

# Reverberations of Colonization: Identity, Gender and the Politics of Becoming in *Nervous Conditions*

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## Abstract

The intricacies of adapting to a foreign milieu while retaining fragments of the original are entrenched in manifold postcolonial texts, particularly in diasporic literature. Scenarios of feeling trapped in a threshold experience, accompanied by unsteady actions and a wavering mind are common among individuals of different age groups. The perpetual fluctuation between two contradictory settings or circumstances while being neither involved nor detached from both inherently prompts psychological disturbance and instability. Such liminal behaviors are apparent in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), which unravels a plethora of postcolonial elements, including diaspora, marginalization based on gender, cultural appropriation, hegemony, multiculturalism, and otherness. The paper focuses on the liminal characteristics exhibited through cultural exoticism featured in the novel and delves into the various ways in which the identity of the characters has been questioned as a result of being acclimatized to a country of a different culture. The study incorporates Arnold van Gennep's theory—Rites of Passage to elucidate the psychological dilemma of the characters as they search for their new identity while mourning their lost individuality. Gennep's theory is restricted to culture and focuses on the celebration of ritual status in varied liminal spaces such as birth, puberty, marriage, death, and so on. The paper redefines and broadens the understanding beyond anthropological lexicons and redirects the approach towards postcolonialism.

**Keywords:** Liminality, Postcolonialism, Identity Crisis, Rites of Passage, Exoticism, Psychological Dilemma.

The era of British colonial rule in Africa during the 1960s gradually marked a progressive change with the advocacy of educational rights for African citizens. The establishment of missionary schools became conducive to the educational upliftment of individuals from minority groups in Africa. After the British colonization, there existed a huge distinction between the West and the rest, as it left behind an everlasting trauma in the minds of those that were colonized.

Africa has been subjected to the unfair prejudice of colorism and was termed the “dark continent” by Europeans. Postcolonialism has brought about significant changes, affecting the status quo of countries under the British Commonwealth. Duncan Ivison, author of *Postcolonial Liberalism* (2002) defines

postcolonialism as “the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism” (Iverson). Postcolonial literature discusses the social, psychological, economic, and political impact of Western colonization.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, author of *Nervous Conditions*, is an African novelist, essayist, short story writer, filmmaker, playwright, and political activist. Born in Zimbabwe, Dangarembga was brought up in Britain from age two to six and moved to a missionary school in Zimbabwe. Years later, she returned to Britain to study medicine at Cambridge University but after becoming homesick, she shifted again to Rhodesia, where she pursued psychology at the University of Harare. Dangarembga published a play, an essay collection, two short stories, and three novels which includes *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and its sequels—*The Book of Not* (2006), and *This Mournable Body* (2018). She has also written, directed, and produced over twenty films including *On the Border* (2000) and *High Hopes* (2010). She was recognized as the first Black female novelist in Zimbabwe and has won numerous awards including the PEN International Award for Freedom of Expression in 2021 and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 1989 for *Nervous Conditions*.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a semi-autobiographical, bildungsroman, and realistic fiction that explores the difficulties of Tambudzai, a young girl who hails from an impoverished household in Southern Rhodesia, and her will to educate herself to lighten the burdens of her family. Set in 1960, this feminist novel centers on the empowerment of women in a male-dominated society. *Nervous Conditions* revolves around individuals from a particular tribal group called “Shona” and their struggle to break free from patriarchy and financial instability.

Liminality refers to a threshold between two different realms. Individuals in this transitional phase belong to neither of the two realms, signifying its ambiguous nature and disoriented order of things but with effective contribution to personal growth. Being in a liminal state or a threshold psychologically disturbs an individual as they struggle with their conflicting emotions thereby inciting feelings of loneliness and alienation because of lack of solace, belongingness, and stability. The etymology of the word is derived from Latin “limen” which means “threshold” or “in-between.” The term was first coined by French anthropologist, folklorist, and ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 book *Les Rites de Passage*, which translates to *The Rites of Passage*.

Existing studies on liminality focus on queer geographies and sexualities through spatial theory and human geography (March), use of liminality as a utilitarian motive for guiding research on cancer survivorship (Blows et al.), conceptual investigation of the interplay between liminality and consumption (Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar), liminal literary landscape in travel narratives (González and Lopez), cognitive liminality in magic realism and so on. While Christopher Okonkwo delved into liminal spaces in Dangarembga's narrative technique in his article “Space Matters: Form and Narrative in Tsitsi Dangarembga's ‘Nervous Conditions’”, the concept of postcolonial liminality in *Nervous Conditions* has not been explored till date.

Gennep's Rites of Passage in anthropological terms, refers to a social and communal celebration that takes place when an individual withdraws from a group or a phase to enter another (Libretexts). Gennep divides the theory into three stages—separation, transition and incorporation.

## 1) Pre-liminal Stage (Separation)

The first stage of Rites of Passage is where an individual detaches oneself from the familiar or is forcefully removed from the customary scheme of things. Here, an individual leaves the current status and prepares to move on to something unfamiliar or new. In terms of culture, the ceremony of marriage separates an individual from their pre-marital life where the move on to become interdependent with collective responsibilities, especially after childbirth. The pre-liminal stage refers to the phase where an individual detaches oneself from the innately inculcated scheme of things before the liminal event (Libretexts).

In *Nervous Conditions*, several characters such as Tambudzai, Maiguru, Nyasha, Babamukuru, and Nhamo, detach themselves from their familiar environment to pursue their education in England. Tambudzai dissociates from her rural culture when she leaves her home to attend a well-sophisticated missionary. She breaks free from the societal expectations placed on young girls in Africa, where it is required of them to stay indoors right from birth or quit schooling at a young age, get married, beget children or perform domestic chores. Similar to Tambudzai, Nyasha's mother, Maiguru, also breaks away from the clutches of societal expectations as she is well-educated and employed, unlike most Rhodesian women, but still is denied recognition for being a female erudite. Nyasha separates from her native Shona identity when her family moves to England. She forgets her native language and is distanced from the norms of Zimbabwean society. She smokes, and befriends boys of her age, which provokes her father as such behaviors are considered ill-suited in her native culture. Her father, whom the narrator (Tambu) refers to as Babamukuru in the novel, detaches from his traditional identity when he leaves Africa to study in England. Being the only male educated member in his family, Babamukuru was treated with utmost respect for his financial assistance and willingness to educate his brother Jeremiah's children to alleviate their impoverished condition.

Tambudzai's brother Nhamo exhibits tendencies of exoticism, a cultural phenomenon that downplays the native culture and aestheticizes the ideologies and culture of the West. He feels ashamed of his poverty-stricken background, which persuades him to stay at the mission school even during holidays. Blinded by his uncle's wealth and the richness of the West, everything else, including his family and his obligation to work on the farm, disgusts him so much that he decides to come up with an excuse of allowing him to study at the mission school to pass his examinations. Tambudzai observes Nhamo as she says, "All this poverty began to offend him, or at the very least to embarrass him after he went to the mission" (Dangarembga 7). Nhamo's arrogance in wanting to relish the academic advantages all by himself and employing crooked strategies to prevent his sister from attending the mission school displays the chauvinistic attitude of being the eldest and the only male heir in his family. It is witnessed when he questions Tambudzai: "Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? You are lucky you even managed to go back to Rutivi. With me it's different. I was meant to be educated" (Dangarembga 49). The pre-liminal stage thus marks the phase where the characters detach themselves from what they are accustomed to in search of something new.

## 2) Liminal Stage (Transition)

Liminal stage or liminality is the state of ambiguity or in-betweenness, where an individual wavers between two different realms or identities. It refers to a phase during which "one has left one place or state but has not yet entered or joined the next" (Libretexts). Although adhering to social and personal

integrity during the transition period can be challenging, it also fosters growth and experimentation enabling individuals to unlearn and relearn. The quest for identity is another fundamental factor that adds to the cultural aspect in the novel. According to Edward Said, a postcolonial thinker, the crisis of identity arises because of the problem of belongingness. Rhodesia was under the influence of the “apartheid” movement, which entails racial segregation and strictly condemns any sort of relationship between the blacks and the whites. Nyasha was forbidden by her father to interact with the whites because of his fear that such relationships would only spoil her. The constant struggle to retain her Shona identity after being habituated to the culture and language of England, psychologically traumatizes her. Patriarchal pressures and the drastic impact of cultural assimilation weigh on her physical well-being as she develops an obsession with trying to stay slim, adhering to the beauty standards of 20<sup>th</sup> century England. This appropriation of Western ideals unveils her desperate need to fit in among her white peers, which is in contradiction with her father’s approval. She becomes mentally unstable and accuses “them” (hinting at the Whites) for turning her into a hybrid of two different cultures and for estranging her from her parents. Nyasha’s actual predicament is revealed when she makes a confession to Tambudzai about why she was indifferent to her after her immediate return from England:

Actually we were frightened that day. And confused. 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 it looked like, what it smelt like, all the things to do and say and not to do and say. It was all strange and new. Not like anything we were used to (Dangarembga 78).

In Tambudzai’s case, she finds herself being caught in a quandary of righteousness and morality. Tambudzai learns about the injustice in her own country through Nyasha who enlightens her about gender disparity, racial discrimination, patriarchy, and poverty. Despite her awareness of Babamukuru’s assertion of male dominance, Tambudzai goes numb in front of him because of the reverence and the gratitude she holds for him for providing her a rare opportunity to study, something many girls in Africa yearn for. Maiguru, on the other hand, was denied from accessing her paycheck and was compelled to perform household duties in Rhodesia as a senior wife. The lack of acknowledgment for her education further disappoints her as she feels conflicted between her obligation as a wife and her inability to turn down the responsibilities that seem unappealing to her. Furthermore, despite Babamukuru’s accomplishment of becoming an erudite African man, he is still a man of culture as he never forsook his Shona culture. Though he had volunteered himself to educate the future generation of his extended family members, his mindset is still patriarchal as he refused to offer education for Tambudzai until Nhamo’s death as it had become a necessity to uplift the poverty of his brother’s family. Therefore, while incorporating progressive notions of women’s education, Babamukuru’s backwardness of masculine superiority remains intact, often causing liminal conflict and psychological turbulence.

Tambudzai’s mother strongly opposed her education as she believed that it would destroy the roots of her native language and culture. An instance of white children suffering from identity issues is also highlighted; a repercussion of the dogmatic ways of the missionaries. The confusion of bilingualism where both Shona and English were spoken with regard to people and circumstances was inherently present throughout the novel. Some Western children were taught Shona at the mission school instead of English and Tambudzai says:

Most of these missionaries’ children...did not speak English at all until they learnt it at school... because their parents sent them to school at the mission with the rest of us. I often wondered how they would

manage when they went back home and had to stop behaving like Africans (Dangarembga 104). Hence, Nyasha, Tambudzai, Babamukuru, and Maiguru struggle through liminality because of their inability to follow one particular culture, unlike Nhamo, subjecting them to emotional trauma and psychological stress.

### 3) Post-liminal Stage (Incorporation)

The final stage of Rites of Passage which involves incorporation or reintegration of individuals into society with a new status or identity after the transition phase. This phase marks the partial acceptance of an individual's emerging identity, thereby crossing the threshold, although not entirely (Libretex). Towards the end, Tambudzai realizes the significance of the heritage of Shona and also stands up to Babamukuru for interfering in the private affairs of her family. She comes out from her disoriented state as she reflects that "Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed" (Dangarembga 204). Maiguru, too, retaliates by leaving her husband's home after witnessing Babamukuru's arrogance towards Tambudzai for responding defiantly. However, Babamukuru welcomes Maiguru back home by treating her fairly with equality and respect that she deserves. The liminal conflict faced by Nyasha and Babamukuru remains unresolved and as a result, the phase of incorporation fails.

Though the African government took initiatives to educate the Black citizens along with the Whites, majority of them could not afford to utilize the opportunity. However, under the guidance of her educated and wealthy uncle, Tambudzai was able to enroll herself in a mission school and later at a convent. Gender was never an obstacle for Tambudzai, as she was resolute enough to break loose from all the external forces that she had been holding on to by embracing the benefits of Western education without completely forsaking her roots like Nyasha and Nhamo did. Nhamo's idealization of Western culture makes him to emotionally disconnect from the "shame" that he was born into. On the other hand, Nyasha's outspoken personality infuriates the patriarch, who deems it inappropriate for a civilized Black citizen. Torn between innate and acquired identities, Nyasha endures the ordeal of a psychosocial crisis. Dangarembga's fictional account successfully showcases the hurdles faced by African women during British colonisation, the impact of which persists till today and is a trauma that we are still reminded of.

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