Post-colonialism in nervous conditions

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. In Nervous Conditions, Dangarembga uses the identity struggles of her characters to show how colonialism disenfranchises native cultures. Tambu and Nyasha's assimilation into western culture diminishes their racial identity while strengthening the power of the white colonialists.

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" (17). We can infer that Rhodesian textbooks do not include the tragedies of colonialism because the elite white class control 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" (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" (19). This epiphany, the realization that the only way for her to succeed is to assimilate into a culture that nearly destroyed her own, shapes the remainder of her adolescence.

Tambu, and everyone around her, believe that Babamukuru " hadn't cringed under the weight of his poverty . . . he had broken the evil wizards' spell"

(50). The Shona people see him as their “ prince,” equalizing him with the white man (36). In part, they’re correct that Babamukuru’s western education gives him higher status than the majority of the Shona people. He lives in an “ elegant house,” with a maid who serves him tea made with a tea strainer, which without, the tea “ wouldn’t be drinkable” (74). These materialistic feats give Babamukuru and his family the illusion of power, when in fact, his western lifestyle brings his family and himself trials. Because he brought his family to England with him while he worked toward his masters degree, Babamukuru ends up with “ hybrids for children” (79). Upon returning to Rhodesia, Chido and Nyasha “ don’t understand Shona very well anymore” (42). Babamukuru tries desperately to erase Nyasha’s English identity and mannerisms, but his power is not strong enough to cut through western influence. Nyasha’s subsequent struggle to reconcile her two identities leads do a destructive eating disorder that affects her entire family.

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, however, that his western education benefits the whites. Although 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. Nhamo, Nyasha, Chido, and Tambu all receive English educations because of Babamukuru.

Tambu sees her life at the mission as positive and transformative, calling it a “ reincarnation” (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 (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.

Although some of her family buys into the elitist ideas of English education, Tambu’s mother does not. Instead of being proud that her daughter is so smart that “ even white people” are impressed, Tambu’s mother feels deep sorrow over the loss of her children to white people (184). Instead of her Shona children, all she has left is a dead son and a daughter who’s become “ a stranger full of white ways and white ideas” (187). Nyasha, Chido, and Tambu “ had all succumbed” to the Englishness (207). Tambu’s mother knows that the Englishness does more harm than good. She knows that Shona people who act white are simply “ pretenders” (54). Although they try not to be, they will always be Shona.

Of course, 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” (208).