

Victims victims  
everywhere!: getting  
to the core of the anti-  
colonial struggle an...



“ The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn’t depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on” (Dangarembga, 115). These ideas, which had been ingrained in Tambu since she was a child, came crashing down while she attended her uncle’s school. Her education there was not only one of textbooks and essays, but also an unveiling of the awful truths about the male-female and settler-native relationship that existed in her society. Her cousin Nyasha was already aware of the intricacies of these relationships and eventually had an emotional breakdown because of them. Through Tsitsi Dangarembga’s skillful writing of *Nervous Conditions*, one can see the core of the conflict between Nyasha and her parents when they examine her sudden breakdown. The dynamics of their relationship stem from the colonization of Babamukuru and Maiguru’s past and parallel the relationship of African men and women. Nyasha’s outburst hits the core of the problems that exist between her and her controlling parents. Dangarembga carefully chooses Nyasha’s words when she says, “ ‘ They’ve done it to me,’ she accused, whispering still. ‘ Really, they have” (200). “ They” refers to Babamukuru and Maiguru and the role that they have played in Nyasha’s despair. She feels that her parents have tried to suppress the person that she is and wants to be. Instead of allowing their daughter to grow into a self-assured, intelligent, sexually free young woman, they have attempted to make her an inferior, well-behaved, subordinate little girl. Babamukuru and Maiguru have taken away books that they felt Nyasha should not be reading, forced their daughter to eat when she said that she was not hungry, and even used violence to reprimand her for staying out too late with a boy.

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Nyasha has felt animosity towards her father and mother since these things have occurred. Her disdain is quite apparent from the words that she uses to address Tambu. Nyasha is very angry with her parents because she “accuses” them of oppressing her, while she also seems to be timid in letting the world know this, as she “whispers” to her cousin. This has been a continuing struggle for Nyasha as she wants to be the strong and confident young woman that she knows exists inside of her, but cannot be that way all the time as a result of her controlling parents. Much of Nyasha’s outburst concerns the unbalanced relationship that exists, as the dominant settlers do not allow the controlled natives to have any self-dignity or pride in their homeland. After explaining her own suppression, she continues to discuss her parent’s oppression saying, “‘It’s not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did!’” (ibid). Nyasha is explaining to Tambu that her parents are not to blame for the problems in their relationship, as the settlers also oppressed them during colonization. It is Nyasha’s insight into her parent’s lives that allows her to sympathize with them. She knows firsthand the hardships of fighting to be oneself and failing because of those holding her back. Just as the colonists took away the rights and-more importantly-the dignity of her parents, Babamukuru and Maiguru have taken away the privileges and happiness of their daughter. At one point during her spasm, Nyasha changes to a Rhodesian accent, one used by a white settler in Africa. She uses this voice to pretend to be a settler and then insult her father by calling him a “good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir” (ibid). This statement has many facets to it, as it applies to the treatment of Babamukuru specifically, in addition to the way that black African men were

treated as a whole. It expresses how the colonized society was thought of as inferior and forced to be obedient to the white settlers. Dangarembga shows this through the use of the term “good boy,” which implies a social hierarchy in which someone called “boy” is towards the bottom. The despair in Nyasha’s soul comes out when she asks her cousin, “‘Why do they do it, Tambu,’ she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, ‘to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they’ve done? They’ve taken us away. Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They’ve deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We’re groveling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them” (ibid). Nyasha is expressing the natives’ fundamental complaints about colonization: they are furious that they have not been allowed to be themselves in their own land, and that the relationships in their lives have suffered as a result. The psychological issues that Nyasha has been having, including her bulimia, are directly correlated to these problems. She has not been allowed to be her true self, breaking down her relationship with her mother and father. More that just losing sight of oneself, Nyasha speaks of the way that the natives have been forced into the inferior role of beggar. She mentions the groveling of Lucia, Jeremiah, and Babmukuru; all three are people of varying respectability in the eyes of Nyasha. She relates to Lucia as they are both strong females, dislikes her uncle Jeremiah because he constantly lets down his family, and hates Babamukuru because of the ways in which he controls her. These individuals show that all types of colonized people are forced to grovel, whether they are male or female, rich or poor. The final portion of Nyasha’s emotional unveiling can be understood on different levels, as both the heart of the anti-

colonial struggle among the natives and settlers, in addition to the fight between men and women in African society. As Nyasha begins to rock her body back and forth she reveals, “‘ I won’t grovel. Oh, no, I won’t. I’m not a good girl. I’m evil. I’m not a good girl.’ I touched her to comfort her and that was the trigger. ‘ I won’t grovel, I won’t die,’ she raged and crouched like a cat ready to spring” (ibid). On one hand, Nyasha is referring to the fight between the natives and the settlers. This is only one interpretation, as she is a determined native that refuses to be subjected to a life of begging and inferiority. Dangarembga’s other point is that Nyasha, as a female, refuses to grovel to the men around her. She is an adamant young woman that has been battling with her father for some time, and is proclaiming that she will battle with the men in her life in the future before lowering herself simply because she is female. This parallel, of the settler to the native as the man is to the woman, is one of the most important points in *Nervous Conditions*. Earlier in the novel, Nyasha was refused to grovel to her father after staying out too late with a boy. When she struck her father he furiously retaliated back, creating a stressful situation for all involved. “ Nyasha fell on to the bed, her miniscule skirt riding up her bottom. Babamukuru stood over her, distending her nostrils to take in enough air” (114). In this image, Nyasha is physically beneath her father while he is in a fit of rage, creating a physical representation of the role of men and women in African society. This scene can be interpreted sexually, as it appears that Babamukuru is capable of raping or sexually assaulting his daughter from his current position. Because she grew up during a period of colonization, Tsitsi Dangarembga is extremely knowledgeable about the struggle between the natives and the settlers. As a

female maturing during this same time period she knows the exact parallels that exist between the settler-native relationship and the male-female relationship. Through intricate characters like Nyasha, Dangarembga has successfully brought the reader to the heart of the anti-colonial struggle, while also showing the parallels to the male and female dynamics in African culture.