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# The Intellectual Woman's Cage: Complicating Ideals of Fanon's "Native Intellectual" in *Nervous Conditions*

## **Abstract**

This paper examines—through a post-colonial lens— Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*. In particular, this paper analyzes the characters of Tambu, Nyasha, and Maiguru and how their Western education allows them to fit into their roles as "native intellectuals." Imposing Franz Fanon's phases of becoming a "native intellectual" onto these strong, educated female characters greatly complicates his term and process. The idea of the native intellectual is most often applied to men. However, in terms of Dangarembga's work, it is the female characters that rise to this title. In this acquisition of education the female characters are truly "between two worlds" as they battle both the colonizing culture and the intense patriarchy of their own.

## **Keywords**

*Nervous Conditions*, Franz Fanon, native intellectual, female intellectual, postcolonialism, Tsitsi Dangarembga

## ***The Intellectual Woman's Cage: Complicating Ideals of Fanon's "Native Intellectual" in Nervous Conditions***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines—through a post-colonial lens—Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel Nervous Conditions. In particular, this paper analyzes the characters of Tambu, Nyasha, and Maiguru and how their Western education allows them to fit into their roles as "native intellectuals." Imposing Franz Fanon's phases of becoming a "native intellectual" onto these strong, educated female characters greatly complicates his term and process. The idea of the native intellectual is most often applied to men. However, in terms of Dangarembga's work, it is the female characters that rise to this title. In this acquisition of education the female characters are truly "between two worlds" as they battle both the colonizing culture and the intense patriarchy of their own.*

### **Fanon and the Native Intellectual**

Frantz Fanon describes the intellectual native as a man between two worlds. For this principle he outlines three phases by which the native intellectual will develop (Fanon 153). The first is a complete assimilation into the Western culture. The second is a remembrance or recognition of the past, his childhood, the culture torn apart by imperialism. From this remembrance will spring a hatred, an anger in the native intellectual (154). The anger will also bring about the third phase in which the native intellectual becomes the "awakener of the people;" he draws attention to the oppression and leads his people in the fight, which will inevitably be violent (155). Yet Fanon approaches this topic of educated natives and their place in society from a strictly male lens. The language he uses is traditionally masculine (Nair 132). He describes the violence and "muscular prowess" needed to fight, the characteristics he attributes to the natives are almost always masculine in nature, and in the entire work he only references three women (132).

However, Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* presents two strong,

African female characters who also happen to possess a Western education. According to Fanon's logic, that now brands them "native intellectuals." The characters of Maiguru and Nyasha complicate Fanon's idea of the intellectual native as found in his article "On National Culture." These characters are females born into the patriarchal Shona society, yet they have the Western education that Fanon claims places them on the outskirts of their own culture. Contrary to Babamakuru, the only Western educated African male in the novel, the females are not worshipped or revered by their family; they are still forced to respect and play the roles of traditional women throughout the novel. Their education has effectively trapped them between these two worlds that Fanon spoke of and unlike their male counterparts there is no way to blend the two together and fight against the Western oppression. They cannot undergo the three phases Fanon has laid out for the native intellectuals; they cannot rebel or participate in the violent uprising Fanon predicts because of their own culture's patriarchy and their subservient roles. They are stuck in the transitional phase between the colonial era and post colonialism with no

escape because of their status as women and the roles they are still forced to play.

In his article “On National Culture” Fanon states that the native intellectuals of a recovering culture have anxiety surrounding the Western culture (153). He claims “these men” have to be wary not to be consumed by this culture and lose their connection to their people, thus forcing them to be “men between two worlds” (154). The Western colonizers are not merely content with controlling a nation and manipulating it; Fanon argues that the colonizing power belittles and devalues the colonial nation’s history from before Western influence and tries to decimate the culture entirely.

Therefore Fanon states that the intellectuals—these men—then angrily search and cling to any aspect of their native culture that existed before the shadow of colonialism fell upon them and shy away from any lingering Western influence. It is with this anger that they begin to rebel and use their duality to fight the oppressive Western nation. However it is only the men in Fanon’s model who are able to be so passionate about reconnecting to their own, native culture because according to Fanon they are in danger of “losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people” (154). Therefore they must bridge the gap between the worlds and research and implement a traditional national culture that will counteract the colonizer’s influences (155). Though Fanon remains pessimistic towards this system and is critical of the native intellectual, he still defines its properties in a strictly patriarchal way. However, because of this violent resurgence of the traditional national culture, this ideal can never be fully realized by the intellectual women of the colonized nation. In a great many traditional African societies, such as the Shona society depicted in *Nervous Conditions*, women are

seen as vastly inferior to men. They clean, cook, and produce children and under all circumstances must listen to and obey the men in their lives. This is why the female characters in Dangarembga’s novel become so important when considering Fanon’s “native intellectual.” The men between two worlds and the women between these same worlds suffer a much different plight.

The educated women of the colonized world exist in a transitional place; they are caught somewhere between the first two of Fanon’s phases. They are indeed “between two worlds” as Fanon states, but not in the way the men of the same nations are. While assimilation has occurred, and they are placed back in the native culture, the remembrance of the national culture is not the ideal for women. Therefore they cannot progress further and are effectively trapped. This gray area is well defined and outlined in Miki Flockemann’s essay. While this article covers a much wider focus than just *Nervous Conditions*, it details that gray area the educated women of Africa are put in. She describes the gradual process of trying to shift black, African women from the “object” to the “subject” (Flockemann 38). It is an interesting and grueling process because of the male-centered traditions of many African cultures. The experiences Tambu has with Western education expose her to the injustices of the patriarchal system (42). This article illustrates the plight of educated women in Africa and shows the inequality that exists between the Western educated men and women within a traditional African culture.

### **Intellectual Hysterics: Maiguru**

The highest educated woman present in *Nervous Conditions* is Tambu’s aunt, Maiguru. Maiguru is the matriarch of the family; her name literally means “Big

Mother.” She receives this honor because she is married to Babamakuru. He is the Western educated miracle of the family. He is revered and almost worshipped by his entire family for this education. Tambu’s father Jeremiah even states, “Truly our prince has returned today! Full of knowledge. Knowledge that will benefit us all!” (Dangarembga 36). There are many other examples such as this throughout the novel which point to the respect and position Babamakuru holds within the family simply because of his Western education. He is the perfect example of Fanon’s native intellectual. He is assimilated, yet holds onto the patriarchal beliefs of the Shona culture, and he is also shown to be quite forceful and violent throughout the novel. However, his wife does not fit so neatly into the ideal. After living with her aunt and uncle for a short time, Tambu is surprised to discover that Maiguru has achieved a Master’s Degree (101). Tambu then proceeds to ask her aunt about this degree and why no one knows about it. They have a short, but powerful exchange where Maiguru confirms she did study alongside her husband in England. Incredulously Tambu states, “I thought you went to look after Babamakuru. That’s all people ever say” (102).

This elicits an impassioned response from Maiguru that highlights the plight of a Western educated African woman Fanon is not able to acknowledge. The narrator perfectly captures the scene.

Maiguru was more serious than she had ever been before. Her seriousness changed her from a sweet, soft dove to something more like a wasp. ‘That’s what they like to think I did,’ she continued sourly. The lower half of her face, and only the lower half, because it did not quite reach the eyes, set itself into sullen lines of discontent. She bent

over her books to hide them, and to prove that she was not unhappy at all she made a chuckling sound, I think she thought gaily, but sounding pained. ‘Whatever they thought’, she said, ‘much good did it do them! I still studied for that degree and got it in spite of all of them—your uncle, your grandparents and the rest of your family. Can you tell me now that they aren’t pleased that I did, even if they don’t admit it? No! Your uncle wouldn’t be able to do half the things he does if I didn’t work as well!’ (102-103)

The dialogue in this paragraph shows Maiguru’s intense frustration with the situation she has been thrust into. When she lists the members of Tambu’s family, giving ownership to Tambu with the pronoun “your,” she demonstrates the fierce, traditional patriarchy still present within that family that she can no longer fit into without question. Maiguru is rejecting the remembrance and embracement of the national culture that Fanon states is a crucial step in the process of the intellectual native. Although Tambu’s uncle is her husband she cannot truly be in that family or fully embrace that culture because of her status as a woman and a native intellectual. Therefore, she is pushed out of her traditional world and forced to suppress the Western educated one. Her duality has caused her to rest outside of both societies, but she is unable to bridge the gap because she is a woman and this has caused a sense of hysteria and helplessness. That comes to a climax when she finally speaks her mind, confronts Babamakuru, and leaves. Yet in the passage above the narrator is clear to point out that the “lines of discontent” never reach her eyes (Dangarembga 102). This shows that even though her situation is

distressing the traditional ideals her husband steadfastly clings to are the rules she lives by and it is ultimately why she comes back. This, in turn, proves that even though she is educated, she is unable to have the same experience as that of an educated man.

Her visible frustration and passionate response also exemplify what Supriya Nair identifies as “intellectual hysterics.” In her article, Nair specifically addresses the differences between the men and women trapped in a postcolonial world (131). She even cites Fanon’s article to highlight the masculine-centered approach to post colonialism and the effect it has on the native population (133). Her term “intellectual hysterics” is meant to reference the condition of the intellectual women of the postcolonial world (135). Traditionally women are seen as weak creatures prone to hysterics. Nair asserts that many critics of Dangarembga’s novel have focused on Tambu’s and Nyasha’s passionate need for education, passing it off as a psychosis (133). The fact that her father actively refuses to invest in her education proves that the women of the society that exists in *Nervous Conditions* are not seen as equal and any attempt to stray from the societal norm is met with anger and in some cases violence. The women in this novel are seen as crazy and are accused of witchcraft by the men. Their resistance and passion for knowledge and education is seen as a pathological impulse rather than a basic human right (133). It fits perfectly into the idea that the educated women within *Nervous Conditions* do not have the luxury of simply being “between two worlds.” In the example of Maiguru’s response to Tambu’s family telling her she went to England to “look after Babamakuru” it is clear that her experience as an educated African is distinctly different than her male

counterpart and she cannot fully progress as a native intellectual (Dangarembga 102).

### **Intellectual Rebellion: Nyasha**

Another character that exemplifies the difference between intellectual men and women in colonized Africa is Maiguru’s daughter Nyasha. She holds a unique and troubling role in Dangarembga’s novel because she is the only educated woman that actively resists the traditional culture. While Maiguru and Tambu passively recognize and ultimately accept the roles they are being forced to play, Nyasha aggressively rejects the Shona culture. She is the female character that is most able to embody Fanon’s ideals surrounding the intellectual natives, yet even she is not able to fully embody it. She has spent the majority of her adolescence in England, so she has almost completely assimilated to the Western culture (Dangarembga 35). Tambu is appalled to learn that Nyasha does not even remember her mother tongue (42). The loss of her traditional language shows that Nyasha has almost completely assimilated into the Western society. She is content to forget it and wishes to return to England. Therefore, she can never complete the second phase of the native intellectual’s journey because as a woman she would be foolish to cling to a culture that perceives her as inferior. Katrina Thompson describes Nyasha’s relationship with language and how it relates to her place in both worlds. By the time Tambu is introduced to Nyasha she both speaks and thinks in English, and so speaking Shona makes no sense to her (Thompson 56). However, this inability to speak Shona causes a huge disconnect between Nyasha, her family, and the Shona community. In Shona society she would have to cook, clean, and serve the men around her and it is quite clear in Tambu’s first meeting of her that Nyasha is not

content to do these things. The conflict within Nyasha becomes so great that Thompson asserts this is where her eating disorder stems from (57). Nyasha's inner conflict with language and culture proves that she is unable to meld the two culture together like her male counterparts and cannot move past the colonial era.

Another passage in the novel shows that Nyasha is ready and capable to participate in the violence Fanon states is necessary to progress past colonialism. It occurs after Nyasha, Tambu, and Chido return from the school dance. Nyasha sends the other two ahead to stay outside with a boy. When she finally enters the house a heated and violent exchange occurs between Babamakuru and Nyasha. When Tambu, the narrator, enters the scene she observes Nyasha's brother complacently watching the argument unfold; he does nothing to help his sister and simply remarks "The little fool. Why does she always have to stand up to him?" (115). Nyasha's brother, a man, does not believe she should stand up to their father. As a girl Nyasha should be grateful and blindly obey her father. He believes she should concede to Babamakuru and admit she was wrong so the whole scene is avoided. However, after Babamakuru is concerned about what people will say and accuses Nyasha of being a whore Tambu observes that Nyasha becomes oddly calm. Nyasha invokes the Western ideal that she was brought up to "not care what people think" (116). This assertion again shows her assimilation into British culture and the completion of Fanon's first step. Yet the scene continues as Babamakuru declares she has to respect him because he is her father. The scene reaches crisis when Babamakuru begins to beat Nyasha. While he repeatedly strikes her, he says,

'Never,' he hissed, 'never,' he repeated,

striking her other cheek with the back of his hand, 'speak to me like that.'

'Today I am going to teach you a lesson,' he told her. 'How can you go about disgracing me? Like that! No, you cannot do it. I am respected at this mission. I cannot have a daughter that behaves like a whore.' (116)

The instant Babamakuru begins to physically beat Nyasha he has done two things. The first is reassert the violence Fanon speaks of in regards to the intellectual native fighting the colonizing culture, in this case represented by Nyasha. But he has also illustrated the second phase in which the traditional national culture—Shona traditions—is passionately clung to. The things he asserts while he strikes her prove that he is more concerned with the standards women in the Shona community are held to than the wellbeing of his own daughter. The need for Babamakuru to enforce his will as her father through violence shows his adherence to the traditional Shona patriarchy. Nyasha, however, is also a native intellectual so she reacts in the same manner as her father. After pleading with her father to cease his assault and various unsuccessful attempts from the family to stop him, Nyasha finally gains enough composure and punches him in the eye (117). While it is the same violence Babamakuru chose, it is met with a much different reaction. The narration that follows that one punch is very telling to both the Shona culture and Nyasha's plight as a woman native intellectual. It reads,

Babamakuru insisted he would kill Nyasha and then hang himself. 'She has dared,' he said, sweat pouring off him, his chest heaving with the grossness of the thought, 'to raise her fist against me. She has dared to challenge me. Me! Her

father. I am telling you,' and he began to struggle again, 'today she will not live. We cannot have two men in this house. Not even Chido, you hear that Nyasha? Not even your brother there dares to challenge my authority. Do you hear what I am saying, do you hear? Your salvation lies in going away from my house. Forever. Otherwise,' he spat in her face because, still securely held, he could not strike her, 'otherwise I-will-kill-you.' (117)

This quotation shows the traditional Shona belief that if the child dares lay a hand on the father he must first kill the child, then himself. The fact that Babamakuru evokes this gruesome tradition highlights his adherence to the traditional culture in resistance to the colonizer. He states that not even her brother would dare strike him, which indicates that even if Chido chose to hit Babamakuru it would be slightly better than what she had done simply because he is a man. This reinforces the patriarchy the intellectual women in Tambu's family are forced back into. Also, the relationship that often exists between a father and his daughter is drained from Babamakuru in this scene. He has reverted back to the traditions and is willing to either kill his own daughter or banish her to save face in the eyes of the Shona community. He has to be physically restrained in order to spare his own daughter, because she is a woman challenging him. This violent clash occurs because of their status as native intellectuals and the fact that an intellectual woman and intellectual man in colonial Africa cannot have the same experience. Although Nyasha is also educated in the Western style, she is not willing or able to conform to the traditions of her father's people. Her punch is effectively the violent act of rebellion that Fanon predicts in his article, yet because she

is a woman it is not successful. She has skipped the second phase and because of that she will always be trapped in between two worlds that do not understand her.

Unfortunately, since Nyasha is the closest to Fanon's model she is not able to cope with the conflicting cultures in the same way as her mother and Tambu do throughout the novel and it leads to some harmful behaviors. While Maiguru and Tambu are still tethered to the rural homestead and the Shona culture in some way, Nyasha has managed to completely break off (Flockemann 42). As a result she no longer understands where she belongs and her alienation from both cultures leads to a strained relationship with her parents and an eating disorder (Flockemann 42). Regardless, Nyasha is perhaps the best example of how it is impossible for an educated woman in a colonized society to have the same experience as an educated man, and Fanon's ideal of the native intellectual is much more complicated than he first lays out.

## **Conclusion**

The idea of the "native intellectual" as purposed by Frantz Fanon in his article "On National Culture" is a primarily male-focused argument. According to Fanon the native will undergo three phases in the process of overcoming the oppressive colonizing power. However, these phases do not take into account the situation of the intellectual women in these colonized countries. Their experience is much different than that of the intellectual man, because of the inclusion of the traditional national culture and this complicates Fanon's ideas. The second step in the process, of remembering and reverting back to the traditional culture, often puts the educated women at a disadvantage. Their status as

intellectuals prevents them from completing all of the steps and ultimately traps them within the colonial era. Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* illustrates this difference through the characters of Maiguru and Nyasha. Both of these women were educated and spent a significant amount of time in the West, and therefore have gained status as native

intellectuals, yet they are unable to have the same experience as their husband and father because they are women. Their experiences and reactions show that Fanon's native intellectual becomes much more complex and unattainable when women are entered into the equation.

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