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Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Fanon, and *Bildung* of a “Native Woman”

Deepa Jani

In the jarring opening sentence of the novel *Nervous Conditions*, the first-person narrator, Tambudzai Sigauke, declares in Kafkaian nonchalance: “I was not sorry when my brother died” (*Nervous Conditions* 1988, 1). The propositional sentence delivers the cold bitter fact through the negative operator “not sorry” about its subject Tambu, wherein the coupling copula “was” leaves little room for doubt about the subject’s state of being, though the pastness of the tense opens a space for the unfolding of the recollective realist narration with its promise of *Bildung*, of expansion of the narrating subjectivity. In the space of the copula the *Bildung* of Tambu unfurls. *Nervous Conditions* is widely recognized as belonging to the genre of *Bildungsroman*, a novel about youthful idealism’s evolution to mature sobriety. Ralph Austen asserts that Dangarembga’s debut novel is a prominent example of African *Bildungsroman* written within the structuration of the classical European *Bildungsroman* (2015, 219).

Scholars working in the field of *Bildungsroman* theory identify the beginnings of the classical European *Bildungsroman* in German letters with the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* in the late eighteenth century (1795-96). Tobias Boes views this “novel of formation” as “one of the most successful” and “vexed” German contributions to world literature (“Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman” 2006, 230). German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, among the first to employ the term in 1870, understands *Bildungsroman* as an organismic form, underscoring its developmental, dialectical, and reconciliatory character, constituting the end goals of maturity and socialization of youth (1985, 390). The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, reading *Wilhelm Meister*, understands the main drive of the classical form, what he calls the “will towards education,” to produce eventual synthesis between abstract idealism and concrete social reality: “Its theme is the
reconciliation of the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal, with concrete social reality” (1971, 135, 132).

3 In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu’s *Bildung* is primarily staged within the organismic structure of the classical *Bildungsroman*. As a consequence, the question of the dialectical success of the youthful protagonist Tambu’s personal self-development and her necessary socialization have generated significant debate in critical readings of the novel. Scholars such as Lindsay Aegerter have argued in favor of Tambu’s successful socialization into the larger African community (1996, 231). However, other scholars such as Susan Z. Andrade, Joseph S. Slaughter, and Gabriele Lazzari have argued that the intrinsically complementary but contradictory forces of self-formation and socialization do not harmonize into a higher synthesis in the colonial space (Andrade 2002, 55; Slaughter 2007, 229; Lazzari 2018, 108). The question of the dialectical success of the black female youth’s *Bildung* remains vexed inasmuch as the novel stages the self-development of that doubly constructed figure of the “native woman” within the exigencies of patriarchy and Empire. Tambu’s ontogenesis occurs during the waning years of white minority rule in Southern Rhodesia in the 1960s and 70s and is articulated within the discursive structures of colonial *Bildung*. The native woman’s will to education is a will for colonial education to facilitate her assimilation and socialization into the native bourgeois sphere, a world with promise of escape from her subalternity.

4 In *Nervous Conditions* Tambu’s colonial *Bildung* is framed by the epigraphic fragment with which the novel opens, quoting in part from Jean-Paul Sartre’s polemical preface to Frantz Fanon’s last book *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The condition of native is a nervous condition.” Sartre further states, “The status of ‘native’ is a neurosis introduced and maintained by the colonist in the colonized with *their consent*” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 2004, l.v). In his book, Fanon famously conceptualizes his revolutionary theory of decolonization that produces national consciousness and the nation-people, a crop of newly minted disalienated postcolonial humanity. According to Fanon, the nation and national consciousness can only be engendered through revolutionary leadership functioning as a bridge to the people: “The nation can only come into being in a program elaborated by a revolutionary leadership and enthusiastically and lucidly appropriated by the masses” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 2004, 142–43). Albeit before the colonized leadership can elaborate a program to bring the nation into being, it needs to revolutionize itself by remedying the neurosis of its “alienated consciousness,” as Fanon describes the condition in his earlier book (*Black Skin, White Masks* 2008, xiv–xv). Throughout Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* the figure of the colonized bourgeois intellectual, a native *évolué* with a white mask, remains compromised and alienated due to the pitfalls of colonial education. Fanon imagines the development of the alienated *évolué* consciousness of the colonized intellectual as an operation of *Bildung*. The colonial *Bildung* of the colonized intellectual develops in tripartite stages culminating in a dialectical resolution, the emergence of a “representative consciousness”: the first phase entails assimilation with the colonizer’s culture, the second stage constitutes the nativist nostalgia for lost origins, and the final combat phase culminates in becoming the representative consciousness who speaks for the people’s struggles (*The Wretched of the Earth* 2004, 158–59). For Fanon this dialectical self-development of the colonized intellectual remains embroiled in the colonial
The epigraphic invocation to Fanon in *Nervous Conditions* frames the development of consciousness of the young Bildungsheld Tambu and her transmigration into the native bourgeois elite in the time of Empire. In this article, I will examine the vexed question of the dialectical success of Tambu’s colonial Bildung, with its constitutive demands of self-development and necessary socialization, from a relatively novel frame of reference: the Fanonian theorization of the tripartite development of the évolué consciousness of the colonized intellectual resulting in a dialectical resolution, the advent of the allegorical figure of spokesperson for the people, that ultimately fails to disrupt the conditions of coloniality and engender a disalienated revolutionary national consciousness. Since the publication of Dangarembga’s celebrated novel few scholars have engaged with Fanon’s thought to read the novel critically. This essay returns to Fanon’s conception of nation and national consciousness to read critically Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* amidst renewed interest in the field of Postcolonial Studies for revisiting Fanon’s ideas on violence, liberation, and national consciousness, as suggested by the editors of the recent special issue of *Interventions* on the Martiniquan philosopher (Sajed and Seidel 2019, 583). In this article, I argue that *Nervous Conditions* stages Tambu’s colonial Bildung along Fanonian dialectical schema engendering the native woman’s alienated representative évolué consciousness only to interrupt such a self-formation when at the end of the novel the narrator reveals to the reader the omission of the actual Bildung, which unfolds outside the space-time of the novel. I contend that this elision in the novel produces a Bildungsroman sans Bildung, thereby opening the space for Fanon, for his decolonizing project of what I call nationalitarian Bildung, in contrast to the alienating colonial Bildung of the colonized intellectual which remains irrevocably implicated in the imperial project. Tambu’s nationalitarian Bildung is a remedy for the Manichean delirium of colonial Bildung, producing national consciousness which links the individual will with the will of the nation-people along a rhizomatic chain formation, that remains necessarily non-allegorical, non-dialectical, and non-hierarchical. The Fanonian nationalitarian Bildung also functions as an antidote to the allegorical-dialectical structuration of the classical Bildungsroman.

Furthermore, I demonstrate that the Fanonian epigraphic invocation in this female novel of development offers a corrective to the originary fiction of Western feminist universalism: for the “native women” of Dangarembga’s novel there is no short-circuit to the Universal. The women in the novel learn that national consciousness is alone capable of producing an international dimension. The novel’s “feminism” does not reside in the liminal space between the nation and the international but is linked to the national question to arrive at the international dimension.

**Nervous Conditions as a Bildungsroman sans Bildung**

A “genre of progress” as Jed Esty proclaims, the Bildungsroman charts the dialectical plot of the European male protagonist’s rational self-development, maturation, and integration with the concrete social reality (2007, 409). As the urtext of the rhetoric of European modernity, the genre is governed by the Enlightenment principles and goals of Bildung, as the creation and development of rationalized and individualized
bourgeois citizen subjects and cultures. This rhetoric of European modernity, as Walter Mignolo following Anibal Quijano reminds us, “hides its darker side, the constant reproduction of coloniality” (2007, 450). The German Enlightenment concept of Bildung, John Noyes argues, is “situated clearly within the topology of colonialism,” professing the doctrine of “formation, improvement, and self-expression of individuals and cultures that became a central concept in discussions on modernization as the century progressed” (2006, 453, 444). In the context of colonial modernity the Enlightenment project of Bildung, the raison d’être for the ontology of Empire, is governed by the civilizing objective of the creation and development of rationalized and individualized évolué subjectivity among the chosen few, and thereby producing the compromised figure of the colonized intellectual who learns that all “the essential values—meaning Western values—remain eternal despite all errors attributable to man.” The colonial Bildung teaches the colonized intellectual “the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity” (The Wretched of the Earth 2004, 11). According to Fanon, such an évolué consciousness of the colonized intellectual develops in tripartite stages resulting in a resolution. The dialectical cartography Fanon theorizes for the development of the colonized intellectual’s Bildung mirrors the contradictory but complementary processes that harmonize in the maturation of the literary Bildungsheld in the symbolic form of the Bildungsroman. In the first stage, “the colonized intellectual proves he has assimilated the colonizer’s culture.” In the second “precombat stage,” the native bourgeois intellectual’s convictions in the forces of colonial modernity are rattled, inducing nostalgia for lost origins, for “the colonized writer is not integrated with his people, since he maintains an outsider’s relationship to them, he is content to remember.” In the final combat stage, the colonized intellectual galvanizes the people by means of national literature, becoming “the spokesperson of a new reality in action” (The Wretched of the Earth 2004, 158–59). The contradictory but complementary processes of assimilation and nativism cohere to produce a representative voice-consciousness. The dialectical success of the colonial Bildung is actualized when the individualized self-formation of the colonized intellectual matures to becoming a “representative consciousness,” that is, a “native informant” as Gayatri Spivak famously labels this compromised intermediary figure, who translates the terms of colonial life by virtue of colonial discourse (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason 1999, 342). For Fanon, such an alienated évolué consciousness of the colonized intellectual fails to produce disalienating national consciousness, a corollary to decolonization, remaining inextricably inculcated in the colonial project: “[The colonized intellectual] is content to cloak these instruments in a style that is meant to be national but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism” (The Wretched of the Earth 2004, 160).

Nervous Conditions charts the cartography of the development of Tambu’s évolué consciousness along the Fanonian dialectical schema. In this regard Tambu’s colonial Bildung is modeled on her England-returned assimilated bourgeois uncle Babamukuru and cousin Nyasha. Mimicking their dialectical successes as évolués, Tambu wants to prepare for a life “in their world,” the world of colonial bourgeoisie (Nervous Conditions 1988, 19). The idealist rural youth Tambu strives for assimilation into bourgeois colonial modernity by means of English education. Tambu’s will to colonial education is a will to become an évolué. Such a self-formation holds the promise of enduring power over self and others. Tambu notes that Babamukuru’s submission to the forces of colonial modernity results in “greater power than before,” which enables him to represent and “to organize his immediate world and its contents as he wished” (88).
Subjecting himself to the will of the missionaries has afforded the patriarch Babamukuru the allegorical story of dialectical success: by uplifting himself through diligence and obedience he has become a “representative consciousness,” a spokesperson for a new reality as both the head of the Sigauke family and the headmaster of the mission school. Babamukuru the exemplar of Shona tradition and also the exemplary évoluté has earned his rightful place as the spokesperson for his people. At the commencement of her journey, Babamukuru reminds Tambu that the blessings of colonial Bildung bestowed upon her are not merely for the growth of the individual but for the advancement of the collective (89). By uplifting her consciousness she can advance the collective consciousness as a symbolic servant of Empire. Dangarembga reminds us, when speaking of her own parents’ colonial education, that the primary function of the European-educated native bourgeois elite (male or female) was to deliver a modernized subjected collectivity in the service of Empire (Black and Female 2022, 29). Good service to Empire is also rewarded with the capture of the postcolonial state. Babamukuru imagines Tambu’s colonial Bildung as constituting an allegorical function commensurate with the expectations of the classical Bildungsroman. Tobias Boes elaborates on the dominant “universalist approach” to the theorization of the classical form which understands “the Bildungsroman as a literary genre in which the idealized shape of the nation comes into being through the essentially arbitrary vessel of an individual life” (Formative Fictions 2012, 20–21). In this approach to the Bildungsroman as an allegory, the self-growth of the errant individual represents and engenders the idealized development of the nation. The chosen Tambu’s colonial Bildung holds the allegorical potentia of delivering the individual and the collective to the forces of colonial modernity.

Tambu, as Babamukuru before, embarking on her dialectical journey to embody a new subjectivity and becoming a spokesperson for a new reality, exhibits absolute faith in the doctrine of modernity, anticipating its transformative power at the level of corporeality and psyche:

When I stepped into Babamukuru’s car I was a peasant [...]. It was evident from the corrugated black callouses on my knees, dull tufts of malnourished hair. This was the person I was leaving behind. At Babamukuru’s I expected to find another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead. At Babamukuru’s I would have the leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body. This new me would not be enervated by smoky kitchens [...]. (Nervous Conditions 1988, 58–59)

Colonial education promises the native woman Tambu “emancipation,” an ingress into the “limitless horizons” of the bourgeois world characterized by interiority, namely, the luxury for the creation of consciousness of a native girl rather than a life of sheer sustenance and reduction to the body, and by mobility, that is, the comforts of an urban native middle-class life devoid of soot and calluses, as well as the pleasure of a cleaner, lighter, and more nourished skin. Franco Moretti reminds us that interiority and mobility are the promises of bourgeois capitalist modernity and its ideological and symbolic form, the Bildungsroman (2000, 4). The native bourgeois world Tambu strives for is marked not only by class privilege but race and gender as well. The rural black woman Tambu, the figure of Spivakean subaltern, is in search of a means of exuviating the layers of subalternity – rural poverty, squalor of peasant life, manual labor, weight of womanhood and blackness – that inhibit the cultivation of her évoluté subjectivity. When Babamukuru and Maiguru formally welcome Tambu into the sphere of colonial
modernity at their palatial home, she hopes that they will “formally disinter me, my mind and my body, from the village” (Nervous Conditions 1988, 87).

When Tambu steps into Babamukuru’s car to leave the rural homestead behind she enters into a covenant with colonial modernity; in exchange for being completely pliable to the exemplary évoluté Babamukuru’s idea of development, she is told to never regress to her marginal homestead self, a self bridled by the immutability of tradition and the indigence of existence. Tambu notes, “I was going to be developed in the way that Babamukuru saw fit, which in the language I understood at the time meant well. Having developed well I did not foresee that there would be reason to regress on the occasions that I returned to the homestead” (Nervous Conditions 1988, 59). Once attaining the dialectical success as an évoluté by virtue of English education, she anticipates never degenerating temporally, spatially, or spirit-wise. The young idealist Bildungsheld Tambu fully subscribes to the rhetoric of modernity, believing in the primacy of progress and development; in such a view, tradition is only so much dead weight, which can be dropped, for circumstances are not immutable: “They were watching me climb into Babamukuru’s car to be whisked away to limitless horizons. It was up to them to learn the important lesson that circumstances were not immutable, no burden so binding that it could not be dropped” (Nervous Conditions 1988, 59). It was for her parents to learn the important lesson that tradition can no more function as an encumbrance to the sweeping forces of modernity. Early in the novel her mother reminds her young daughter of the twin historical burdens of the “native woman”: “And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength” (16). Rejecting her mother’s socio-historical lessons marking her subalternity, convinced that the burden of tradition, of her womanhood and blackness, can be discarded, Tambu decides “it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood” (16). Her évoluté uncle and aunt, each in their own way, exemplify for Tambu the possibility of exorcising the nightmare of tradition and evils of poverty.

In the key chapter in the novel when Tambu arrives at Babamukuru’s palatial house, a material manifestation of his dialectical success, Tambu delineates by means of hyperbole the power of the forces of colonial modernity in transforming native lives, describing modernity as “limitless horizons,” “emancipation,” “clean,” “shiny,” “liberation,” “otherworldly,” “Heaven,” and “glamorous” (58–77). At Babamukuru’s house, she now begins to understand the seductive blackmail of the otherworldly modernity that her brother Nhamo succumbed to while pursuing his own colonial education. Striving for the dialectical success of an évoluté increasingly induces in Nhamo “alienated consciousness,” which Fanon cautions about. Her brother’s life and death serve as early warning lessons against the deleterious effects of alienated évoluté consciousness, compelling Tambu to build up her defenses against the enticements of colonial modernity, making her prematurely declare, “I triumphed. I was not seduced” (70). Tambu nevertheless remains ensnared by the transformative potentia of the glamorous otherworldly modernity, describing the commencement of her colonial Bildung as “the period of reincarnation”: “Thus began the period of my reincarnation. I liked to think of my transfer to the mission as my reincarnation. [...] I expected this era to be significantly profound and broadening in terms of adding wisdom to my nature, clarity to my vision, glamour to my person” (94). Tambu postulates that her colonial
*Bildung* will not merely facilitate her expansion and normalization as an *évolué* bourgeois subjectivity but reconcile her idealism with reality, her potentiality with actuality:

Freed from the constraints of the necessary and the squalid that defined and delimited our activity at home, I invested a lot of robust energy in approximating to my idea of a young woman of the world. [...] I was meeting, outside myself, many things that I had thought about ambiguously; things I had always known existed in other worlds although the knowledge was vague; things that had made my mother wonder whether I was quite myself, or whether I was carrying some other presence in me. (94)

In this remarkable passage, Tambu professes to have *a priori* knowledge, albeit abstract and vague, of the world of colonial modernity, its values and ideologies, residing as a presence inside her this idea of another world, whose material manifestation is affirmed at the mission school. The mission school’s colonial *Bildung* provides the conditions of possibility to induce this ideal world into reality, where the abstract idealism is embodied as lived experience. Her mother is the first to recognize this otherworldly presence, this alien form of another species, dwelling in her daughter. Tambu understands her colonial *Bildung* as a process of reincarnation, for the colonial English education provides a conducive soil for this other species-being to emerge, enabling the subaltern to be reborn as an *évolué*. The marginalized Tambu’s rebirth into the native bourgeois sphere at the mission school not only results in class transformation but also species transformation.

Tambu, a disciplined and obedient pupil, possessed by idealistic knowledge of the first principles of bourgeois modernity, is highly amenable to socialization as reincarnation, which will facilitate her dialectical success of realizing a new subjectivity and becoming a spokesperson for a new reality. She gets an early warning lesson on the detrimental effects of socialization as reincarnation in her brother Nhamo’s death as a consequence of his alienated *évolué* consciousness. The otherworldly alien presence that resides within her, which the mother perceives, is reproduced by the compartmentalization of the Manichean geographical colonial space: Fanon notes, “The colonial world is a compartmentalized world” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 2004, 3). In the novel, her England-returned cousin Nyasha also remains a deterrent example of the neurosis induced by socialization as reincarnation. Nyasha, more than any other character in *Nervous Conditions*, is a fully assimilated native woman, an *évolué*, whose colonial *Bildung* markedly exhibits the Fanonian dialectical schema: the contradictory but complementary processes of assimilation and nativism cohere in the emergence of Nyasha’s representative voice-consciousness. The assimilated Nyasha increasingly turns to the native past, to the history textbooks, which destabilizes her belief in colonial modernity. When Tambu gets admitted to the predominantly white private school Sacred Heart, eagerly anticipating her reincarnation into colonial modernity, Nyasha warns her against the dangers of assimilation:

> It would be a marvelous opportunity [...]. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation [...]. 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. (*Nervous Conditions* 1988, 182)

From a Fanonian precombat nostalgic phase Nyasha enters into the combat stage during her nervous breakdown, when, at the end of the novel, she pronounces, “‘They’ve done it to me,’” thereafter violently “shredding her history book between her
teeth (‘Their history. Fucking liars. Their blood lies.’) (204, 205). If Nyasha’s normalization as an évolute alienates her from her father and her community, then her neurosis reintegrates her with her family and her community: ‘I don’t hate you, Daddy,’ she said softly. ‘They want me to, but I won’t.’ She lay down on her bed. [...] ‘But I can’t sleep. Mummy will you hold me?’ [...] ‘Look what they’ve done to us’ she said softly’ (205). During her delirium the rebellious individualist Nyasha becomes a spokesperson for the oppression of her people. The female individualist reframes her conflict with her patriarch father as an effect of the conditions of coloniality. This allegorical emergence as a “representative consciousness” nevertheless does not lead to disalienation: ‘I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you.’ She fell asleep (205). The self-division effected by colonial Bildung induces Nyasha’s Manichean delirium as she battles to liberate the self not only from the law of the father-master but also from the otherness of the self. The almost the same but not quite English Nyasha learns a key Fanonian lesson, i.e. that the experience of alienation is the condition of the natives. This lesson also comes as a forewarning to Tambu just as she enters Sacred Heart, with the aim of mimicking Nyasha’s dialectical success.

According to Mary Anne Ferguson, the female novel of development, since the 1970s when women left their place to enter the “man’s world,” stages heroines who “can achieve distance from themselves and from their society without alienation,” eventually attaining maturity (1983, 229, 235). If the heroines of the Western female novel of development achieve maturity without alienation, then the colonized native women of Dangarembga’s female novel of development cannot circumvent such a fate, for they can attain maturity only as a consequence of their alienation. The neurosis of Nyasha’s alienated évolute consciousness triggers Tambu’s mother’s warning about the dangers of Englishness to her immature daughter who harbors an otherworldly presence yearning for self-actualization: ‘It’s the Englishness,’ she said. ‘It’ll kill them all if they aren’t careful,’ and she snorted (Nervous Conditions 1988, 207). The mother’s admonition sows a seed of suspicion against the blackmail of modernity: “For I was beginning to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the ‘Englishness’ of the mission, and after that the more concentrated ‘Englishness’ of Sacred Heart” (207).

Throughout her recollective narration, Tambu exhibits conviction in the power of the forces of colonial modernity to precipitate her self-formation as an évolute. But in the predominantly quixotic hyperbolic narration the narrator occasionally reminds the readers of the distance (temporal, spatial, and spirit-wise) between the adult narrator’s self and the youthful narrated self: at the end of the novel Tambu says, “I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow” (Nervous Conditions 1988, 208). The seed of suspicion sowed by the mother became seeds that did grow, yielding the lacuna between the narrating and the narrated subjectivities. While we do witness Tambu’s successful colonial Bildung as she journeys from the homestead to the mission school to Scared Heart accelerating her accession into the native bourgeoisie, emerging as an évolute consciousness in her own right, she abruptly apprises her readers in the final paragraph of the novel that the actual story of expansion is yet to come:

Quietly [...] something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume. (208)
Despite, or because of the black colonized woman’s ingress into the native bourgeois sphere, which in the European classical variant would be deemed a triumphant Bildung, in Nervous Conditions the actual story of expansion unfolds outside the discursive structures of her colonial Bildung, in the temporal lacuna between the narrator and the protagonist, where Tambu undergoes a long and painful process of Bildung, of refusing to be brainwashed by Englishness, the account of which remains unnarrated in the current Bildungsroman. Tambu’s self-formation as an évoluté in the pages of the novel precipitates the pitfalls of alienated consciousness, what the Fanonian epigraph foreshadows, occasioning the actual story of Bildung in the space of the past copula (“I was not sorry”). Dangarembga’s debut novel breaks the stipulated generic covenant staging a Bildungsroman sans the actual Bildung; the veritable story of expansion occurs outside the space-time of the current novel. To witness the actual Bildung her disappointed readers will have to await another volume. In the current one though the narrator offers a glimpse into the actual process of becoming, revealing that her self-formation constituted refusing the blackmail of colonial modernity, notwithstanding the many temptations of socialization as reincarnation affording the black colonized woman extrication from the constancy of tradition and patriarchy. The process of maturity for the colonized Bildungsheld does not consist in reconciliation between abstract idealism and concrete social reality but in refusing the blackmail of colonial modernity in order to achieve a dis-alienating consciousness. The dialectical success of the colonized Bildungsheld induces neurosis, or as Spivak notes, “The postcolonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 1994, 82). In the veritable Bildung, Tambu learns to unlearn the learning.

Nervous Conditions and Fanonian nationalitarian Bildung

Joseph Slaughter argues that the elision in Dangarembga’s Bildungsroman of the actual Bildung “opens the space not only of irony but, as I will argue, history” (2007, 230). I argue that the elision in Nervous Conditions opens the space for Fanon, for his decolonizing project of what I call “nationalitarian Bildung,” of the colonized intellectual that engenders disalienation, contra to the alienating colonial Bildung inextricably implicated in the colonial project. I borrow the term “nationalitarian” from Anouar Abdel-Malek by way of Neil Lazarus’ adoption of the term to read Fanon’s national consciousness, which will be discussed below. The novel’s epigraphic invocation to Fanon frames the colonial Bildung of its protagonist, Tambu, forewarning her of the pitfalls of her dialectical journey. Tambu’s mother is the diegetic manifestation of the Fanonian voice. She is the first to recognize the alien being that resides in her daughter, planting in her seeds of suspicion against colonial modernity. The seeds did grow in the space of the past copula, bearing for the young native bourgeois intellectual, fruits of a Fanonian decolonizing consciousness, therein affording her the realization that “we cannot go resolutely forward unless we first realize our alienation” (The Wretched of the Earth 2004, 163). Maturity for the colonized native woman is not achieved by reconciliation between the ideal self with the socialized bourgeois self, but by the realization of her alienation from the self and society in order to achieve a decolonizing consciousness. For Fanon, the colonized bourgeois intellectual can only begin to achieve such a consciousness by virtue of
recognition of the Manichean divisions of the self engendered by colonial education. The colonized intellectual’s dialectically structured colonial Bildung culminating in a “representative consciousness” fails to achieve disalienation, which for Fanon is the end goal of decolonization.

Fanon’s oeuvre aims to provide a path for disalienation of the native évoluté consciousness: “My book is, I hope, a mirror with a progressive infrastructure where the black man can find the path to disalienation” (Black Skin, White Masks 2008, 161). For the colonized intellectual the path to disalienation is non-dialectical and non-allegorical, demanding that they not become the spokesperson for the people, representing their will: “No leader, whatever his worth, can replace the will of the people” (The Wretched of the Earth 2004, 144). They need to learn that their privilege is their loss, and begin to build a bridge with the people, merging with the will of the people in their present liberation struggle: “It is not enough to reunite with the people in a past where they no longer exist. We must rather reunite with them in their recent counter move which will suddenly call everything into question” (163). The colonized intellectual needs to disengage with the nativist nostalgia for the past, and directly join with the people in their present revolutionary violent struggle, where everything is called into question, opening up the future of the nation-people. If colonial Bildung instilled in the colonized intellectual Enlightenment values of individualism, where “each is locked in his subjectivity,” then the revolutionary liberation struggle teaches “the falsity of this theory,” introducing a new vocabulary and a language, such as “‘Brother,’ ‘sister,’ ‘comrade’” (11). If colonial education induces Manichean divisions at the level of psyche and geography, then decolonizing and disalienating education of the liberation struggle leads to the merging of the individual experience with the collective national experience. For Fanon “individual experience is national, since it is a link in the national chain, it ceases to be individual, narrow and limited in scope, and can lead to the truth of the nation and the world” (140–41). Elsewhere I have argued that Fanon understands the advancement of the national consciousness of the postcolonial people as a process of Bildung leading to the unification of the nation-people, and thereby ushering in a new humanity and a new humanism (Jani 2022). Similarly, Fanon understands the development of the consciousness of the colonized intellectual as a merging of the individual will with the nation-people along a non-dialectical, non-allegorical, and non-hierarchical rhizomatic chain formation to remedy the alienation of the representative évoluté consciousness. The colonized intellectual’s experience and growth, rather than symbolically representing the national experience and growth, as demanded by the dialectical-allegorical structuration of the classical Bildungsroman, is a link in the national rhizomatic chain where the colonized intellectual discards his parochial nature to merge with the will of the people.

17 I call the Fanonian antidote to the colonial Bildung of the colonized intellectual “nationalitarian Bildung.” Neil Lazarus differentiates between bourgeois nationalism and Fanon’s national consciousness, which he understands as “nationalitarian” consciousness that is “liberationist, anti-imperialist, nationalist internationalism” (1993, 72). Lazarus borrows the term from Anouar Abdel-Malek, who distinguishes between the degraded form of European nationalism characterized by xenophobia and imperialist expansionism and the progressive form of decolonizing “‘nationalitarian stage’ of development [...] during which the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America are freeing themselves from imperialism and neo-imperialism” (1964, 51). Fanon
himself asserts, “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is alone capable of giving us an international dimension” (The Wretched of the Earth 2004, 179). For Fanon “it is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness establishes itself and thrives” (180). Elaborating on Fanon’s vision, Sajed and Seidel assert, “This distinction between nationalism as sterile formalism and national consciousness as a collective ownership of the goals of anticolonial struggle clarifies Fanon’s vision of national liberation” (2019, 586). Developing on the Fanonian antidote to colonial Bildung, I contend that nationalitarian Bildung alone affords the colonized intellectual a path to disalienation. If colonial Bildung leads to the emergence of a representative évoluté consciousness in the allegorical figure of the spokesperson for the people, then nationalitarin Bildung leads to nation and national consciousness (not nationalism) yielding an international dimension, where the colonized intellectual discards its parochial nature merging with the nation-people.

In Nervous Conditions Tambu undergoes a long and painful process of nationalitarian Bildung outside the space-time of the novel. If her cousin Nyasha succumbs to the Manichean delirium induced by her colonial Bildung, disappearing from the narrative, then we can presume that Tambu avoids the fate of her unfortunate cousin. Reading the novel within the Fanonian frame of reference, I attest that Tambu prevails to tell the tale by virtue of her nationalitarian Bildung, which functions as a remedy to the neurosis of colonial Bildung. Since its publication scholars and critics of Dangarembga’s novel have searched for links between the national experience of the Chimurenga liberation struggle, a guerilla warfare fought from the 1960s to 1979 resulting in the end of the white-minority rule in Rhodesia, and the lived experience of the Bildungsheld Tambu. Susan Andrade argues that the novel, far from being silent on the black independence struggle, “explicates a decolonizing nationalism that it understands as overlapping with and aided by its feminism” (2002, 46). Heather Zwicker maintains that the novel is a work of “national literature” (2002, 12). By contrast, I contend that it is not nationalism that the novel elucidates, wherefore the novel is not a national allegory, but Fanonian national consciousness. The novel’s staging of Fanonian nationalitarian Bildung disrupts the allegorical-dialectical structuration of the Bildungsroman, a “genre connected more than any other to the rise of modern nationalism” and enmeshed in the topology of colonialism (Boes 2012, 3). Tambu’s colonial Bildung develops within the constraints of the colonial state and establishes its historical continuity with the postcolonial state that Babamukuru’s lecture to Tambu intimates, foregrounding the allegorical dimension of her dialectical journey, which stipulates that by uplifting herself she can follow him in becoming a spokesperson for a new reality. In contrast, her nationalitarian Bildung engenders national consciousness as a remedy to the nervous conditions, linking the individual will with the nation-people along a rhizomatic chain formation, that remains necessarily non-allegorical, non-dialectical, and non-hierarchical.

Reminiscing on her youth, the adult narrator notes her lack of historical and national consciousness: “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 the other Whites in Rhodesia, ought to have stayed at home” (Nervous Conditions 1988, 157). Ironically enough, this lack of political consciousness also marks her, unlike Nyasha, as a “paragon of feminine decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to [...]” (157). Her female decorum impressed the patriarch Babamukuru who thought, “I was the sort of young
woman a daughter ought to be.” In contrast, Nyasha thinks of her cousin as a “little spineless” (157). The reminiscing narrator’s tone peppered with irony and sarcasm highlights the lacuna between the narrated self and the narrator’s self, inferring that Tambu did eventually grow a spine, exorcizing her female decorum for political and national consciousness. If in her youth she lacked consciousness of her colonized subjecthood, was not concerned about freedom fighters being called terrorists or thought that the missionaries should have stayed home, then this presumably changed for the adult narrator. Tambu’s nationalitarian Bildung produces national consciousness, functioning as a remedy to the Manichean delirium of colonial Bildung.

Conclusion

Despite the epigraphic invocation to Fanon, in the last forty years since the publication of Dangarembga’s celebrated novel, few scholars have engaged with Fanon’s thought to read the novel critically. The few who have understand the novel as a “feminist novel” providing a corrective to the “elision of gendered politics from his analysis” (Andrade 2002, 52). Like Susan Andrade, Heather Zwicker argues that Dangarembga’s novel is a feminist novel, rectifying Fanon’s omissions. For Zwicker, the novel’s feminism resides in the “liminal space between the nation and the international,” which is the site of “feminist agency” (2002, 5). While Nervous Conditions stages the black female narrator’s escape from patriarchal Shona social reality by means of her colonial Bildung, the Western ideology of feminism, rather than functioning as a panacea to the alienated consciousness of colonial Bildung, engenders it. After Babamukuru’s altercation with Nyasha over the length of her skirt following the school dance, she says to Tambu, “I was comfortable in England but now I’m a whore with dirty habits.” […] ‘I know,’ she interrupted. ‘It’s not England any more and I ought to adjust. But when you’ve seen different things you want to be sure you’re adjusting to the right thing’” (Nervous Conditions 1988, 119). The dissension between Nyasha and Babamukuru is explained as originating from the daughter’s experiences in England, where in the context of the politics of the 1960s, sexual liberation was a weapon for social emancipation. If exposure to the world of Englishness creates a chasm between Nyasha and her father, her neurosis triggers reconciliation with him: “I don’t hate you, Daddy,’ she said softly. ‘They want me to, but I won’t’” (205). If Western feminist discourse and its attendant Enlightenment discourse of “universal” rights (and suffering, as Tambu says: “The victimization, I saw, was universal”) makes her see her father as a victimizer, her neurosis makes her reframe the father-daughter conflict as an effect of the conditions of coloniality (118).

In an interview Dangarembga says that for the doubly constructed figure of the “native woman” “the gender problem is always second to the national question” (Petersen 1994, 347). Dangarembga’s novel maybe a corrective to the elision of gendered politics in Fanon, but the epigraphic invocation to Fanon also offers a corrective to the originary fiction of Western feminist universalism. Nyasha’s neurosis teaches her a Fanonian lesson that for the native woman there is no direct short-circuit to the Universal, that national consciousness is alone capable of giving an international dimension. Nervous Conditions’s “feminism” does not reside in the liminal space between the nation and the international but is linked to the national question to arrive at the international dimension.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

In the classical Bildungsroman Nervous Conditions, the epigraphic invocation to Frantz Fanon frames Tambu’s colonial Bildung. Examining the contested question of the dialectical success of Tambu’s colonial Bildung from within the Fanonian theorization of the tripartite development of the consciousness of the colonized intellectual, which culminates in a dialectical resolution, i.e. the representative évolué consciousness, I argue that the novel interrupts precisely such a self-formation in the elision of Tambu’s actual Bildung. This form of Bildungsroman sans Bildung opens the space for Fanon’s decolonizing project, what I call, nationalitarian Bildung, in contrast to the Manichean delirium of colonial Bildung. Nationalitarian Bildung produces national consciousness and the nation-people. Moreover, I show that the “native women” in the novel learn a Fanonian lesson that national consciousness is alone capable of producing an international dimension.

INDEX

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