditions* functions as an ambivalent apparatus: it grants access to literacy, class mobility and critical consciousness, while simultaneously displacing African women from Shona language, kinship memory and embodied cultural belonging. The school is thus not merely a setting in the novel; it is a symbolic and institutional machine through which race, gender, class and language are reorganized.

The analysis is situated at the intersection of postcolonial and feminist theory. Fanon's account of colonial alienation helps clarify why the colonized subject may come to inhabit the colonizer's categories of value. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of linguistic domination allows us to understand why English is never a neutral medium in the novel, but a sign of prestige, exclusion and psychic division. Spivak's reflections on subaltern speech illuminate the muted suffering of Mainini and Maiguru, whose voices are present yet structurally unheard. Finally, McClintock's critique of nationalist and postcolonial masculinism reveals why women may remain subordinated even when education seems to promise emancipation.

Methodologically, the study proceeds through a close textual analysis of the novel's educational spaces: the homestead, the mission, England as imagined metropole, and the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart. These spaces are read not as isolated locations but as connected sites in a colonial geography of formation. The study pays particular attention to speech, silence, clothing, food, language choice, salary, obedience and bodily distress, because Dangarembga's critique of colonial education is often expressed through these apparently domestic details. The guiding question is therefore the following: how does *Nervous Conditions* represent women's education as both a route toward agency and a mechanism of cultural, linguistic and gendered subjection?

1. Women's Education and Cultural Conflict: The Colonial Promise and Its Costs

1.1. Colonial Schooling as Promise of Social Ascent

Babamukuru occupies a central position in the narrative economy of *Nervous Conditions*. His story appears at first to confirm the colonial promise of education. Sent at a young age to be educated by missionaries, he becomes the family's emblem of success: a man who has travelled, acquired degrees and returned with economic authority. His prestige is inseparable from schooling. He is not merely an educated man; he becomes the visible proof that Western education can transform the conditions of a rural Shona family. For Tambu, this transformation initially carries an almost salvific meaning. Babamukuru's house, his income, his mission position and his capacity to redistribute resources make him appear as the one who has escaped the constraints of the homestead.

Yet the novel immediately complicates this admiration. Babamukuru's education has not freed him from domination; it has also made him an instrument through which colonial values circulate within the family. His early exposure to missionary schooling produces a subject who has learned to associate authority, order and success with Western norms. He therefore becomes a mediator between colonial institutions and Shona domestic life. This mediating role is deeply ambivalent: he provides opportunities, but he also polices behaviour; he funds education, but he controls the women who benefit from it; he invokes progress, but he reproduces patriarchy.

The conflict between Babamukuru and Mbuya crystallizes this dilemma. Mbuya's objection to sending children away is not an irrational attachment to the past. It represents a counter-epistemology, a different understanding of what it means to educate a child. In the homestead, learning is embedded in land, work, kinship and oral history. Tambu's memory of her grandmother shows that knowledge can be transmitted outside colonial literacy. The unwritten histories she receives from Mbuya are not less valuable because they are not found in textbooks; they belong to a system of memory that colonial education tends to erase.

This tension can be described as a conflict between two pedagogies. The colonial pedagogy values abstraction, English literacy, examination and institutional certification. Mbuya's pedagogy values rootedness, oral transmission, labour, intergenerational continuity and communal belonging. Dangarembga does not idealize traditional society, since that society is also patriarchal. However, she does suggest that colonial schooling becomes destructive when it presents itself as the only legitimate form of knowledge. The problem is not education as such, but education severed from cultural memory and reorganized by colonial hierarchy.

Babamukuru's decision to take Nyasha and Chido to England is therefore symptomatic. It is motivated by paternal care and social ambition, but it is also

marked by a failure to anticipate the psychic cost of displacement. He wants to spare his children the deprivation he endured, yet he exposes them to a system that will make their return difficult. The movement to England promises privilege, but it also produces a loss of linguistic and affective continuity. In Nyasha's case, this loss will become painfully visible. Her education is not merely an acquisition; it is also a fracture.

1.2. Mbuya's Oral Pedagogy and the Limits of Colonial Literacy

One of the major weaknesses of colonial education, as represented in the novel, is its tendency to define knowledge as what can be certified by European institutions. Against this reduction, Mbuya's role must be understood as pedagogical rather than merely domestic. She teaches Tambu through stories, agricultural practice and moral interpretation. Her knowledge is situated, embodied and transmitted in relation to land. It carries historical memory and ethical orientation. In that sense, the grandmother functions as an archive of indigenous epistemology.

The phrase that the histories transmitted by Mbuya could not be found in textbooks is crucial. It implies that the textbook is not a neutral container of knowledge, but a selective colonial technology. What the textbook excludes is not simply folklore; it is a people's relation to its past. Fanon's description of colonialism as a force that distorts and disfigures the past is relevant here: colonial education often claims to bring enlightenment while producing ignorance about the colonized subject's own history. Dangarembga's novel stages precisely this paradox. The more education promises progress, the more it threatens to detach the learner from the historical conditions that would allow her to interpret that progress critically.

This does not mean that Mbuya's world is free from inequality. Tambu's struggle to cultivate her maize in order to pay school fees shows that rural life is marked by labour, deprivation and gendered injustice. However, the novel insists that the alternative to colonial schooling cannot simply be a return to an untouched tradition. Instead, Dangarembga asks whether women can enter education without losing the cultural resources that allow them to resist domination. The answer remains unresolved, and this unresolved tension gives the novel much of its intellectual force.

2. Colonial Education as Cultural Erosion: Language, Dress and the Making of Hybridity

Nyasha is the character through whom the violence of cultural displacement becomes most visible. Having spent part of her childhood in England, she returns to Rhodesia with a language, posture and self-consciousness that unsettle her

family. Her Shona has weakened, her dress appears improper to Tambu's rural gaze, and her relation to authority is marked by argument rather than obedience. At first glance, she may seem simply Westernized. Yet Dangarembga's portrayal is more complex: Nyasha is neither a caricature of assimilation nor a figure of pure resistance. She is a subject formed in-between, compelled to inhabit incompatible demands.

The loss of Shona language is one of the most decisive signs of this displacement. Language in *Nervous Conditions* is not an instrument of communication alone; it is a medium of kinship, memory and social recognition. When Maiguru observes that her children have been speaking English for so long that most of their Shona has gone, the sentence names a deeper loss. It is not only vocabulary that disappears, but a mode of belonging. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of colonial language policy is particularly useful here: colonial education works by separating the child from the language through which the world has been named, narrated and remembered. English becomes the language of advancement, but it also becomes the language of distance from the mother, the grandmother and the homestead.

Nyasha's dress is another site of cultural translation and misrecognition. Tambu's observation of the short dress that barely covers Nyasha's thighs reveals a clash of codes. The scene is not simply about modesty. It dramatizes the way the body becomes the surface on which colonial education is read and judged. Nyasha's body is interpreted as evidence of Western contamination, while her own self-consciousness indicates that she knows she is being watched and measured. The educated female body becomes a public text, exposed to familial surveillance and patriarchal judgment.

Hybridity is therefore not an abstract celebration of cultural mixture. In Nyasha's case, it is lived as anxiety, anger and bodily conflict. Bhabha's concept of hybridity can illuminate the instability of colonial identities, but Dangarembga's novel prevents any romanticization of the in-between. Nyasha's hybridity does not allow her to move freely between cultures; it subjects her to double discipline. The English world has marked her as racially inferior, while the Shona patriarchal home marks her as improperly feminine. Her consciousness becomes critical because she perceives both forms of domination, but this consciousness does not protect her from psychic distress.

2.1. Nyasha's Embodied Critique of Colonial Education

Nyasha's conflict with Babamukuru is often read as a generational dispute, but it should also be understood as an epistemological and political conflict. Babamukuru expects education to produce disciplined success. Nyasha uses education to question discipline itself. She reads, argues and interprets; she refuses to accept paternal authority as natural. This makes her dangerous within the house-

hold, not because she has been corrupted by England in a simple moral sense, but because she has acquired tools of critique that exceed the limits Babamukuru is willing to tolerate.

The father's accusation that Nyasha is no longer the kind of daughter she ought to be exposes the gendered limits of colonial education. Babamukuru values schooling when it produces prestige, income and obedience; he fears it when it produces a woman capable of intellectual dissent. The contradiction is crucial. Colonial education is praised as modernizing, yet the educated daughter is punished when she claims modernity as autonomy. In this respect, Nyasha reveals the hypocrisy of a system that encourages aspiration but disciplines female agency.

Her eating disorder and psychological breakdown can be read as the somatic form of an unresolved historical contradiction. The colonial curriculum has fed her a history that denies her, while the patriarchal home demands that she digest obedience. Hill's reading of Nyasha's body as a site where colonial history is ingested and purged remains especially persuasive. The body becomes the only space in which a silenced conflict can appear. Nyasha's illness is therefore not reducible to individual pathology; it is the bodily inscription of colonial and patriarchal violence.

2.2. Tambu at Sacred Heart: Racialized Space and Disenchanted Mobility

Tambu's educational trajectory is different from Nyasha's, yet it is governed by the same ambivalence. For Tambu, schooling initially represents escape from poverty and from the fate she associates with her mother. Her desire for education is neither naive nor purely colonial. It is grounded in concrete deprivation: hunger, labour, gendered inequality and the fear of becoming economically dependent. To dismiss Tambu's aspiration as mere assimilation would therefore be unjust. Dangarembga shows that colonial education is attractive because it responds to real social injuries.

However, the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart quickly reveals that prestige is inseparable from racial hierarchy. The school offers elite formation, but it organizes African students as exceptions, tolerated within a white institution while spatially segregated. Tambu's African dormitory is a material sign of this contradiction. She has been admitted, but not fully included. The college does not simply educate her; it teaches her where she belongs within a racial order.

The crowded dormitory, designated for African girls, functions as a miniature of colonial society. It allows the institution to claim benevolent inclusion while preserving segregation. Tambu's humiliation does not cancel her ambition, but it changes the meaning of her education. She learns that access does not equal equality. The lesson is bitter: the same institution that promises refinement and advancement also produces shame, surveillance and racial demotion.

Nyasha's warning to Tambu that Sacred Heart may teach her to forget who she is therefore proves prophetic. The danger is not simply that Tambu will learn English manners. The danger is that she will come to identify progress with the abandonment of the old ways. Her later pride in leaving those ways behind reveals the internalization of colonial temporality: Europe and its institutions are imagined as the future, while African traditions are cast as residues of backwardness. Dangarembga's critique is subtle because Tambu is not simply wrong. Some old ways are oppressive. Yet the colonial definition of progress makes it difficult for her to distinguish liberation from self-erasure.

3. The Gendered Hypocrisy of Colonial Education

The novel's critique of colonial education becomes most powerful when it turns to Maiguru. Unlike Tambu and Nyasha, Maiguru has already achieved what the girls desire: she has been abroad, earned a degree and become a professional teacher. If education were sufficient to liberate women, Maiguru should be the novel's exemplary emancipated figure. Instead, she remains economically and domestically subordinated to Babamukuru. Her case demonstrates that education can increase a woman's prestige without transforming the gendered structure that controls her labour and income.

Maiguru's salary is especially important. Money represents autonomy in the world of the novel: the ability to decide, to move, to support oneself and to resist dependency. Yet Maiguru's earnings are absorbed into Babamukuru's household authority and extended family obligations. Her labour is recognized only insofar as it strengthens his patriarchal position. The educated woman becomes a resource managed by the husband. This is not an accidental injustice; it is a structural contradiction. Colonial education can produce qualified women while leaving intact the social grammar that makes men the custodians of women's productivity.

Tambu's discovery of Maiguru's lack of financial autonomy produces a crucial moment of feminist consciousness. She realizes that schooling does not automatically generate freedom. Her sympathy for Maiguru marks a shift from individual aspiration to structural awareness. She begins to understand that the problem is not simply that some women have not been educated, but that even educated women can be deprived of the right to make use of their education.

The concept of double colonization is useful here. African women in the novel are subjected to colonial authority and to patriarchal domination. These two systems do not merely coexist; they reinforce one another. Babamukuru's patriarchal power is strengthened by colonial education, because his schooling gives him income, status and moral authority. He can present himself as rational, modern and benevolent even when he disciplines the women around him. Colonial modernity thus becomes the language through which domestic patriarchy is reorganized and legitimized.

3.1. Maiguru's Educated Subalternity

Maiguru's condition also complicates simplistic models of subalternity. She is not uneducated, voiceless or socially invisible. She has a degree and a profession. Yet her speech is constrained by marriage and by the patriarchal expectations of respectability. Her silence is not the absence of thought; it is a survival strategy in a household where open opposition carries emotional and social cost. When she briefly leaves Babamukuru, the act is powerful because it interrupts the assumption that an educated wife must remain endlessly compliant.

Spivak's famous question concerning whether the subaltern can speak does not mean that dominated subjects are literally mute. It asks whether their speech can be recognized within the structures that authorize meaning. Maiguru speaks, but her grievances are minimized, domesticated or absorbed into the family's need for stability. Her education gives her language, but patriarchy controls the conditions under which that language can matter. This is why her position is so significant: she exposes the limits of liberal narratives that equate schooling with empowerment.

3.2. Mainini and the Maternal Cost of Colonial Schooling

Mainini's role is often underestimated because she does not occupy the institutional spaces of education. Yet she is one of the novel's most important critics of colonial schooling. From her perspective, education is not a neutral opportunity. It is the force that removes children from the mother, teaches them another language and returns them as strangers. Her grief after Nhamo's death is therefore inseparable from linguistic and emotional dispossession.

Nhamo's refusal or inability to communicate in Shona with his mother dramatizes the intimate violence of colonial language. Mainini does not merely lose access to her son's words; she loses access to his transformed self. The mother tongue becomes a broken bridge. When she accuses Babamukuru and education of having taken Nhamo's tongue before taking his life, the accusation is not metaphorical only. It names the sequence through which colonial schooling first interrupts communication, then reorganizes affection, and finally produces a death that confirms the mother's exclusion from the educational project.

Mainini's resistance to Tambu's departure must therefore be read with care. She is not simply an obstacle to female education. She is articulating a historical memory of loss. She has already seen education divide her from one child; she fears the same process will claim another. Her anxiety that Tambu will return full of white ways and ideas is a maternal formulation of the postcolonial problem of alienation. In this sense, Mainini speaks from a position that formal education dismisses but the novel asks readers to hear.

3.3. Tambu's Strategic Obedience and the Ambiguity of Agency

Tambu's response to these contradictions is not rebellion in Nyasha's mode. Her strategy is endurance, obedience and calculated advancement. She accepts discipline because she believes that schooling is the only available route out of poverty. This does not make her passive. Rather, her agency is constrained and tactical. She learns to navigate authority, to please those who control resources, and to pursue her own future within structures she cannot openly transform.

This is why the grandmother's maxim, often paraphrased as the need to endure and obey, is not simply a lesson in submission. It is also a survival code for those without power. Tambu's obedience is a form of strategic compliance. She does not yet possess the language to fully criticize the system that benefits and injures her. The narrative itself, however, is retrospective. The adult narrative voice understands more than the younger Tambu can understand. This gap between experiencing and narrating allows Dangarembga to expose the seductions of colonial education without denying the necessity that drives Tambu toward it.

Tambu's tragedy is therefore not that she desires education. The tragedy is that the available form of education requires her to translate desire into self-distancing. She must learn to admire institutions that humiliate her, to accept benefactors who control her, and to imagine progress through categories shaped by colonial power. Her formation is thus a colonial *Bildung*: a process of development in which the subject gains consciousness while also learning the terms of her own subjection.

4. Discussion: Education, Double Colonization and the Politics of Memory

Dangarembga's novel is not an anti-education narrative. It is a critique of education under colonial and patriarchal conditions. This distinction is essential. The novel does not ask African women to reject literacy, schooling or intellectual ambition. On the contrary, it shows why women desire education with such intensity. Education promises food, money, movement, speech and social recognition. What the novel rejects is the colonial organization of education as cultural replacement and the patriarchal organization of education as controlled privilege.

The four female figures examined in this article represent different positions within the same historical structure. Nyasha embodies the psychic cost of being educated across colonial borders. Tambu embodies the aspirational force and moral danger of schooling as social mobility. Maiguru embodies the insufficiency of professional education when domestic patriarchy remains intact. Mainini embodies the maternal and linguistic losses that accompany the removal of children into colonial institutions. Together, they reveal that the effects of educa-

tion cannot be understood through a single opposition between oppression and liberation.

The novel also complicates the opposition between African tradition and Western modernity. Patriarchal violence is present within Shona society, and Dangarembga does not conceal it. At the same time, Western education does not liberate women from that violence; it often provides new instruments through which male authority is stabilized. Babamukuru's modernity is patriarchal; his patriarchy is modernized by colonial education. This is one of the novel's strongest insights: colonialism and patriarchy are not separate layers but mutually reinforcing structures.

A further contribution of the novel lies in its attention to memory. Colonial education tends to produce subjects who move forward by forgetting. Sacred Heart, the mission and England all promise new beginnings, yet these beginnings require the devaluation of prior forms of belonging. Dangarembga counters this by writing a narrative that remembers what education tries to erase: grandmothers' stories, mothers' grief, children's shame, women's unpaid labour and the bodily effects of cultural contradiction. The novel itself becomes an alternative pedagogy, one that teaches readers to read education historically rather than mythologically.

5. Narrative Form, Retrospective Voice and the Ethics of Education

A final dimension of the novel's treatment of education concerns narrative form itself. *Nervous Conditions* is not narrated from a position of innocent immediacy. Tambu tells the story retrospectively, and this distance between the child who desires education and the adult voice that interprets that desire is central to the novel's critique. The younger Tambu often admires the signs of colonial privilege: clothes, rooms, manners, English speech and institutional prestige. The narrating Tambu, however, repeatedly exposes the cost of that admiration. This double temporality allows Dangarembga to preserve the truth of Tambu's aspiration while also interrogating the ideological conditions that shaped it.

The retrospective narration prevents the article's central question from being reduced to whether education is good or bad. Education is shown as historically necessary, materially attractive and morally dangerous at the same time. Tambu's later voice understands that the desire to escape poverty was legitimate, but it also recognizes that colonial schooling required a tacit disavowal of the very world from which she came. The Bildungsroman structure is therefore ironized. Instead of moving smoothly from ignorance to maturity, the narrative moves through contradiction: the protagonist develops by internalizing values that she will later have to reread critically.

This narrative procedure has ethical consequences. Dangarembga asks the reader not to condemn Tambu for desiring the mission or Sacred Heart, but to understand the colonial distribution of choices that made such desire intelligible. A poor rural girl cannot be expected to reject the only institution that offers her mobility. At the same time, the novel refuses to let the reader confuse mobility with liberation. The narrative voice holds both truths together: Tambu needs education, and education wounds her; she seeks freedom, and the available form of freedom asks her to abandon parts of herself.

The same narrative ethic applies to Babamukuru. He is not a simple villain. His generosity, discipline and sense of responsibility are real. Yet the novel shows how colonial education has reorganized his imagination of authority. He believes he is protecting the family, but protection becomes surveillance; he believes he is transmitting success, but success becomes obedience to colonial and patriarchal norms. Such complexity gives the novel its human depth. It avoids moral simplification and instead demonstrates how domination can pass through affection, responsibility and the language of duty.

5.1. The School as Ideological Apparatus and Emotional Economy

Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatus clarifies the institutional role of schooling, but Dangarembga adds an affective dimension that a purely structural account might miss. The school does not discipline only by rules, timetables and examinations. It disciplines by producing longing. Sacred Heart is desirable because it is imagined as beautiful, prestigious and socially rare. Its uniforms, rooms and manners create an emotional economy in which African girls learn to desire the very institution that ranks them as inferior. Colonial education is therefore effective because it converts domination into aspiration.

This emotional economy explains why humiliation does not immediately produce rejection. Tambu experiences segregation, yet she remains attached to the promise of advancement. The institution wounds her and seduces her simultaneously. Such a mechanism is one of the most powerful insights of the novel: colonial power does not work only through prohibition; it also works through invitation. It invites the colonized subject to enter, to improve, to imitate and to become worthy according to standards that remain controlled by the colonizer.

For women, this mechanism is intensified by gendered vulnerability. Schooling offers escape from domestic confinement, early marriage, poverty and maternal exhaustion. Yet the price of that escape is often submission to another hierarchy. The girl moves from the patriarchal household to the racialized school, from one regime of discipline to another. Dangarembga's achievement lies in showing that these regimes do not cancel each other; they form a chain. The colonial school

may appear to rescue the girl from the homestead, but it also produces a refined version of obedience, one compatible with racial hierarchy and class aspiration.

5.2. From Education to Decolonial Reinterpretation

The novel's lasting contribution lies in its insistence that education must be decolonized rather than simply acquired. Decolonizing education does not mean rejecting literacy, English or institutional learning in a simplistic way. It means refusing the hierarchy that makes English the measure of intelligence, Europe the measure of civilization, and patriarchal respectability the measure of feminine success. It also means recovering the legitimacy of oral knowledge, maternal memory and indigenous languages without idealizing oppressive elements within local tradition.

In this respect, *Nervous Conditions* anticipates later decolonial debates on epistemic justice. The novel shows that epistemicide is not only the destruction of books, schools or archives; it is also the quieter destruction of confidence in one's own inherited ways of knowing. When Tambu learns to associate progress with leaving the old ways behind, she does not merely choose a school; she accepts a hierarchy of worlds. The task of decolonial reading is to make that hierarchy visible and contestable.

The article's revised argument therefore understands Dangarembga's novel as a critique of colonial education and as an alternative pedagogy. The text teaches readers how to read the school against itself. It reveals the hidden labour of women, the silenced grief of mothers, the fragility of educated daughters and the contradictions of benevolent patriarchs. By doing so, it transforms literature into a space where the history of education can be reinterpreted from the viewpoint of those who were promised liberation but often received a more subtle form of subjection.

Conclusion

Nervous Conditions dismantles the myth of colonial education as an uncomplicated instrument of emancipation. Through Tambu, Nyasha, Maiguru and Mainini, Dangarembga shows that education under colonial rule is a double-edged formation: it creates access to literacy, social mobility and critical awareness, yet it also produces cultural alienation, racial humiliation and gendered subordination. The novel's originality lies in its refusal of simplification. It neither idealizes tradition nor celebrates Western schooling. Instead, it reveals the contradictory conditions under which African women are asked to become educated subjects.

Nyasha's fractured identity demonstrates that assimilation can wound the body and unsettle the self. Tambu's trajectory shows that ambition may be both necessary and dangerous when the only available route to advancement is mediated by colonial values. Maiguru's life proves that academic achievement cannot guar-

antee autonomy when patriarchal authority continues to control women's labour and income. Mainini's grief reminds readers that education can appear as loss to those whose children are removed from language, land and maternal intimacy.

The article has argued that Dangarembga's treatment of women's education should be read as a postcolonial feminist critique of double colonization. Colonial schooling promises freedom while translating African women into subjects who must negotiate the demands of Englishness, racial hierarchy and domestic obedience. Yet the novel also preserves the possibility of agency. That agency does not appear as pure liberation; it emerges through critique, memory, endurance, refusal and narration. In giving narrative form to these tensions, Dangarembga transforms the story of women's education into a rigorous meditation on power, identity and survival under colonial modernity.

For this reason, *Nervous Conditions* remains a major text for understanding the relation between schooling and domination in postcolonial literature. It teaches that education becomes liberating only when it ceases to require cultural self-erasure, only when women's speech is heard, and only when intellectual formation is detached from the colonial and patriarchal structures that have historically claimed to civilize while dispossessing.

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