

## **Ending-Closure Tension in Postcolonial Fiction: A Study of Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions***

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to look at ending-closure tension that exists in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*. The paper also aims to look at the precarious conditions faced by the characters of the novel where the characters face the precarious condition as by many colonized people. The paper also tries to look at the portrayal of women in the novel and how the novelist challenges the general notions of the society where a young girl challenges the society and achieve her dreams. The paper tries to put Tambu, the protagonist of the novel and Nyasha to understand the ending-closure tension that present in postcolonial fiction.

**Keywords:** culture, precarity, ending, closure, postcolonial conditions

*Nervous Conditions* is a novel written by Tsitsi Dangaremba, narrating the story of the struggle of a Shona girl, Tambu who breaks free of her impoverished background and acquire education. The novel was published in 1988 and won widespread critical acclaim for its complex and nuanced portrayal of the challenges of women of the Shona community. "Shona" is a name given to various tribal groupings living mostly in the eastern half of Zimbabwe, north of the Lundi River. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangaremba focuses in particular on a small group of women who struggle to be heard and succeed in a world that often aggressively seeks silence and control them. Though in a way these women are successful in their struggle but the voices of

their victories are not grand. They do not openly challenge the state of things, throw over the repressive system, or alter the prevailing behaviors and ways of thinking. Instead their victories lie in the strength they master to navigate a world that is unsympathetic to their concerns.

The "ending" as discussed by Kermode in his book *The Sense of an Ending* as the representative of the narrative fiction as it is the postulate of an ending that makes beginning possible and makes a meaningful pattern out of the varied items of the story that fulfills the story. It is the final event presented in the novel and it provides the readers a sense of fulfillment. Closure is one of the widely studied areas in narrative theory. In his introduction to narrative theory, Abbott expresses closure as the narrative effect which has to do with a broad range of expectations and uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close. (Krisnan 1) Closure is not obligatory to a narrative but it gives a sense of completeness, importance and finality. Closure is an important part of the satisfaction of literature through which readers are able to organize stories as coherent and meaningful. Endings are not necessarily a narrative focus but scaffold the interpretation of the book and the ending in a special way allows the readers to sum the work's meaning.

The novel focuses on the story of Tambu and her struggle for education. There are only a few characters from the Shona community are presented in the novel. They are mainly, Tambu, her parents, her uncle Babamukuru, Nyasha etc. and white characters make only the briefest of appearances. The novel on the surface level can be studied as a bildungsroman novel and the struggle of the women in Zimbabwe especially of the Shona community.

*Nervous Conditions* starts with epigraph from Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The title is also influenced from his book. In the preface of "The status of the 'native'", Jean-Paul Sartre says, "The status of the 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent". The colonizer dream of substituting themselves for the colonizer and adopting his system of values, in the process adopting a conception of themselves as inferior, which created a permanent tension, a nervous condition. Fanon himself explains that afraid of being punished by colonial authorities for unintentionally trespassing routes, the colonized are fearful and always on the alert. This fear, combined with

Babamukuru's share of authoritarianism, has explained his fierce reactions to his daughter's unconventional behavior in the novel. (Khader 305)

The novel itself begins at the end as the incidents the narrators describing have already ended and she is reflecting on the incidents as an adult. The novel begins by the statement where it states the death of Nhamo who was the elder brother of the protagonist Tambu. She reflects at the death of her brother which later gave her the opportunity to be educated in the Mission School which was earlier provided to her brother. She reflects how she was not sad at the news of her brother's death who, as she has described a bully and because of his gender he has attained facilities. Her parents could only afford the education of one child and they have decided to educate her brother as an obvious choice for the well being of their family. Patriarchy plays an important role in the lives of women in Zimbabwe and they are not encouraged to get educated. One may argue that she is later allowed to receive higher education in the Mission school but that eventually happened because of the death of Nhamo and there was no other male child present in the family at that moment.

Britain colonized the area of Rhodesia on the African Continent in 1890 and it remained a part of colony till 1980 and in 1980 Rhodesia gained its independence and became Zimbabwe. The area was exploited by the colonizers for the Gold prospects and later the black citizens were stripped of their civil rights. The novel set in the 1960s where Black Nationalist groups were fighting for independence from the colonizers. The colonizing forces including England and France set up mission schools throughout Africa to educate local children in the upstanding ways of their governments. The founding belief was that native children could be educated and saved through Christianity which led by replacing traditional cultural beliefs with Christian beliefs. To make these changes, African Children like Tambu and other children in the novel were taught that the behaviours outside the boundaries of Christian morality were sinful, shameful, and primitive. African students were instructed in English or French, and because of this many children lost their native languages- as Tambu's cousin Nyasha and Chido did in the novel. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his books *Decolonizing the Mind* states the consequences of teaching in English leads to the natives attaining a dual identity which is quite disturbing.

In nations around the world, colonialism instilled a racial hierarchy that made whiteness synonymous with prosperity. In places like 1950s Rhodesia, colonialism created a system of mass assimilation, where giving up a part of their culture was a native's only path to success. The novel contains elements of the four Rs of colonialism in fragments. Resistance is the main amongst them as the female characters are often seen resisting against the norms of the society as well as against colonialism. Within Rhodesian society, the white colonialists educate the Shona people to control them. When Tambu asks her grandmother about the history of her culture, her grandmother tells her about colonialists conquering their country, a "history that could not be found in the textbooks" (Dangaremba 17). We can infer that Rhodesian textbooks do not include the tragedies of colonialism because the elite white class controls education in Rhodesia. They censor the native's education, brainwashing them with the belief that westernization should be strived for. In answer to Tambu's inquiry, her grandmother describes the colonialists as "wizards well versed in treachery and black magic" (Dangaremba 18). These wizards give Babamukuru an English education, allowing him to be successful in their society. From this story, Tambu takes away a significant message: "endure and obey, for there is not other way" (Dangaremba 19). She realizes that the only way for her to succeed in life is to assimilate into a culture that nearly destroyed her own. This shows the narrator revising the history of her own culture.

Although some of Tambu's family buys into the elitist ideas of English education, Tambu's mother does not. She resists the dominance of the colonizers in the form of education. Tambu's mother is correct. Despite that Tambu worked diligently to earn a spot at a prestigious catholic school, her race causes her to be seen as lesser. At her new school, she must share a cramped dormitory with six African girls, whereas the white girls sleep four to a dorm. Finally, she realizes that no matter how much she studies, or how many books she reads, or how intelligent she becomes, all white people will see is blackness. With this realization she begins to "question things, and refuse to be brainwashed" (Dangaremba 208). The novelist has tried to revise the old narratives about Africa and the Blacks and to re-tell the stories of the women of Zimbabwe through her narrative. Repetition can be seen in the form of Tambu's education which she uses to move out of her oppressed state but restrains herself from being totally moved away by the values of the colonizers. There is an apocalyptic sense present in the condition of Nyasha

where she struggles to attain her Shona identity but the sense of loss and of end haunts her. Thus she develops a disorder by the end of the novel.

Tstisi Dangarembga, in *Nervous Conditions*, depicts Nyasha, as a product of hybridization of British and African culture. Nyasha spent the majority of her childhood years in the United Kingdom. As a child she was forced to accompany her parents to Britain while they received a higher education. She returns to Rhodesia only at the onset of puberty and by then she attains the culture of the European. She can no longer adhere to African customs and regards the Rhodesian culture customs as a foreign concept. Usually children develop their cultural identity and skills at the age of 6-14 and learn the essential elements of one's culture. But Nyasha spent those years living in England. Even Nyasha herself realizes this. She confides in Tambu: "You know it's easy to forget things when you're that young. We had forgotten what home was like. I mean really forgotten – what is looked like, what is smelt like, all the things to do and say and not do and say" (Dangarembga 79). The skills that she required during the time she stayed in England are reflected in the simple tasks that she performs. For example, rather than eating with her hands, she eats with a fork and knife which is a British custom. She grew up immersed in Western culture. Once when she comes to Tambu's house, she wears a dress which "hardly covered her thighs" and she realizes that she "shouldn't have worn it". She also faces other internal conflicts regarding her British and African customs. She could not escape from the hybridity in a sense because of the psychological alteration that happens with her because of the conflicting cultures. She attempts to revert back to her Shona- self but to achieve that, she employed Western tactics and therefore experiences nervous conditions. She moves back and forth between the two cultures like when she comes to Africa she clings onto the Western culture and at the mission she wants to go back to the Shona culture, she even tries to find retreat in the English books.

Throughout the novel, Nyasha's internal battle between her conflicting cultures causes her behave irrationally. She is often in conflict with her parents for putting her through the traumatic experience of cultural shifts. She expresses to Tambu her desire to have remained in Africa, saying, "We shouldn't have gone... The parents ought to have packed us home"

(Dangarembga 18). Immediately, Nyasha realizes that her childhood years in England will have a negative effect on her well being during her adolescent years. Specially, her broken relationship with her parents, especially her father, is a direct impact of her time in England. More frequently, the readers can see Nyasha and her father disagreeing. While discussing her father, Nyasha remarks to Tambu, "I can't help it. Really, I can't. He makes me angry. I can't shut up when he oys on his God act" (Dangarembga 193). Nyasha's behavior in a sense can be seen as resistance against Western culture as he is a symbol of the foreign culture. The change that has to face is brought by Babamukuru's education and she rebels against the westernization brought by her father.

By examining two specific experiences before Tambu starts her life at the mission, one can see how colonialism and oppression permeate through her life. While she is living on the homestead, colonialism affects her education and independence. Within a day of living with Babamukuru's family, colonialism has already changed Tambu's journey to be educated. Babamukuru exerts his patriarchal control over Tambu through his discussion with her how she is how lucky she is to receive the education and it is a form of blessing she has received from him. He tells Tambu that his actions are going to help make her free through the knowledge and wealth education will provide her because of his generosity. While Babamukuru says Tambu is an "intelligent girl" his support of her will make her into a "good woman" (Dangarembga 89). The traditional idea of a "good woman" changes; while woman were once expected to stay at home to raise a family, Babamukuru's idea of a "good woman" is effected by colonialism. This also creates the sense of apocalypse where Tambu is moved back and forth between the two cultures.

Babamukuru's assimilation into western culture gives power to the colonialists. The white class disguises their power over the Shona as gifts of education and prosperity. Babamukuru fails to see that his western education benefits the whites and it doesn't equalize him with white men, Babamukuru's education gives him status among the Shona, creating a complex hierarchy within native society. Babamukuru's westernized life and subsequent wealth lead the Shona people to associate whiteness with success. They strive to be like him, and as a result, more Shona people assimilate into western culture. Again it is seen that Babamukuru

being educated in the Western mode of education and works as the headmaster of the Mission school. By so doing he unintentionally becomes a part of the colonizers and thus carries several values of the colonizers. He demands respect from the family and shouts when Nyasha disapprove of something he says. He wants to hold the power as the head of the family and seek attention and respect from everyone else whom he thinks to have been looking after or helping them out. He also tries to employ the ideals about women in Western cultures and often resorts to what people will think of him and his family. He even beats Nyasha for her rudeness and once Tambu for not following his orders to attend her parent's wedding. During a quarrel regarding Nyasha's late return to the mission, Babamukuru calls her a "whore" and worries about what people will view her behavior. Eventually he cries in anger, "Do not talk to me like that, child.... You must respect me. I am your father" (Dangarembga 115). This shows the authoritarian voice of the father and of the form of the colonizer in the form of Babamukuru. In one instance her father hides her book, and she demands that he should return the book due to her belief that she is entitled to the freedom to make decisions. Her demand for freedom and going against the norms of the family as set up by Babamukuru is a form of resistance, by Nyasha or by the oppressed. Nyasha's purpose of defying to her father is to reject Western ideal or the colonizer which Babamukuru represents. She also develops a disorder, bulimia while defying her father and his values. She at first objects to eat food and forced she eats it and throws up later. Her refusal to eat can also be seen as a resistance toward the Western values. To resist the force of the culture of the colonizers she eventually ruins her body. Her bulimia signifies her fight against her uncertainty and the contradictory ideologies she has experienced as a hybrid.

The patriarchal society and values set by the Shona community can be seen as an allegory of the colonizers and their values. The patriarchal society, especially the whole blood line of Babamukuru is led by Babamukuru himself. Babamukuru has attained colonial education and holds the economic power of the family and thus takes the important decision of the whole family. He is also part of the colonizers as he run the mission school as the headmaster. He expresses himself as the kind hearted head of the family who is educating Nhamo to colonize him and to lift up the financial status of Tambu's family. This is similar to what the colonizers

tried to dominate the colonized. His sense of dominance and the authoritarian power runs parallelly with the colonial values.

There always been a sense of tension goes on among the characters presented in the novel. The colony has its influence in all the lives of the characters. Tambu's parents struggles with the financial issues and a ray of hope is shown to improve their economic status by the colonial education given to Nhamo and later Tambu. Babamukuru's family heavily influenced by the colonial power and the inner conflict as a colonized is seen in Nyasha's behavior. Most of the characters in the novel have used the colonial education to rise from their present social status and many have succeeded in achieving that goal. Tambu sees her life at the mission as positive and transformative, calling it a "reincarnation" (Dangaremba 94). Her new western identity causes her to increasingly dismiss her family. She believes that herself and her cousins are "too civilized" to go back home for Christmas (Dangaremba 122). Tambu even sacrifices her relationships with her family in order to be successful in the colonialist social structure she exists within. In order to get an education, she must become westernized, and in order to keep her family, she must not forget her own roots.

To study the ending and closure tension, the structure of the novel is important. Dangarembga's narrative structure focuses on the personal journey of the narrator, Tambudzai, yet allows her to reveal crucial insights into the socio-political situations in which the journey takes place. The reflective, analytical tone of the narrative also characterizes Tambu as mature and educated, thus adding to the validity of her story and implying that it contains insight worthy of consideration. The narration of Tambudzai's development is primarily formatted to serve the classic style of Bildungsroman that traces her growth from child to adult. Dangarembga cleverly combines the Bildungsroman framework with the grown narrator in order to transfer her authorial prerogatives to Tambu, allowing her to author or narrate her story thus giving her a voice of her own. Tambu ends her narration with a final reflection on the mental turning point of her self-discovery: "Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to questions things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story" (Dangarembga 204). This marks the ending of the novel as well as the closure on the author's side. The novel eventually ends when Nyasha is moved to the clinic for

her treatment as she becomes mad and Tambu goes back to Sacred heart. The novel ends with the mature Tambu is reflecting these incidents and looking back at her younger self. The closure of the novel can be seen in two ways, one in the form of Nyasha's outburst at the end of the novel where she realizes the flaw of the English culture and tries to destroy every trace of it. This can be sense of closure in case of Nyasha and later she seeks medical help to move out of her current state of confusion and distress. The other form of closure is found in Tambu's realization of the flaws of the Western culture and education and thus resolute to question everything and refused to be brain washed.

In conclusion it can be said that there is a tension going on in the course of the novel where every character is suffering in one way or the other by the grasp of colonial values and systems. As stated earlier the novel begins at the end of Nhamo's life which marks the ending in Nhamo's side in his death. This serves as the beginning of Tambu's life in the mission and her story as well as the novel's. The narration begins at the end and moves from the course of events where each character is tormented by the newly emerging western culture and struggling in their own way. Patriarchy can be seen as a symbol of colonial power which controls the lives of the characters in the novel. The narration finds in closure in the self realization of Tambu about the effect western culture and Nyasha revealing the reason of her inner conflicts and breaks free from it. The final end of the novel is marked by the narrator looking back at her past self and reflecting actions of the people present in the novel. Babamukuru is placed as an agent of the colonizers who in a way tries to dominate his own people. The novel can be read as a bildungsroman novel or as a feminist novel which portrays the colonial state and its effects on Africa and its people.

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