

Utilitarianism versus Universalism in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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ABSTRACT

In her widely acclaimed novel, *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga has used irony with such artistic finesse that many readers seem to miss the subtle indirect satire ranged against Tambudzai, the narrator and implied author of the novel. Tambudzai, the sixteen-year old girl from whose point of view the story is told, is an innocent but unreliable narrator. She misinterprets the facts not purposely, but naively. However, the narrator's presentational style of her thoughts and feelings is so compelling and honest that she wins the general sympathy of the readers. In fact, her narrative voice has such a ring of truth that some readers have assumed that she necessarily represents the views of the author. This wrong-headed assumption has often misled readers into neglecting what I think is the primary and timeless statement of the novel. The impetus of this article is to show that in *Nervous Conditions* Dangarembga uses the subject of sexual and colonial domination to invite readers to reflect on two contending philosophies of life: universalism, adopted by Nyasha, and utilitarianism to which all the other characters subscribed.

Keywords: patriarchy, colonialism, universalism, utilitarianism

UTILITARIANISM VERSUS UNIVERSALISM IN DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*

In *Nervous Conditions*, as far as the narrator's reliability is concerned, Dangarembga has employed a paradoxical narrative strategy, which is both challenging and stimulating. In the novel, facts of the story are accurately observed but naively misinterpreted by the narrator, an innocent sixteen-year old girl, Tambudzai. However, the narrator's presentational style of her thoughts and feelings is so compelling and honest that she wins the general sympathy of the readers. In fact, her narrative voice has such a ring of truth that there are at least three legitimate ways of misreading *Nervous Conditions*. First, one can assume that the narrator, who is the implied author of the novel, necessarily represents the views of the actual author. In that case one misses the subtle ironic tone of the novel. Second, one may be tempted to endorse the narrator's estimation of the moral worth of the other characters. In that case one ignores the testimony by example provided in the novel – the actions and motives of the various characters. Third, one may believe that the central preoccupation of this novel is with the problems attending the dual levels of domination, patriarchal and colonial. In that case one confounds the subject of *Nervous Conditions* with its theme. The

impetus of this essay is to show that the main concern of Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (hereinafter *NC*) is to critically examine the meaning and value of human existence. She uses the subject of domination in the form of patriarchy and colonialism to invite readers to reflect on two contending philosophies of life: universalism adopted by Nyasha, and utilitarianism to which all the other characters subscribed.

Utilitarianism, as used in this essay, refers to a doctrine, which regards human comfort as the ultimate good. It is a philosophical outlook that encourages human beings to take positions which will maximise their comfort and minimise their suffering. As a method, utilitarianism judges the correctness of ideas in terms of their results or consequences. The appropriateness of a decision is gauged on the basis of a costs-benefits analysis. On the other hand, universalism is a moral doctrine that proclaims the equality, dignity and liberty of all human beings. It is a philosophical standpoint, which assumes that those ideals cannot be a matter of bargaining. Its method is principled idealism. People should strive to live as dignified human beings irrespective of the consequences. Nyasha was the only character who was almost unswervingly inspired by that philosophy of life. To illustrate this point, it will be convenient now to compare and to review in some detail the behaviour of the major characters in the novel. That is the focus of the following section.

Due to their self-consciousness, human beings normally entertain an image or a dream of what they consider to be the good life worth striving for. At a personal level, that vision is what psychologists refer to as the “Ideal I”. Babamukuru’s vision is very limited, both, in its nature and scope. For him, good life means economic prosperity, not for all the people, not even for all Africans in colonial Rhodesia, but for his own extended family. Babamukuru’s decisions and actions were actuated by a keen desire to ensure that members of his family did “not go hungry. They live in a comfortable home. They wear decent clothes” (Dangarembga 1988: 45). In his relentless pursuit of that dream, Babamukuru was willing to do anything, no matter how despicable. His policy was “endure and obey, for there is no other way” (Dangarembga 1988: 19). His endurance and unquestioning obedience endeared him to the missionaries. “They thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator” (Dangarembga 1988: 19). For him education was important, not because it sharpened one’s critical powers, but because it was a passport to a good job which would enable a person to have good food, decent clothes and a comfortable home. He harboured a strong distaste for any type of intellectual or moral thinking, which questioned the *status quo*. When Nyasha was reflecting on a Sunday sermon which urged members of the congregation to render unto Caesar what was Caesar’s, she said to her mother, “it is all very well to render unto Caesar what is his, but who was to say what was Caesar’s? Caesar. Then everything would be his! As always, I was impressed by her mental agility, but Babamukuru was irritated by it” (Dangarembga 1988: 100). He was irritated because Nyasha’s train of thoughts ran counter to his endure-and-obey policy. To

question the moral or political authority of the Caesars of the day was to jeopardise their bread.

From Babamukuru's perspective, the point at issue was not whether one's moral or intellectual position was right or wrong; but whether that position was prudent or useful. For several reasons, Babamukuru did not want to take up the scholarship to study in England. However, he dared not decline the offer because "to decline would have been a form of suicide. The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them and they would have taken under their wings another promising African in his place" (Dangarembga 1988: 14). He did what the missionaries bid him to do, not because he was convinced, but because he was afraid of losing his bread. As it were, Babamukuru was so dominated by the Mephistopheles of consumerism that the colonial oppression under which the people of Rhodesia suffered did not concern him at all, so long as he could provide food, clothing and shelter for his family. In fact, in a way, even his indifference to the racial oppression of blacks was itself actuated by his pragmatic policy of craving for the approval of the authorities. He managed to win that approval. "The authorities thought Babamukuru was a good African. And it was generally believed that good Africans bred good African children who also thought about nothing except serving their communities" (Dangarembga 1988: 107).

Unfortunately for Babamukuru, his daughter, Nyasha, did not want to be a "good African" as defined by the authorities. Nyasha's behaviour threatened his social standing as a "good African". As a remarkable testimony of Babamukuru's lack of self-esteem, he censured what he considered as Nyasha's gross misbehaviour not on rationally or morally defensible grounds, but on the basis of "What will people say of me when my daughter behaves like that?" (Dangarembga 1988: 100). Just because others behaved or did not behave in a particular way, was no reason for one to follow their example or to worry about their approbation. And that was precisely what Nyasha said to her father: "You've taught me how I should behave. I don't worry about what people think so there's no need for you to" (Dangarembga 1988: 114).

Babamukuru who grovelled to the authorities because they gave him his bread, demanded and expected unquestioning obedience from those who depended on him for their basic needs. He said to Nyasha, "*I* expect you to do as *I* say. Now sit down and eat your food" (Dangarembga 1988: 83), "You must learn to be obedient, Babamukuru told Nyasha and struck her again" (Dangarembga 1988: 115). According to him, pride was Nyasha's undoing. "She is proud. That is her problem. She is proud" (Dangarembga 1988: 115). From his point of view, success, in material terms, hinged on one's capacity to swallow one's pride and obey the powers that be. On the habits that Babamukuru wanted her daughter to acquire, the narrator says, without noticing the barbed irony in her self-praise:

I was a paragon of feminine decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to, and then only to answer with utmost respect whatever question had been asked. Above all, I did not question things. It

did not matter to me why things should be done this way rather than that way. I simply accepted that this was so... I was not concerned that freedom fighters were referred to as terrorists, did not demand proof of God's existence nor did I think that the missionaries, along with all other whites in Rhodesia, ought to have stayed at home. As a result of all these things that I did not think or do, Babamukuru thought I was the sort of young woman a daughter ought to be and lost no opportunity to impress this point of view upon Nyasha (Dangarembga 1988: 155).

When Tambudzai refused to go to the belated church wedding of her parents, she became a bad girl and Babamukuru threatened to withdraw his material support and to send her back to the village. He used a similar threat to Nyasha, "If she doesn't want to do what I say, I shall stop providing for her – fees, clothes, food, everything" (Dangarembga 1988: 189). Babamukuru considered his relatively better position as a result of the kindness, and generosity of those whites who had singled him out for special elevation among millions of unfortunate blacks, and for which he was eternally grateful. His benefactors were like his gods who had to be obeyed and served with reverence and gratitude. He expected the beneficiaries of his kindness and generosity to treat him like a god whose wisdom could not be questioned. He expected total obeisance from all members of his extended family. It is worth noting that with the exception of Nyasha, there are striking parallels between the behaviour of Babamukuru towards the authorities and the behaviour of other characters towards Babamukuru.

Like Babamukuru, Jeremiah's vision was not self-transcendent. His dream was merely to have the basic amenities of life, to live in "a brick house with running water, hot and cold, and lights, just like Mukoma" (Dangarembga 1988: 5). Like Babamukuru, his strategy was to follow the wishes of his benefactors regardless of his own opinions. "My father had always been ingratiating in Babamukuru's presence" (Dangarembga 1988: 31). He knew that was what his benefactor wanted. He accepted with nauseating alacrity anything said by his brother, not out of conviction, but out of expediency. When Babamukuru decided to let Nhamo stay with him at the mission Jeremiah knelt down in homage to Babamukuru who "belched magnanimously" (Dangarembga 1988: 47). Jeremiah endured a humiliating church wedding in his old age because to do so was more useful than to incur his brother's displeasure. In fact, Babamukuru was so pleased with his unquestioning obedience that he donated to the couple his modern village house. In appreciation of Babamukuru's decision to allow Tambudzai to go to Sacred Heart College, Jeremiah knelt down before him and said, "Truly, we would not survive without you. Our children would not survive without you. Head of the family, princeling, we thank you" (Dangarembga 1988: 183). When his wife fell sick, Jeremiah decided to seek the services of a traditional healer. He only abandoned that decision because her daughter threatened to notify Babamukuru who disapproved of traditional mediums. In principle, both,

Babamukuru and Jeremiah believed in the same goddess, even if they differed in their styles of worship.

Despite her constant references to Babamukuru as her “Daddy sweet”, Maiguru had no real affection for him. She obeyed and served Babamukuru with slavish devotion because she believed to do so would maximise her comfort and minimise her pain. She was so determined to avoid the hardships of life that she willingly sacrificed her freedom in exchange for security. Maiguru was intelligent enough to see that her husband’s outbursts against their daughter were unfair and even irrational. Yet, she dared not confront her “Daddy sweet”. To do so would be unwise. Even when Nyasha tried to reason with her father, Maiguru’s advice was, “Nyasha, try to be quiet,” and when Babamukuru threatened to stop providing for Nyasha if she did not finish her food, again, Maiguru’s advice was, “Nyasha, eat your food” (Dangarembga 1988: 189). In both cases, and in several others, her advice was not based on her satisfaction that to do so was right, but rather because to do so was useful.

In a case that involved Lucia and Takesure, Babamukuru and other men had clearly violated the rules of natural justice when they listened to that case in the absence of the accused. Quite significantly, when Maiguru was invited to state her stand, she found herself caught up in a difficult situation. She could not afford to displease her husband, and she could not say that the men were being fair to Lucia, the accused. She decided to be evasive. She said, “This matter is not my concern... I don’t want to intrude into the affairs of my husband’s family. I shall just keep quiet and go to bed” (Dangarembga 1988: 138). At one point, however, even Maiguru realised that material comfort and happiness did not always coincide. She decided to tell her husband the truth and face the consequences:

Let me tell you, Babawa Chido, I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being a housekeeper for them. I am tired of being nothing in a home, I am working myself sick to support...And when I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this house (Dangarembga 1988: 172).

Since Babamukuru knew that his wife was a utilitarian at heart, he intimidated her with his standard threat, “Then go where you will be happy, he snapped, and departed to his office” (Dangarembga 1988: 172). Contrary to everyone’s expectations, Maiguru was prepared to pay the price. She left. After a five-day break with Babamukuru, she somewhat regained her dignity and self-respect. “She smiled more often and less mechanically, fussed over us less and was more willing or able to talk about sensible things. Although she still called Babamukuru her Daddy sweet, most of her baby-talk had disappeared” (Dangarembga 1988: 175). Maiguru’s principled idealism in that particular case, was but a fleeting spark against a dark backdrop of utilitarianism. Even after her return, Maiguru was essentially submissive towards her husband. She obeyed and served him. And like Babamukuru, she also expected and enjoyed to see those who were

economically weaker to obey and serve her. “Maiguru rang the little silver bell, that sat next to her. The sound brought Anna hurrying to kneel beside her” (Dangarembga 1988: 82).

Like Babamukuru, Nhamo’s dream was to lead a decent life in terms of material comfort. He boastfully said to Tambudzai:

I shall wear shoes and socks, and shorts with no holes in them, all brand new, bought for me by Babamukuru. He has the money. I will even have underwear – a vest and pants. I shall have a jersey in winter, and probably a blazer too. I shall stop using my hands to eat. I will use a knife and fork (Dangarembga 1988: 48).

There are interesting points of contact between Nhamo and Babamukuru. Babamukuru’s behaviour was actuated by a keen desire to impress and to please his authorities because they had the power to uplift him. Nhamo’s behaviour was motivated by an earnest yearning to win the approval of Babamukuru because he had the money to buy him the good things of life. Nhamo who usually avoided manual labour, worked “like an archetypal labourer” when he knew Babamukuru was going (Dangarembga 1988: 7). Commenting on Nhamo’s penchant for ingratiating himself, the narrator says, “Nhamo took after my father in the way that he could effuse over anything that was necessary” (Dangarembga 1988: 37). After being singled out for special favours from the whites, Babamukuru severed his political links with other Africans. After being singled out for special promotion at the mission, Nhamo vowed to forget his own identity, “I shall no longer be Jeremiah’s son”, he declared (Dangarembga 1988: 48). And after just one year at the mission, Nhamo was proud to demonstrate his self-induced amnesia, “He had forgotten how to speak Shona” (Dangarembga 1988: 52). If Babamukuru bowed to the whites, Nhamo, like his father, Jeremiah, grovelled to Babamukuru, “they always looked as though they were cringing” (Dangarembga 1988: 50). Nhamo thought his sister, Tambudzai “would be better off with less thinking and more respect” (Dangarembga 1988: 51), Babamukuru tried to compel his daughter to adopt that proposition. They both believed, and testified by their own behaviour, that it was very unwise to allow independent thinking to override material comfort.

Like other characters mentioned above, Lucia’s behaviour was primarily guided by an ardent craving for self-gratification. If Babamukuru was prepared to endure anything in exchange for material goods, Lucia was willing to do anything to gratify her appetites. She was so dominated by her appetites and impulses that to satisfy them, she was willing to sleep with any man, including her sister’s husband. Like Babamukuru, Lucia was guided not by principles, but by convenience. She said to Tambudzai, “Don’t worry about things that don’t concern you, ... When the time comes when it is more convenient for me to go than to stay, then I shall go, isn’t it?” (Dangarembga 1988: 153–154). When she felt that it was useful for her to worship Babamukuru in order to get and to maintain her job at the mission, she did so:

“Babamukuru has found me a job!” She knelt in front of Babamukuru, energetically clapping her hands. “Thank you, Samusha, thank you Chihwa. You have done a great deed. Truly, we could not survive without you...” My mother came hurrying with her own shrill ululations... and she knelt worshipping beside Lucia. Then it was Maiguru’s turn to take her place on the floor. “Thank you, Baba, thank you for finding Mainini Lucia a job” (Dangarembga 1988: 158–159).

Nyasha who was saddened by Lucia’s willingness to bargain her dignity with bread, said, “And what about poor Lucia! She’s been grovelling ever since she arrived to get Daddy to help her out” (Dangarembga 1988: 160). It is interesting to note that when Lucia came to know about Nyasha’s disapproval of her worshipful attitude, she said, “But you, Nyasha, are you mad! ... Babamukuru wanted to be asked, so I asked. And now we both have what we wanted, isn’t it?” (Dangarembga 1988: 160). In other words, she knew that Babamukuru’s bruised ego enjoyed to play a god. He wanted the needy to supplicate to him with reverence and awe. By prostrating herself to him she got what she wanted, and Babamukuru’s ego was satisfied. Any other course of action was nothing but madness. *Endure and obey, for there is no other way*. Occasionally, Lucia, like Maiguru, could speak out her mind. She courageously confronted the men-only assembly that denied her the right to be heard. It is open to debate, though, if Lucia stormed into the room because she was a fierce defender of a moral principle, or because it was expedient for her to do so considering that her personal interests were at stake. At any rate, there is no doubt that, without fear or favour, she did speak out her mind to Babamukuru about Tambudzai’s punishment. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that Lucia was a pragmatist to the core.

Like Nhamo, Tambudzai regarded creature comfort as the ultimate good. She was very bitter against Nhamo and she disliked her parents and “in fact everybody”, not because she subscribed to universalism like Nyasha, but because she was denied the opportunity to advance herself (Dangarembga 1988: 12). When she got that opportunity, following Nhamo’s death, she behaved like Nhamo. Unlike Nhamo who ingratiated himself to Babamukuru without any apology, Tambudzai entangled herself in elaborate self-deception. She made a fine distinction between wisdom and cowardice, and she thought she was being wise. Upon careful reflection, Tambudzai was not as unlike Nhamo or Maiguru as she thought she was. Eventually however, painful reality crushed into her fine web of self-deception.

It would seem to us that in *NC* the author uses non-satiric humour to invite readers to laugh at Tambudzai’s simplicity; but that they should do so without losing any of their sympathy for her. Dangarembga’s ironic tone can be detected from the contrast between Tambudzai’s inability or unwillingness to understand, and the putative readers’ superior insight. It can also be seen from the discrepancy between what the narrator says and what she does later. The fact that in *NC*

readers observe Tambudzai from within, and this naturally elicits strong affection and sympathy with her feelings may blind the unwary from detecting the fine ironic tone of the novel.

The author expects her readers to take into account the narrator's innocence and naivete. Discerning readers would not share the narrator's simple-minded opinion that Babamukuru and his wife were offered the scholarship to study abroad because the missionaries were so anxious to ensure that they became "useful to their people" (Dangarembga 1988: 14). Probably, that was the good reason given by the missionaries. The real reason, however, was that the missionaries had satisfied themselves that the couple was "cultivable, in the way land is, to yield harvests that sustain the cultivator" (Dangarembga 1988: 19). And it is quite noticeable that the above statement has a tinge of disapproval. Likewise, it is quite revealing that Tambudzai was, justifiably, disgusted and saddened by the cowering attitude of her father and her brother. Jeremiah and Nhamo "always looked as though they were cringing" (Dangarembga 1988: 50). Her estimation of Babamukuru, however, is out of step with reality when she says:

Babamukuru, I knew, was different. He hadn't cringed under the weight of his poverty. Boldly, Babamukuru had defied it...Babamukuru was now a person to be reckoned with in his own right. He didn't need to bully anybody any more. Especially not Maiguru, who was so fragile and small she looked as though a breath of wind would carry her away. Nor could I see him bullying Nyasha (Dangarembga 1988: 50).

Tambudzai's romantic view of Babamukuru's high self-esteem, unhappily, is countered by the fact of Babamukuru's despotism. Subsequent evidence demonstrated that Babamukuru was as domineering and, by implication, as despicable as the others were. The comparison is meant to alert readers to the possible affinity of character between Babamukuru and the others.

When Nhamo was leaving for the mission, he boasted without any apology, "I shall no longer be Jeremiah's son" (Dangarembga 1988: 48), and he also made it quite clear that he would not worry himself at all about his biological parents or his sisters. According to Tambudzai, Nhamo spoke of their "father's name in such derogatory tones that for once I was up in arms on my father's behalf" (Dangarembga 1988: 48). The satirical contradiction was that Tambudzai behaved like Nhamo when it was her turn to leave for the mission. The author indicates her disapproval of Tambudzai by using a very gentle indirect satire. Tambudzai says:

How can I describe the sensations that swamped me...on the day I left my home? There was no room for what I left behind. My father, as affably, shallowly agreeable as ever, was insignificant. My mother, my anxious mother, was no more than another piece of surplus scenery to be maintained, of course to be maintained, but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the path of my departure. As for my sisters, well, they were there...When I stepped into Babamukuru's car I was a peasant. You could see that at a glance...This was the person I was leaving behind. At

Babamukuru's I expected to find another self,... (Dangarembga 1988: 58).

Like Nhamo, Tambudzai also disowned her self-identity. She was desirous of acquiring a new self. Unlike Nhamo, Tambudzai ensnared herself in self-deception. She managed to convince herself that the squalid condition at the village was not conducive to spiritual development. At the mission, she would have the leisure to invigorate her consciousness and to reflect on more fundamental issues of human life. "This new me would not be enervated by smoky kitchens that left eyes smarting and chests permanently bronchitic" (Dangarembga 1988: 59). The comic effect of her statement comes from the contrast between what observant readers recall and what Tambudzai seems to have conveniently forgotten. Among the enduring lessons of history which Tambudzai learned from her grandmother was that her grandfather, lured by an intense desire for "riches and luxury and driven by the harshness of the homestead, took himself and his family to one of their wizards' farms. Yuwi! Only to find that they had been enticed into slavery" (Dangarembga 1988: 18). Like her grandfather or Nhamo, Tambudzai is enchanted by the promise of luxurious ease and comfort at the mission and is repelled by hardship and squalor of the homestead. In the case of Nhamo, life at the mission did not enliven, it killed, his nerve. And Nhamo did not care. On the other hand, life at the mission sapped Tambudzai's vitality and enfeebled her nerve without entirely obliterating it. Unlike Nhamo, she was disturbed by that development. Commenting on her ingratiating grins, she recalls:

I do not know how I came to be like that. If you remember, when I was at home before I came to the mission, I could assert myself and tell people what was on my mind. So I suppose that in spite of my success and settling down well, my going to the mission was such a drastic change that it unnerved me (Dangarembga 1988: 110).

Insightful readers know that what had transformed a once forceful and vibrant girl into an unassertive and recoiling young woman was her inordinate fascination with material comfort and her fear of penury and hardships. To speak out her mind was unwise because to do so could jeopardise the realisation of her dream. In fact she did not approve of Nyasha's critical thinking because she "thought it was not safe" (Dangarembga 1988: 97).

Her most debilitating blind spot was to imagine that she would buy her dignity and self-respect with money. "Money would do all this for me" (Dangarembga 1988: 183). As a result, she carefully avoided taking a principled stand on issues that could displease her god, Babamukuru. She deluded herself that by postponing the struggle for justice, she was being prudent. "I thought I was wise to be preserving my energy, unlike my cousin, who was burning herself out" (Dangarembga 1988: 116). Babamukuru's plans for her parents' church wedding, threw Tambudzai into a painful state of cognitive dissonance. She knew the

proposed wedding was a mockery, but she could not afford to incur the wrath of her benefactor. She was jolted into confronting her own self, and she acknowledged that life at the mission had insidiously enervated her:

I knew I had not taken a stand on many issues since coming to the mission, but all along I had been thinking that it was because there had been no reason to, that when the time came I would be able to do it. Coming to the mission...had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position. It had happened insidiously (Dangarembga 1988: 164).

For once, like Maiguru, Tambudzai dared to disobey Babamukuru, and she was prepared to pay the price. Rather than participate in the cruel joke at the expense of her parents, Tambudzai was willing to forfeit all privileges. Babamukuru threatened “to stop buying me clothes, to stop my school fees, to send me home, but it did not matter any more” (Dangarembga 1988: 167). In that particular episode, she resembled Nyasha in her willingness to sacrifice material goods and comfort for the sake of an ideal. Like Maiguru, Tambudzai’s idealism was but an exceptional interlude in her life-long philosophy of utilitarianism.

To her credit, Tambudzai instinctively diagnosed political amnesia as the most infectious disease threatening her at the mission. The life of luxurious ease at the mission could easily and imperceptibly lull one’s intellect into forgetting the suffering of the vast majority of the people of Rhodesia. Quite unsurprisingly, the fear of forgetting loomed so large in her consciousness. She says, “Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven. I was in danger of becoming an angel or at the very least a saint, and forgetting how ordinary humans existed – from minute to minute and from hand to mouth” (Dangarembga 1988: 70). Unfortunately, she could not avoid that danger despite repeated reminders from her well wishers:

Don’t forget, don’t forget, don’t forget. Nyasha, my mother, my friends. Always the same message. But why? If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that, of course, could not happen. So why was everybody so particular to urge me to remember? (Dangarembga 1988: 188).

Her perplexity generates non-satiric humour as a result of the sharp contrast between what she says and what she actually does. While acknowledging that it was good for her to go home and stay with her mother and to take care of her during the vacations, like Nhamo, Tambudzai “always hated leaving the mission” (Dangarembga 1988: 108). Likewise, she forgot Nyasha, Babamukuru and Maiguru. As far as her home was concerned, she says, “and if I had ever really missed my home, I had long since stopped doing that during my stay with Babamukuru” (Dangarembga 1988: 195–196). Nyasha wrote to her several times, but Tambudzai did not get the time to reply. When Nyasha stopped writing, Tambudzai was too busy to notice. And quite ominously, she began to justify her

amnesia. Even as her cousin, Nyasha was suffering in a hospital, she longed to go back to Sacred Heart. "I told myself I was a much more sensible person than Nyasha, because I knew what could or couldn't be done" (Dangarembga 1988: 203).

Quite significantly, at the very end of the novel, Tambudzai realises, what intelligent readers knew all along, that she was not more sensible than Nyasha. She verbally endorses what Nyasha stood for. Despite her lip profession of the need for critical thinking and steadfastness of action, readers have no way of knowing how she actually behaved in the turmoil of real life, outside the novel. In the novel, Tambudzai behaved like Nhamo, Jeremiah, Babamukuru or Maiguru.

Despite her human weaknesses and her errors of judgement, it is Nyasha, and not Tambudzai, who is the leading interpreter of the novel. Unlike the other characters, Nyasha stood for genuine universalism. She believed in, and fiercely defended, the equality and dignity of all human beings. The proper course of action, according to her, was for people to act out of their convictions, and not out of fear. She said to Tambudzai:

You can't go on all the time being whatever's necessary. You've got to have some conviction, and I'm convinced I don't want to be anyone's underdog. It's not right for anyone to be that. But once you get used to it, well, it just seems natural and you just carry on. And that's the end of you. You're trapped. They control everything you do (Dangarembga 1988: 117).

Nyasha was disappointed by the tendency of her father and the other characters to uncritically accept anything handed out to them by the colonisers, like a sponge absorbing any type of water. She said, "It's bad enough...when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end" (Dangarembga 1988: 147). Unlike the other characters in this novel, Nyasha's vision was self-transcendent. Her mission was broader than self-gratification. It incorporated more people than just her family members:

But Nyasha's energy, at times stormy and turbulent, at times confidently serene, but always reaching, reaching a little further than I had even thought of reaching, was beginning to indicate that there were other directions to be taken, other struggles to engage in besides the consuming desire to emancipate myself and my family (Dangarembga 1988: 151–152).

Since she was concerned about the rights of all human beings, she devoted a lot of her time studying the problems facing other downtrodden people. She read about the Arabs and the Palestinian question, about the Jews and the Nazis, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, about the best form of government, about productive forces and production relations before and after the onset of colonialism in Rhodesia, and about the implications of Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence. She resolutely struggled against all forms of oppression or

degradation. While Maiguru took for granted Anna's submissive attitude, and Tambudzai soon grew indifferent to it, Nyasha was always irritated when Anna knelt down before her. "For heaven's sake, Anna, stand up!...Every time you come in here I tell you not to kneel down, but you keep on doing it. What's the matter with you?" (Dangarembga 1988: 79).

It is quite evident that *NC* is dominated by the symbolism of food. Food is used as a byword for all that is good. It stands for material comfort and satisfaction. All characters, except Nyasha, made bread the object of their striving. They devoted themselves with passionate avidity, to its search and to its consumption. Nyasha thought people should not live by bread alone. What was important according to Nyasha, was not to fill the belly with good food, but to fill the head with good thoughts. "I don't mind going to bed hungry,...what I need is a good read" (Dangarembga 1988: 82–83). To Nyasha the philosophy of utilitarianism was indigestible; she embarked on a diet "to discipline my body and to occupy my mind" (Dangarembga 1988: 197).

Her principled idealism inspired her to struggle for what she believed in to the bitter end. When she challenged her father, Nyasha's brother, Chido, thought she was unwise to court their father's wrath, "The little fool... Why does she always have to stand up to him?" (Dangarembga 1988: 113). Despite the pain which her decision to confront her father caused to all of them, Nyasha said, "I can't just shut up when he puts on his God act" (Dangarembga 1988: 190).

From her own independent thinking, Nyasha realised that assimilation was the greatest danger facing the elite in a colonial situation. The marvellous opportunities open to the elite few induced them to forget:

To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others – well really, who cared about the others? So they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself (Dangarembga 1988: 178–179).

Nyasha was convinced that even at its richest, life, which was inspired by nothing except utilitarianism or consumerism, was not worth living. It reduced human beings to the level of self-gratifying beasts. Such people lose their dignity and independence. They tend to grovel. Nyasha was the only character who refused to grovel and for which she was considered mad:

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 grovelling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him...I won't grovel. Oh no, I won't (Dangarembga 1988: 200).

NC is a novel, which uses patriarchy and colonialism to illustrate the charm and perils of utilitarianism. In real life, as in the novel, people who are inspired by genuine universalism are always in short supply. In difficult situations people tend to abandon their cherished principles and to embrace expediency. Rather than suffer political persecution, exile or economic hardships, many university professors and even religious leaders chose to prostrate themselves before Hitler. Many people are entrapped into acquiescing in their own dehumanisation because they find the prospect of maximising their material comfort and minimising their suffering, quite attractive. How many people are willing to speak out their minds and risk losing their jobs? And in order to assuage their guilt, some people, like Tambudzai, would not consider such behaviour as cowardly or grovelling, but rather as a mark of wisdom.

Although the subject of *NC*, whose setting is in colonial Rhodesia of the late 1960s, is patriarchy and colonialism, its goal is to stimulate readers into reflecting on a very common human weakness – the love of property and comfort. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville in his magisterial work, *Democracy in America*, noted a similar problem. Commenting on how preoccupation with material well being hindered Americans of the day from concerning themselves with more important issues, de Tocqueville (1956: 266) says:

Consider any one of them at any period of his life, and he will be found engaged with some new project for the purpose of increasing what he has; talk not to him of the interests and the rights of mankind, this small domestic concern absorbs for the time all his thoughts, and inclines him to defer political agitations to some other season. This not only prevents men from making revolutions, but deters men from desiring them.

It would seem to me that in *NC*, Tsitsi Dangaremba raises broader and more fundamental questions than “the retrieval of [Shona] traditional culture” as Phillips (1994: 100) suggests. The novel’s subtle ironic tone appears to challenge the popular view about Tambudzai’s “superior status of the interpreter” suggested by Ada Uwakweh (1995: 78) in her otherwise insightful reading of the novel. Trained as a medical doctor, Dangaremba has applied to literature the medical distinction between symptoms of diseases, which are easily observable, and causes of diseases, which are not. Even when readers agree about the facts provided in the novel, they might legitimately dispute each other’s interpretation of those facts. *NC* deserves more attention than it has so far received.

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