

Nervous Conditions, Tsitsi Dangarembga

Historical Overview for Rhodesia/Zimbabwe:

Present-day Zimbabwe was the site of a large and complex African civilization in the 13th and 14th centuries. It was populated by descendants of the Bantu tribes, who had migrated from the north around the 10th century. Mainly pastoral, evidence of their lifestyle may be seen in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, near the present-day town of Masvingo. The first contact with Europeans was at the end of the 15th century, with the Portuguese, who were largely concerned with their colonies in Angola and Mozambique on either side of Zimbabwe. In the 1830s, the region was thrown into upheaval by the northward migration of Ndebele people from South Africa. The Ndebele conquered the indigenous Shona people. Later in the 19th century British and Boer traders, hunters, and missionaries also started encroaching on the area.

A new aggressive breed of colonists arrived in the form of British mining interests led by Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSAC). In 1888 British imperialist Cecil Rhodes extracted mining rights from King Lobengula of the Ndebele. In 1889 Rhodes obtained a charter for the British South Africa Company, which conquered the Ndebele and their territory (named "Rhodesia" in 1895 after Cecil Rhodes) and promoted the colonization of the region and its land, labor, and precious metal and mineral resources. Both the Ndebele and the Shona staged unsuccessful revolts against white colonialist encroachment on their native lands in 1896-1897.

In 1911 the territory was divided into Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia, which was governed by the BSAC until it officially became a British colony in 1922. In 1953 the two parts of Rhodesia were reunited together with Nyasaland in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, but this dissolved in 1963, and Southern Rhodesia was renamed Rhodesia. African majority governments formed Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland; a white-minority government led by Ian Smith in Rhodesia reacted to the possibility of decolonization declared unilateral independence in 1965. The white-minority regime declared itself a republic in 1970. It was not recognized by the UK or any other state, other than white minority led South Africa under apartheid. This triggered a bitter civil war between the white minority government and fighters for African independence, ending only in 1980, with the granting of independence and the holding of a general election under British auspices, which was won decisively by Robert Mugabe's ZANU party. Even a decade after independence, whites who made up less than 1% of the population held 70% of the country's commercially viable arable land.

Defining Colonialism:

Deep, racialized structural inequality is created through forceful oppression, one which materially profits the oppressor. However, the colonizer justifies this overt material inequality through a narrative of civilization and development that:

- 1) describes the colonized as inferior and attempts to eradicate and replace their "other" culture (for within it may lie cultural resources for resistance)
- 2) erases (through a historical amnesia) the oppression and inequality that created *and* perpetuate conditions of poverty

The colonized (e.g. Tambu and her family) experience a radical, traumatic decentering of the self, but not as a one-time occurrence. Rather, it is a planned, everyday, self-replicating form of violence—psychological and physical—that makes the colonized into an *always already* inadequate and injured

subject. Men and women experience this process in gendered ways, for they must contend with the gender categories and norms of their own culture, of the colonizer, and the combination of the two.

How does feminism fit into this picture? (Importance of gender analysis, not as an additive thing, but as a mode of thought that fundamentally changes how we understand social phenomenon like colonialism, by examining the gendered dimensions that undergird it.)

Third World women often find themselves suspicious of Western “liberatory” feminism as an extension, part and parcel, of colonialism. It collapses them into a single image—as victim of their own culture—and aims to make them over in the image of the West. They have feminist voices of their own that in addition to fighting colonialism also struggle to make the independent postcolonial nation accountable to continuing and new forms of gender inequality.

Link to a BBC interview with Tsitsi Dangarembga on the role of women in contemporary Africa:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4370007.stm>

EPost Assignment :

For the reading assigned for Thursday, February 1, you are required to post a two-paragraph response to one of the following questions. These posts must be made by midnight on 2/1 to receive credit. Students will also post a 1-paragraph response to another student’s posting. These posts must be made by midnight on 2/2 to receive credit.

- 1) What do you think are the “nervous conditions” referred to by the title of Dangarembga’s novel? How do they apply to the various characters in the novel? Are these conditions impacted or caused by colonization?
- 2) What do you learn from Tambu’s responses/reactions to the following situations:
 - when she goes to sell her mealies in the town
 - when she sees Nyasha upon her return from England
 - when Nhamo goes to the mission school
- 3) Compare Tambu with her mother and her grandmother. How do their attitudes about themselves, family, and whites differ? Have gender categories changed over time?