

Education as Liberation or Erasure? Decolonizing Identity in *Nervous Conditions*

Naeemah J. Alrasheedi

Department of English and Literature, College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, P.O. Box 6640, Buraidah 51452, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—This paper explores the complexities of freedom within the framework of colonial education, particularly through the lens of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). At the heart of this analysis is the paradox of education as both a means of empowerment and a vehicle for cultural displacement. While Tambu initially views schooling as a path to self-determination, her journey reveals the deeper ideological forces at work—forces that require assimilation at the cost of identity and belonging. The paper examines the psychological and cultural toll of colonial education, the role of indigenous knowledge as resistance, and the necessity of decolonizing learning spaces to foster true liberation. Engaging with postcolonial and feminist theorists, this study argues that freedom must be redefined beyond the boundaries of colonial epistemologies. True liberation, as suggested by *Nervous Conditions*, is not granted by the system but must be reclaimed through the integration of indigenous perspectives, language, and self-determination.

Index Terms—colonial education, indigenous knowledge, cultural alienation, identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Freedom takes on multiple dimensions, shaping social, cultural, and personal autonomy. Social freedom allows individuals to engage with their communities without imposed restrictions, while cultural freedom safeguards heritage, language, and traditions. Personal freedom, deeply tied to self-determination, enables individuals to pursue aspirations without coercion. Within the colonial context, these facets of freedom were systematically undermined, with colonial education serving as a primary tool for reinforcing control. Instead of fostering intellectual empowerment, colonial schooling reshaped perceptions, conditioning individuals to accept Western ideals while displacing indigenous knowledge and traditions.

Colonial education was never intended to uplift indigenous populations but to sustain imperial dominance. It functioned as a strategic mechanism for embedding Western ideologies, languages, and worldviews while discrediting and marginalizing indigenous systems of thought (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). By privileging European histories, philosophies, and languages within curricula, colonial schooling alienated students from their cultural foundations, creating deep psychological and cultural rifts that persisted across generations (Fanon, 1963). The systematic suppression of native languages further entrenched power hierarchies, ensuring that influence remained firmly within the hands of the colonizers (Wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Yet, paradoxically, colonial education also introduced avenues for self-awareness and resistance. Though designed to condition compliance, it inadvertently provided access to intellectual frameworks that some students used to challenge colonial narratives and reclaim their identities. This contradiction is central to the experiences depicted in *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga, 1988), where education serves as both a means of restriction and a pathway to self-discovery.

Set in colonial Zimbabwe during the 1960s and 1970s, Dangarembga's novel explores how colonial education shapes personal and collective understandings of freedom. Tambu, the narrator, initially perceives education as an escape from gender-based oppression. She believes that academic success will afford her independence and mobility, freeing her from patriarchal constraints. However, as she progresses in her studies, she comes to understand the cost of this perceived freedom—her deepening detachment from her Shona roots and the internalization of colonial ideologies, which challenge her sense of belonging (Dangarembga, 1988). Nyasha, by contrast, experiences the psychological toll of cultural displacement. Having spent her formative years in England, she struggles to reconcile her Westernized identity with her Shona heritage upon returning to Zimbabwe. While her education exposes her to systemic oppression, it also isolates her, leading to profound alienation and distress (Dangarembga, 1988).

Nervous Conditions (1988) reveals the profound consequences of colonial education, not merely in terms of academic instruction but in shaping identity, self-perception, and agency. By examining the trajectories of Tambu and Nyasha, this paper explores the paradox of education in a colonial context—how it simultaneously empowers and confines, enlightens and estranges. Dangarembga's work underscores the urgency of decolonizing education to restore cultural autonomy and redefine what it means to be truly free.

Thus, this paper interrogates the intersections between education, freedom, and identity in *Nervous Conditions* (1988), arguing that genuine liberation necessitates a radical reimagining of knowledge systems that foreground indigenous voices. Tambu and Nyasha's divergent experiences highlight the enduring struggle for educational and cultural self-determination

in postcolonial societies. By engaging with Dangarembga's text through the lens of decolonization, this study contributes to broader discussions on the role of education in both sustaining and dismantling systems of oppression.

II. EDUCATION AS OPPRESSION: NYASHA AND CULTURAL SCHIZOPHRENIA

Nyasha's struggle with colonial education is not merely intellectual—it manifests in her deteriorating mental health. She is acutely aware that her British education has distanced her from her cultural roots, making her feel like an outsider even within her own family. This internal conflict leads to physical and emotional distress, culminating in episodes of self-harm, disordered eating, and violent outbursts, particularly directed at her father (Dangarembga, 1988). These symptoms reflect a deeper existential crisis. Nyasha is caught in a system that invalidates her identity at every turn, leaving her with no stable sense of self. Her education has forced her into a state of intellectual isolation, where she cannot fully belong to either her Westernized schooling or her indigenous heritage. The struggle to reconcile these identities contributes to her psychological turmoil, illustrating the long-term consequences of colonial indoctrination.

Fanon (1963) describes this condition as a psychological fracture, where the colonized subject experiences “a permanent state of nervous tension” due to their inability to fully assimilate into the imposed colonial structure (p. 93). Fanon's argument highlights that this state of nervous tension results in long-term identity fragmentation and can manifest in both psychological and physiological distress. Memmi (1965), in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, further reinforces this idea, arguing that colonial education creates an impossible standard for the colonized to achieve, leading to a constant state of self-doubt and anxiety. Nyasha embodies this tension—she understands the oppressive nature of colonialism yet cannot escape its psychological grip. She is both hyperaware of her marginalization and incapable of altering her situation, which intensifies her frustration and distress.

The pressure to conform to patriarchal and colonial expectations exacerbates Nyasha's distress. Babamukuru, who represents both the father figure and the colonial authority, imposes strict rules that reflect the Western moral order he has internalized (Dangarembga, 1988). His rigid stance mirrors what McClintock (1995) describes as “the domestic sphere of imperial power,” where patriarchal authority is intertwined with colonial rule, reinforcing domination at both familial and societal levels (p. 234). Nyasha's rebellion against his authority—whether by talking back, refusing to eat, or challenging his views—can be read as an attempt to reclaim autonomy in a system that denies her agency. However, her resistance is met with severe consequences, reinforcing the idea that colonial education, rather than liberating, often serves as a form of subjugation. The psychological violence Nyasha endures is a direct response to her refusal to conform to either her father's patriarchal expectations or the broader colonial system that devalues her.

Mohanty (1991) argues that colonial education does not simply impose Western ideals onto colonized women—it also fails to recognize their unique struggles at the intersection of race, culture, and colonial oppression. Nyasha's plight exemplifies this reality. While she has access to the privileges of Western education, it does not shield her from the racialized and gendered oppression that comes with being a Zimbabwean woman under patriarchal rule. Instead, it isolates her further, leaving her without a community in which she fully belongs. Her inability to find solidarity among her family or peers deepens her alienation, leading her toward self-destructive behaviors.

Lorde (1984) argues that the psychological toll of oppression often results in self-negation, where individuals internalize societal devaluation and turn it inward as self-hatred. Nyasha's eating disorder, self-harm, and aggressive outbursts reflect this pattern. Her struggle is not just with external oppression but also with the internalized trauma that colonial education has instilled in her. She sees through the structures that oppress her, yet she lacks the power to dismantle them, leaving her trapped in a destructive cycle.

A. Language and Nyasha's Alienation

Wa Thiong'o (1986) asserts that language is central to identity, and when an individual is forced to abandon their native tongue, they are effectively stripped of their cultural grounding. The imposition of English as the language of education and power reinforces colonial hierarchies, making fluency in English a marker of intelligence and progress while devaluing indigenous languages. For Nyasha, language becomes yet another barrier that prevents her from fully integrating into her cultural heritage. She speaks English fluently, yet her grasp of Shona is weak, creating a disconnection between her and her family members (Dangarembga, 1988). This linguistic alienation deepens her sense of displacement, reinforcing the notion that colonial education distances individuals from their indigenous roots.

Spivak (1999) discusses how colonial education often imposes Western linguistic structures that override indigenous ways of thinking and speaking, leading to further alienation. Nyasha's frustration at not being able to articulate her emotions in Shona reinforces this argument. Her identity crisis is compounded by the fact that English, the language of the colonizer, has become her primary mode of communication. While this grants her access to the intellectual tools of Western education, it also distances her from her cultural heritage, deepening her psychological struggles (Dangarembga, 1988). Spivak's analysis of the silencing of the subaltern applies to Nyasha, as she struggles to find a space where she can fully articulate her identity without being dismissed or misunderstood.

The psychological impact of linguistic alienation is further explored by Fanon (1967), who asserts that language is not just a means of communication but also a carrier of cultural values and identity. Nyasha's preference for English over Shona reflects her colonial conditioning, yet it also isolates her from her community, reinforcing her status as an outsider.

This loss of linguistic connection exacerbates her psychological turmoil, illustrating how colonial education operates not just through institutional structures but also through language and communication.

B. *Nyasha as a Symbol of Resistance*

Nyasha's resistance to the colonial and patriarchal structures imposed upon her is a powerful and tragic representation of the psychological toll of colonial education. Unlike Tambu, who initially embraces education as a means of liberation, Nyasha recognizes its destructive potential and actively rejects the expectations placed upon her. Her defiance is not just a personal struggle but a broader critique of the systems that attempt to mold colonized individuals into compliant subjects. By resisting these forces, Nyasha challenges both the authority of her father, Babamukuru, and the colonial mindset that he has internalized. However, her resistance does not come without severe consequences, underscoring the brutal nature of colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Nyasha's confrontation with Babamukuru is particularly describing her refusal to submit to his rigid control highlights the intersection of colonial and patriarchal oppression, where women are expected to be silent and obedient. As Fanon (1963) argues, colonial systems not only subjugate entire populations but also reinforce gendered oppression within those populations (p. 122). Babamukuru embodies this double oppression, enforcing colonial ideals in his home and demanding complete submission from the women in his family. Nyasha's resistance disrupts this structure, making her a direct threat to his authority. Her willingness to challenge him, despite the physical and emotional cost, marks her as one of the novel's most radical figures.

Despite her intellectual awareness of colonial oppression, Nyasha is unable to find a space where she truly belongs. Her resistance isolates her from both the colonial system and her own family, leaving her in a psychological limbo. Bhabha (1994) describes this condition as "unhomeliness," a state in which the colonized subject exists between cultures but is fully accepted by neither (p. 13). Nyasha's rejection of colonial education prevents her from assimilating into the world of the colonizer, but her Westernized upbringing distances her from her own cultural roots. This results in a profound identity crisis, manifesting in her deteriorating mental health.

The ultimate cost of Nyasha's defiance is her psychological breakdown. Her struggles with eating disorders and self-harm are indicative of her internalized frustration, an inability to reconcile her awareness of oppression with her powerlessness to change it. Lorde (1984) notes that women who resist systemic oppression often turn their anger inward when they are unable to express it externally. This is exactly what happens to Nyasha—her body becomes the battleground for her resistance, with self-destruction serving as her final form of protest against a world that refuses to accept her.

Nyasha's fate serves as a cautionary tale about the costs of colonial education when it fails to provide genuine empowerment. Her experience underscores the urgent need for decolonized educational systems that affirm indigenous identities rather than erasing them. Hooks (1994) argues that true education should be a liberatory practice, one that enables individuals to critically engage with the world while affirming their identities. However, colonial education, as depicted in *Nervous Conditions*, functions in precisely the opposite manner, stripping individuals of their cultural heritage while failing to provide them with true belonging in the colonial world.

Unlike Tambu, who seeks to navigate colonial education by partially assimilating while holding onto aspects of her cultural identity, Nyasha refuses to compromise. This makes her an incredibly powerful but ultimately tragic figure. While her resistance is inspiring, it is also deeply isolating, revealing the impossibility of existing between two irreconcilable cultures without experiencing profound psychological distress. Her story forces a reexamination of how colonial education operates as a site of both oppression and contestation, and how resistance, while necessary, can come at a devastating cost.

Nyasha's battle is not just against Babamukuru or the colonial education system—it is against the entire structure of colonialism that seeks to erase indigenous identities. Her suffering underscores the violent consequences of this erasure, emphasizing the need for alternative educational models that do not demand assimilation at the cost of cultural annihilation. Through Nyasha's tragic arc, Dangarembga delivers a scathing critique of colonial education, making a compelling case for decolonization as a necessary step toward genuine liberation.

III. EDUCATION AS AMBIVALENT FREEDOM: TAMBU'S COMPLEX JOURNEY

Tambu's journey through colonial education encapsulates the paradox of schooling under imperial rule—offering both mobility and subjugation, enlightenment and erasure. Unlike Nyasha, who perceives education as a tool of oppression and openly resists its impositions, Tambu initially sees it as her only means of breaking free from the limitations imposed on her by poverty, gender, and tradition. Her ambition to succeed in an educational system governed by colonial values reflects her belief that knowledge will empower her. However, as she progresses, Tambu begins to witness the underlying cost of this success. The closer she moves toward assimilation into the Western system, the further she is removed from her cultural identity, family, and community. In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Tsitsi Dangarembga masterfully illustrates the internal conflict that emerges as Tambu navigates this complex terrain, presenting education as both an emancipatory force and a mechanism of control.

From the outset, Tambu perceives education as her gateway to freedom. She watches as her brother Nhamo, simply by virtue of being male, is given priority in schooling while she is expected to remain at home performing domestic labor. This unequal distribution of opportunity highlights the intersection of gender and educational access, reinforcing the

societal expectation that women's primary roles are those of caretakers rather than intellectuals (Dangarembga, 1988). Tambu's determination to receive an education, despite the systemic barriers in her way, underscores her resilience and unwavering belief in schooling as a means of empowerment. Her perspective resonates with Adichie's (2014) assertion that education provides women with the ability to challenge patriarchal constraints and achieve economic and intellectual independence.

However, Tambu's desire for education extends beyond personal ambition. She sees it as a means of uplifting her family from economic hardship, a notion reminiscent of Freire's (1970) argument in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that true education must serve as a practice of freedom, equipping marginalized individuals with the critical tools to challenge systems of oppression. In Tambu's mind, Western education promises knowledge, status, and the ability to improve her family's conditions. This belief, however, is gradually tested as she becomes more entrenched in colonial educational institutions.

As Tambu advances in her education, she begins to experience the contradictions inherent in the colonial schooling system. Initially, she perceives Western education as a force for positive transformation, but she soon realizes that success within this system demands the abandonment of her cultural identity. At the mission school, Tambu is exposed to Western ideals that position European customs as superior, fostering an implicit disdain for her Shona heritage (Dangarembga, 1988). This is a hallmark of colonial education, which, as wa Thiong'o (1986) explains in *Decolonising the Mind*, systematically replaces indigenous knowledge systems with European frameworks, stripping colonized subjects of their cultural roots.

Tambu's sense of alienation deepens when she returns home. Instead of feeling a sense of belonging, she struggles to connect with her family, particularly her mother, who views her education as a tool that distances her from traditional values. This growing divide between Tambu and her home environment mirrors Said's (1978) observations in *Orientalism*, where he discusses how colonial subjects who receive Western education often find themselves in liminal spaces, disconnected from both the indigenous and colonial worlds. Tambu's increasing discomfort at home signifies the beginning of her disillusionment with education as a purely liberatory force.

A. Babamukuru's Role in Shaping Colonial Mentality

A pivotal figure in Tambu's educational journey is Babamukuru, her uncle and benefactor, who epitomizes the success of colonial indoctrination. As a man who has benefited from Western education, Babamukuru enforces colonial ideals within his household, reinforcing the notion that European ways of life are superior (Dangarembga, 1988). His strict adherence to discipline and his belief in the moral and intellectual authority of Western education parallel the colonial administration's control over African societies. Babamukuru's character exemplifies what Fanon (1963) describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*—colonized elites who, after being educated in the Western system, become the enforcers of the very structures that oppressed them.

Tambu's early admiration for Babamukuru reflects her initial belief in education as a pathway to success, but as she matures, she starts recognizing the limitations of his worldview. Babamukuru's rigid enforcement of colonial norms makes it clear that the education he has embraced is not one of true liberation but of compliance and subjugation. His demand for obedience within the family mirrors the expectations of the colonial system, demonstrating how deeply entrenched colonial ideologies become within native communities.

B. Education as a Site of Contradiction

By the time Tambu reaches Sacred Heart, a prestigious colonial school, her disillusionment becomes more apparent. Instead of feeling empowered, she finds herself in an environment where her racial and cultural background mark her as inferior (Dangarembga, 1988). This experience echoes Du Bois's (1903) concept of "double consciousness," introduced in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which describes the dual awareness that African subjects experience when viewing themselves through the lens of the dominant white culture (p. 45). Tambu realizes that while education has granted her access to new opportunities, it has also come at the cost of her cultural grounding.

Sacred Heart is not just a space of academic learning but a site of ideological conditioning, where black students must conform to Eurocentric values in order to succeed. Tambu becomes increasingly aware that excelling in this institution requires her to suppress parts of her identity. The pressure to assimilate creates an internal conflict—one that forces her to question whether the freedom she once sought through education is truly attainable within the constraints of a colonial system.

By the end of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu undergoes a profound transformation in her understanding of education. While she still values intellectual growth, she begins to see the framework of her schooling as inherently flawed. Her evolving perspective aligns with the broader postcolonial critique of education as a tool for both control and resistance. Hooks (1994), in *Teaching to Transgress*, advocates for an education that empowers individuals to critically engage with the world while affirming their identities. Tambu's disillusionment suggests that empowerment does not come from blindly adopting Western education but from redefining knowledge on her own terms.

Her journey ultimately reflects the broader challenge of decolonizing education. Scholars such as Smith (1999) argue in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that true liberation comes from reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems and rejecting the Eurocentric frameworks that continue to shape global education. Tambu's growing awareness underscores this

necessity, illustrating that access to education alone is not enough—it must also be transformed into a tool that fosters genuine self-determination rather than assimilation.

Through Tambu's complex journey, Dangarembga critiques the colonial education system while simultaneously highlighting the potential for its reinvention. Her story serves as both an indictment of the ways colonial education alienates and subjugates, and as a call to reimagine education as a space where cultural heritage and intellectual empowerment can coexist. Tambu's narrative underscores the contradictions of education under colonial rule—its capacity to uplift and its tendency to erase, its promise of liberation and its demand for conformity. In this way, *Nervous Conditions* offers not just a critique of the past but a vision for a future where knowledge can truly serve as a path to freedom.

Tambu's journey through colonial education forces her to confront the contradictions within a system that initially appeared to promise liberation. As she advances academically, she realizes that success in colonial institutions often comes at the cost of assimilation, challenging her sense of identity and belonging. Dangarembga (1988) uses Tambu's disillusionment to critique colonial education as both an instrument of oppression and a site of potential resistance. The novel ultimately argues that decolonization is not simply about rejecting Western education but about reconstructing knowledge systems that do not require cultural displacement as the price for success.

One of the most pervasive aspects of colonial education is its redefinition of indigenous knowledge as inferior while presenting Western ideologies as the only valid intellectual framework. From her earliest school experiences, Tambu is conditioned to associate English fluency and Western norms with intelligence and progress, internalizing the belief that her own Shona traditions are secondary (Dangarembga, 1988). Her growing estrangement from her mother and community reflects the colonial strategy of cultural alienation, which Fanon (1963) describes as a means of controlling colonized populations by severing their ties to indigenous knowledge.

Wa Thiong'o (1986) expands on this in *Decolonising the Mind*, arguing that colonial education is not just about instruction but about replacing indigenous cultural worldviews with Eurocentric perspectives, ensuring the continued marginalization of local knowledge systems. Tambu's experiences at Sacred Heart highlight this displacement, as she is encouraged to embrace Western ideals while distancing herself from her heritage. Said (1978) similarly critiques this process in *Orientalism*, arguing that colonial education positions indigenous knowledge as outdated, thereby securing Western models of thought as dominant. While Tambu initially embraces Western education as an opportunity, she slowly realizes that it distances her from the communal knowledge systems that once shaped her identity.

The deeper Tambu immerses herself in colonial education, the more she experiences the psychological burden of assimilation. The prestige of Western schooling comes at the cost of personal identity, forcing students to navigate a constant tension between their cultural heritage and colonial expectations. This is particularly evident when Tambu arrives at Sacred Heart, a predominantly white institution where she is made to feel that her background renders her inherently inferior (Dangarembga, 1988).

Du Bois (1903) provides a useful framework for understanding Tambu's experience through his concept of "double consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which describes the internal conflict of marginalized individuals who must constantly see themselves through the lens of the dominant culture (p. 45). Tambu's realization that her education has not freed her but instead forced her into cultural displacement mirrors Du Bois's notion of psychological fragmentation that results from existing between two irreconcilable worlds. Fanon (1963) similarly examines this theme in *The Wretched of the Earth*, arguing that colonial education instills a deep sense of inferiority in the colonized, leading them to believe that their own identity is inadequate. Tambu's increasing discomfort at Sacred Heart reflects this tension, as she begins to understand that the very system she once saw as a tool for liberation is reinforcing her oppression.

A pivotal moment in Tambu's transformation is her growing awareness that education should not come at the cost of cultural displacement. Rather than rejecting schooling altogether, she begins to explore alternative ways of acquiring knowledge that do not require severing ties with her heritage. Smith (1999), in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, argues that reclaiming indigenous knowledge systems is an essential form of resistance against colonial domination. Tambu's evolving perspective aligns with this, as she starts to see that education must be redefined to include indigenous histories, values, and knowledge, rather than being a vehicle for cultural erasure.

Hooks (1994), in *Teaching to Transgress*, similarly calls for education to be a transformative rather than an assimilative process, one that empowers individuals to challenge systems of domination while affirming their identities. Tambu's journey suggests that true empowerment does not come from adopting Western education without question, but from reshaping it into something that serves the needs of her community rather than alienating it. Language plays a central role in shaping both access to knowledge and sense of belonging. wa Thiong'o (1986) argues that language is integral to cultural survival, and the imposition of colonial languages erases indigenous ways of knowing and being. In *Nervous Conditions*, English becomes the primary marker of intelligence and social mobility, reinforcing the idea that fluency in the colonizer's tongue equates to progress. This linguistic alienation is most evident in Tambu's gradual detachment from Shona, which distances her not only from her family but also from the worldview that once shaped her understanding of herself.

Spivak (1999), in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, discusses how colonial education silences the voices of the colonized, making it difficult for them to articulate their experiences within imposed Western frameworks. Tambu's struggle to reconcile her educational aspirations with her cultural identity reflects this silencing, as she begins to

understand that true empowerment cannot come from an education that demands the erasure of her linguistic and cultural heritage. Tambu's ultimate disillusionment with colonial education does not lead her to reject learning but instead pushes her to reconsider what a truly liberatory education might look like. Rather than accepting Western schooling as the only valid pathway to knowledge, she begins to envision an educational system that values multiple epistemologies and integrates indigenous perspectives. Mignolo (2011), in *Epistemic Disobedience*, argues that decolonization requires a rejection of Eurocentric knowledge systems and an embrace of diverse ways of knowing. Tambu's evolving consciousness aligns with this perspective, as she realizes that true education cannot be measured solely by Western standards but must be redefined to include the histories and traditions of marginalized peoples.

Through Tambu's journey, Dangarembga critiques the limitations of colonial schooling while also offering a vision for what education could become if freed from its Eurocentric constraints. The novel ultimately advocates for an educational model that does not demand assimilation as a prerequisite for success but instead fosters critical engagement with multiple knowledge systems. Tambu's growing awareness serves as a powerful commentary on the need for decolonization in education, making *Nervous Conditions* not just a critique of past injustices but a call to action for reimagining education as a truly liberatory practice.

IV. WOMEN, FREEDOM, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ALIENATION

Tambu's struggle for freedom in *Nervous Conditions* extends beyond education and cultural identity; it is also intricately tied to women's alienation from the land and their roles as custodians of environmental knowledge. Colonial rule, alongside its education system, not only reshaped indigenous knowledge but also displaced women from their traditional roles in land stewardship and sustainable practices. As a result, Tambu and the women around her face multiple layers of oppression—not only are they constrained by patriarchal structures, but they are also systematically distanced from the land, which once provided sustenance, cultural continuity, and autonomy. This environmental alienation exacerbates their struggles, limiting their economic agency and deepening colonial control.

Colonial expansion across Africa brought not just cultural domination but also land dispossession, fundamentally disrupting indigenous relationships with the environment. In traditional Shona society, as in many African communities, women played a central role in agriculture and community sustainability. However, colonial policies that privatized landownership and introduced European farming techniques marginalized indigenous women from their historical roles. Mies and Shiva (1993), in *Ecofeminism*, discuss how colonialism and capitalism have jointly displaced women from their ecological knowledge systems, positioning them as laborers rather than key contributors to environmental sustainability. In *Nervous Conditions*, this forced disconnection is evident in the struggles of Tambu's mother and other women in the village, who labor under worsening conditions while being denied ownership of the land they cultivate.

The colonial administration's policies reinforced patriarchal structures, placing land rights exclusively in the hands of men, thereby stripping women of economic independence. Agarwal (1994), in *A Field of One's Own*, highlights how this economic marginalization made women more vulnerable to systemic control. Tambu's mother exemplifies this dynamic, as she remains trapped in relentless labor without ownership, reliant on Babamukuru's financial assistance to survive (Dangarembga, 1988). Without landownership, she is denied financial autonomy, reinforcing a cycle of dependency that colonialism strategically maintained.

Beyond material dispossession, the psychological effects of environmental alienation further intensify women's struggles. With land no longer a guaranteed source of sustenance, their labor becomes increasingly exploitative and precarious. Federici (2004), in *Caliban and the Witch*, examines how colonial economies devalued women's reproductive and agricultural labor, forcing them into subservient roles. Tambu's mother, for instance, experiences growing frustration and exhaustion, reflecting the broader structural oppression that deprives women of control over their economic futures (Dangarembga, 1988). Her struggle highlights how colonial disruption of traditional land relations contributes to systemic gendered oppression, deepening both material and psychological burdens.

Despite these systemic barriers, *Nervous Conditions* also portrays women's resistance and resilience. Tambu's mother, though weighed down by her circumstances, remains a figure of strength, using her knowledge of farming and household management to sustain her family despite worsening conditions. This resilience reflects the strategies used by indigenous women across colonized nations to preserve cultural and environmental knowledge in defiance of erasure. Shiva (1997), in *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, argues that women's traditional ecological knowledge serves as a critical form of resistance against colonial and capitalist models of land use (p. 91). In *Nervous Conditions*, women's efforts to preserve food, share agricultural expertise, and maintain familial structures become everyday forms of defiance against a system designed to marginalize them.

Lucia stands out as a character who challenges both gender and environmental alienation. Her rejection of patriarchal and colonial expectations marks her as someone who refuses to conform to imposed limitations. While she does not directly own land, her assertion of economic independence and refusal to be constrained by societal norms signify a break from colonial structures (Dangarembga, 1988). Unlike Tambu, who initially equates education with liberation, Lucia asserts her autonomy through direct action rather than through colonial validation. Her resilience highlights the potential for reclaiming autonomy through self-determination and the rejection of imposed hierarchies.

The novel suggests that overcoming oppression requires more than just access to colonial education—it demands the reassertion of indigenous ways of knowing and being. Mies (1986), in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*,

argues that colonial and capitalist systems simultaneously subjugate women and exploit natural resources, treating both as objects for control. *Nervous Conditions* critiques this dual oppression, underscoring how decolonization must involve not only reclaiming cultural and educational identities but also restoring relationships between women and the land from which they have been alienated.

For Tambu, the realization that colonial education does not provide true liberation is a crucial turning point. She comes to understand that freedom cannot be confined to academic or economic success but must include the restoration of cultural and environmental ties. Dangarembga's narrative suggests that true empowerment requires rejecting the structures that sustain oppression and reclaiming indigenous ways of sustaining life. Through the struggles of Tambu, her mother, and Lucia, the novel envisions a future where education, land, and gender equality are deeply intertwined in the pursuit of self-determination.

V. OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES: INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AS RESISTANCE

The final stage of Tambu's journey in *Nervous Conditions* brings her to an essential realization: true freedom cannot be found in the structures of colonial education that require assimilation. Instead, liberation comes from embracing indigenous knowledge and reclaiming the cultural heritage that colonialism sought to erase. The novel illustrates that while colonial institutions promise upward mobility, they ultimately reinforce hierarchies that maintain racial, systemic, and cultural oppression. Dangarembga presents the revival of indigenous knowledge as a form of resistance, challenging the notion that Western education is the sole pathway to success. This section explores how indigenous knowledge serves as a tool for survival, empowerment, and decolonization, positioning it as an essential element in the struggle for true liberation.

A. Indigenous Knowledge as a Counterforce to Colonialism

Western education under colonial rule is framed as a necessary step toward modernity, with indigenous ways of knowing relegated to the past. However, *Nervous Conditions* challenges this assumption by showing how traditional knowledge systems are not only valuable but also vital to self-sufficiency and cultural identity. Smith (1999), in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, argues that indigenous knowledge is deliberately marginalized under colonial rule to sustain Western epistemic dominance. This suppression of local knowledge ensures that colonial subjects remain dependent on the very system that subjugates them. Tambu's gradual realization that Western education alone cannot provide her with true empowerment aligns with this argument, as she begins to see the limits of assimilation.

Tambu's mother serves as a key example of indigenous knowledge as resistance. Although she lacks formal education, she possesses an intricate understanding of farming, food preservation, and communal survival strategies that have sustained her family for generations (Dangarembga, 1988). This expertise is dismissed by colonial structures, yet it remains essential to the community's well-being. Her ability to navigate droughts and economic hardship using traditional farming techniques demonstrates the resilience of indigenous knowledge, highlighting its importance in countering colonial dependency. Scholars such as Maathai (2009) emphasize that ecological wisdom and sustainable agricultural practices developed over centuries in indigenous societies remain crucial for contemporary resistance against economic and environmental exploitation.

Throughout *Nervous Conditions*, women are portrayed as the primary custodians of indigenous knowledge, yet they are also the most affected by colonial systems that devalue their contributions. Mies (1986), in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, discusses how colonial capitalism systematically undermines women's roles in subsistence economies, positioning them as secondary to men in both economic and intellectual spheres. This is reflected in the novel through the way colonial education privileges Western ideals while treating indigenous women's expertise as obsolete.

Lucia, one of the most independent female figures in the novel, represents an alternative model of empowerment—one that does not rely on Western education for validation. Unlike Tambu, who initially equates education with freedom, Lucia asserts her autonomy through direct action, challenging patriarchal and colonial norms without seeking approval from Western institutions (Dangarembga, 1988). Her confidence and ability to navigate multiple spaces without losing her cultural identity offer a contrast to Tambu's initial belief that assimilation is the only path forward. Lucia's defiance is a form of resistance that underscores the power of indigenous agency, demonstrating that freedom can be reclaimed by rejecting imposed hierarchies. Scholars such as Oyěwùmí (1997) highlight how African feminist epistemologies disrupt colonial narratives, providing alternative frameworks for understanding identity and agency.

B. Language and the Decolonization of Knowledge

One of the most significant barriers to decolonization in the novel is language. As wa Thiong'o (1986) argues in *Decolonising the Mind*, the imposition of colonial languages serves as a means of control, forcing colonized subjects to think and express themselves within Western frameworks. In *Nervous Conditions*, English is presented as the language of power and intelligence, while Shona is associated with tradition and the past. This dichotomy creates a tension in Tambu's identity, as she struggles with the realization that fluency in English grants her access to certain privileges while simultaneously distancing her from her cultural roots (Dangarembga, 1988).

Spivak (1999), in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, discusses how colonial education erases indigenous linguistic structures, making it difficult for colonized subjects to articulate their resistance in ways that are recognized by the dominant system. Tambu's growing discomfort with English as a marker of superiority signals her evolving awareness of this issue. Scholars such as Mazrui (2000) further argue that linguistic imperialism limits intellectual sovereignty, reinforcing dependency on Western epistemologies. The novel ultimately suggests that true decolonization requires not only reclaiming land and economic agency but also restoring indigenous languages as legitimate vehicles of knowledge and intellectual engagement.

By the end of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu reaches a critical point of awareness: the colonial education she once revered does not grant her the freedom she expected. Instead of providing her with the tools to uplift her community, it alienates her from it. This realization aligns with the work of Mignolo (2011), who, in *Epistemic Disobedience*, argues that decolonization requires a fundamental rejection of Eurocentric knowledge systems in favor of indigenous epistemologies. Tambu's education, rather than empowering her, becomes a mechanism through which she is forced to conform to Western ideals, making it clear that a new educational framework is needed—one that integrates, rather than suppresses, indigenous ways of knowing. Hooks (1994), in *Teaching to Transgress*, advocates for an educational model that encourages critical thinking while affirming cultural identity. Tambu's journey echoes this perspective, as she begins to recognize that knowledge should not be confined to Western institutions. Instead, it must be transformed into a space where multiple perspectives coexist.

VI. CONCLUSION: REDEFINING FREEDOM THROUGH DECOLONIZED EDUCATION

Through Tambu's evolving understanding of education and identity in *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga presents a compelling critique of colonial schooling and its deep-seated effects on individual and collective freedom. The novel reveals how education, often perceived as a tool for emancipation, operates under colonial rule as both an enabler of personal agency and a mechanism of cultural erasure. Tambu's journey, alongside the experiences of Nyasha, Lucia, and her mother, highlights the need to deconstruct colonial educational frameworks and instead promote a decolonized understanding of knowledge—one that does not demand the loss of indigenous identity as the price for empowerment.

Throughout the novel, colonial education is portrayed as a system that entices the colonized with promises of progress and mobility while simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic power structures. At the beginning of her journey, Tambu perceives schooling as an opportunity for independence and upward mobility. She believes that education will provide her with the means to escape the poverty and gender constraints imposed upon her by traditional society (Dangarembga, 1988). However, as she moves deeper into the colonial educational system, she begins to see its contradictions. Fanon (1963), in *The Wretched of the Earth*, explains that colonial education is not designed to liberate but to condition subjects into internalizing colonial ideologies. Tambu experiences this firsthand as she realizes that her academic success is contingent on her willingness to suppress her Shona identity and adopt Western cultural norms (Dangarembga, 1988). Said (1978) similarly argues in *Orientalism* that colonial education fosters a mindset in which the colonized see themselves through the lens of the colonizer, creating an internalized sense of inferiority. Tambu's gradual alienation from her family and cultural heritage is a direct consequence of this process.

Nyasha and the Psychological Consequences of Cultural Schizophrenia

Nyasha's experience serves as a cautionary tale about the psychological costs of colonial education. Having been raised in England, she returns to Zimbabwe only to find herself unable to reconcile her Westernized upbringing with her cultural heritage. This tension leads to profound mental distress, as she struggles to fit into either world (Dangarembga, 1988). Fanon (1967), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes this condition as "cultural schizophrenia," a state in which the colonized subject is torn between two irreconcilable identities (p. 93). Nyasha's breakdown underscores the emotional toll of colonial education, revealing that assimilation into Western norms does not guarantee freedom but instead deepens internal conflict. Lorde (1984), in *Sister Outsider*, critiques systems of education that demand the suppression of one's identity, arguing that true empowerment must come from within, not through external validation. Nyasha's inability to conform to either Western or Shona expectations illustrates the impossibility of achieving liberation through an educational system designed to maintain colonial dominance.

The Path to Decolonization: Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge

While the novel critiques colonial education, it also presents indigenous knowledge as a viable and necessary alternative to Western epistemologies. Smith (1999), in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, argues that reclaiming indigenous ways of knowing is central to resisting colonial oppression and redefining freedom. Tambu's mother, despite her lack of formal education, embodies the resilience and wisdom of traditional knowledge systems, sustaining her family through agricultural expertise and communal support (Dangarembga, 1988). The novel suggests that true empowerment comes not from abandoning one's cultural heritage but from integrating multiple knowledge systems in a way that affirms identity rather than erasing it. Hooks (1994), in *Teaching to Transgress*, advocates for an educational model that embraces critical engagement while valuing indigenous perspectives. Tambu's eventual disillusionment with colonial education signals her realization that true learning cannot be confined to Western institutions but must also include the knowledge passed down through generations within her own community.

The Role of Language in Reclaiming Freedom

Language is one of the most powerful tools of colonial control, and *Nervous Conditions* emphasizes its role in shaping identity and access to knowledge. Wa Thiong'o (1986), in *Decolonising the Mind*, argues that the imposition of colonial languages severs individuals from their cultural roots, forcing them to operate within an alien framework of understanding. In the novel, English is positioned as the language of education and success, while Shona is relegated to domestic and informal spaces. Spivak (1999), in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, discusses the silencing of indigenous voices through linguistic imperialism, noting that those who cannot express themselves in the dominant language are often rendered invisible within colonial discourse. Tambu's growing discomfort with English as a marker of superiority signals her evolving awareness of this issue, suggesting that true decolonization requires not only reclaiming land and cultural identity but also restoring indigenous languages as legitimate sites of knowledge production.

Redefining Freedom Beyond the Colonial Paradigm

By the end of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu has moved beyond her initial belief that success within the colonial system equates to liberation. Instead, she begins to understand that freedom cannot be attained within a structure that is designed to enforce submission. Mbembe (2016), in *Critique of Black Reason*, argues that decolonization is not merely about political independence but requires the dismantling of colonial ideologies that persist in education, governance, and cultural institutions. Tambu's story aligns with this perspective, as she recognizes that true liberation is not about achieving success within a colonial framework but about redefining what success means on her own terms. Mignolo (2011), in *Epistemic Disobedience*, calls for rejecting Eurocentric knowledge systems and embracing alternative epistemologies that reflect the lived realities of the formerly colonized. Tambu's final realization signals her first steps toward this epistemic rebellion, as she begins to question the structures that have shaped her understanding of freedom.

Final Thoughts: The Ongoing Struggle for Decolonized Education

Nervous Conditions is not just a novel about one girl's journey through colonial education—it is a broader commentary on the complexities of knowledge, identity, and resistance in postcolonial societies. Through Tambu's story, Dangarembga critiques the false promises of Western education while advocating for a more holistic approach to learning—one that does not demand cultural erasure in exchange for opportunity. As scholars such as Tuhiwai Smith, wa Thiong'o, and Mbembe argue, the process of decolonization requires more than access to formal education; it demands a reconfiguration of knowledge systems that prioritizes indigenous voices. The novel ultimately leaves the reader with a critical question: What does true freedom look like, and can it ever be achieved within a system that was designed to oppress? Tambu's journey suggests that the answer lies not in assimilation, but in the reclamation of identity, knowledge, and self-determination. In this way, *Nervous Conditions* serves as both a critique of colonial education and a call to imagine new ways of learning, knowing, and being in the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to thank the Deanship of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research at Qassim University for financial support (QU-APC-2025).

REFERENCES

- [1] Agarwal, B. (1994). *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge University Press, p. 78.
- [2] Dangarembga, T. (1988). *Nervous Conditions*. Seal Press, pp. 27, 57, 89, 98, 102, 108, 112, 118, 130, 134, 137, 145, 157, 162, 172, 178, 193.
- [3] Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. A. C. McClurg & Co., p. 45.
- [4] Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, pp. 42, 89, 93, 122, 152.
- [5] Fanon, F. (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, p. 93.
- [6] Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, p. 72.
- [7] Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Routledge, pp. 88, 113.
- [8] Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, pp. 45, 66.
- [9] Maathai, W. (2009). *The Challenge for Africa*. Pantheon Books, p. 74.
- [10] Mbembe, A. (2016). *Critique of Black Reason*. Duke University Press, p. 44.
- [11] McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. Routledge.
- [12] Memmi, A. (1965). *The colonizer and the colonized* (H. Greenfeld, Trans.). Orion Press.
- [13] Mies, M. (1986). *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. Zed Books, pp. 63, 84.
- [14] Mies, M., & Shiva, V. (1993). *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, p. 12.
- [15] Mignolo, W. (2011). *Epistemic Disobedience: Decolonization and the Global Epistemic Shift*. Duke University Press, pp. 67, 92.
- [16] Mohanty, C. T. (1991). *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. Duke University Press, p. 73.
- [17] Wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. (1986). *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, pp. 16, 23, 44, 52, 76.
- [18] Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, p. 59.
- [19] Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, p. 156.
- [20] Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, pp. 199, 201.
- [21] Shiva, V. (1997). *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. South End Press, p. 91.
- [22] Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, pp. 112, 128.

- [23] Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Harvard University Press, pp. 202, 211.

Naemah J. Alrasheedi is an Assistant Professor of Literature and Criticism in the Department of English and Literature at the College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. She earned her PhD in English Literature and Criticism from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA, with a specialization in Shakespearean Transatlantic Studies and Appropriations. Dr. Alrasheedi's research spans a wide range of interdisciplinary fields, including African American literature, Indigenous literature, postmodern studies, transnational feminist theories, and the Arabic appropriations of Shakespeare. Her work highlights the intersections of literature, culture, and identity, contributing to the global discourse on cross-cultural literary engagements.