

Postcolonial Literatures and the Ongoing Process of 'Writing Back'

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POSTCOLONIAL literatures embody a dynamic of perpetually writing back in order to move forward, challenging misconceptions entrenched in and perpetuated by previous texts, whether on the basis of race, nationality, or gender, and opening fertile ground for future elaboration and discussion. In an attempt to forge an ever-widening space within the major critical discourses in the humanities, postcolonial literatures and theories engage in unlocking unspoken, unheard or silenced pasts (of individuals, communities, genders, nations) thus expanding the scope of possibility for culturally and politically viable presents and futures. Postcolonialism is primarily concerned with 'voicing'. Fundamentally, postcolonial literatures and theories aspire to the establishment of an ongoing dialogue, aiming to facilitate a "democratic colloquium between the antagonistic inheritors of the colonial aftermath" (Gandhi x). Inclusive rather than merely "nebulous" or "diffuse" (Gandhi viii), the dialogue of postcolonialism often focuses on regions "whose subjectivity has been constituted in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism" (Adam and Tiffin vii). The dialogue can also, on a wider level, mobilise "a set of discursive practices... [including] resistance to colonialism, colonialist ideologies" and their insidious contemporary

forms and “subjectificatory legacies” (Adam and Tiffin vii). Indeed, this dialogue, or ongoing process of 'writing back', while situated in the symbolic and literary, is firmly engaged in the process of eliciting positive (and necessary) change in the real world. The explosion of Eurocentric notions of canonicity, literature, and language facilitates a 'decolonisation of the mind' of both African reading audiences and their white neo-colonial counterparts (wa Thiong'o).

This dynamic of writing back (and thus moving forward) is clearly visible in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988). In this literary conversation, or argument, Joseph Conrad's Africanist images in *Heart of Darkness* (1917) provoke an impassioned response from Achebe, who in turn prompts Dangarembga to raise her voice. Dangarembga suggests that, in protesting the reductive 'othering' of the black African as 'savage' by skilfully portraying a rich and vivid pre-colonial Ibo existence, Achebe has effectively 'othered', or repressed the voices of, African women. The politics of writing in English, as well as the complex interplay between traditional and colonial forms of patriarchal oppression, will be explored as, departing from Spivak, it becomes apparent that it is not the case that 'the subaltern cannot speak', nor need the “babel” of subaltern voices be “unpleasant” or “confusing” (Gandhi 3). Rather, postcolonial texts such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions* might most fruitfully be seen as speaking clearly and building with and upon each other in a process of self-assertion and self-empowerment, seeking not to have the definitive last word but rather to contribute to a multiplicity of voices, opinions and culturally-specific realities. Achebe and Dangarembga speak to Nigerian, Zimbabwean, African and global audiences of past and present experiences (both positive and negative, 'traditional' and colonial) and thus pave the way, through greater awareness and

respect for difference, to a positive future in an increasingly postcolonial world.

Set in much the same chronological period as *Heart of Darkness* (the late nineteenth century), *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's response to Conrad's text, is an "object lesson" (Thieme 19) in how to achieve much-needed redefinition (and expression) of African subjectivities. Constructing an alternative fictional historiography of the incursion of European colonial society in West Africa, Achebe replaces the limited and reductive Eurocentric gaze with the deeper insights of an Ibo point of view. Achebe refrains from answering perceived racism with racism: his European characters, although heavily overlaid with ironic or symbolic commentary regarding white ignorance, are more three-dimensional than Conrad's 'natives', with the Reverend Smith's Manichaean worldview, where "black was evil", contrasted to his predecessor Mr Brown's more accommodating approach (TF 162). However, he presents the close-knit communities of Umuofia, and each of the Ibo individuals therein, as possessed of far greater agency, insight and interest than mere 'black shapes crouching' (HD 34). Ibo society is shown to be vibrant and complex. Fundamentally, Achebe deals the smug self-importance of empire a savage (harsh and calculated, not unthinkingly 'primitive!') blow by displacing white missionaries, soldiers and government to the margins of the text. Their fatal imposition is registered, but it is only *part* of the text of African cultural history, with the first appearance of the colonialists, denaturalised through Ibo eyes as "albino" men (TF 121), not occurring until Chapter 15, a substantial way through the work.

In this sense, while Innes has claimed that Achebe "rarely lets his reader forget the otherness of the Igbo culture" (34), it is rather the case that the Western reader is 'othered' by the Ibo traditions and words which, while often explained in the glossary present in most

editions, if not the text itself, act as a firm reminder that not all experience can be contained by the English language or the corresponding prevailing European worldview. From the Ibo perspective, cross-cultural encounters render the invaders ludicrous and lacking intelligence (rather than the reverse), a people who, in translation, seem unable to master the difference between “myself” and “my buttocks” (TF 126). As Obierika bitterly observes, it is unlikely that the white man will “understand our custom about land” when he “does not even speak our tongue” (TF 155). The dangers of cultural blindness and the self-legitimizing superiority of the ‘centre’ are made starkly apparent in the sudden shift of perspective to the “the distant eyes of an outsider” (Harris 108) at the novel’s close, where the striking juxtaposition in tone and insight betray the utter inadequacy of the uninvited, self-reflexive commentaries of the “student of primitive customs” (TF 182). The tragic hero Okonkwo (who, despite the masculinist orientation of his *chi*, or personal spirit, the reader has come to admire) is, in the District Commissioner’s blinkered frame, nothing more than a limp body hanging from a tree: pacified, rather than staunchly resisting. The Commissioner concedes that the death of “one of the greatest men in Umuofia” is “interesting” enough to warrant “a reasonable paragraph” in his upcoming Africanist manual (TF 183). Achebe’s work, as “Ur-text” of post-colonial African literary tradition, undermines this “rhetoric of lack” (Gikandi 8) by drawing attention to the need for whole books, by suitably qualified authors: Obierika would be such a spokesperson, had he not, like Okonkwo, “choked” (TF 183) on his words in anger and frustration. As Huggan has suggested, while one of the greatest achievements of Achebe’s “self-consciously hybrid” work is its success in attaching a local, largely ancestral, orally transmitted body of knowledge to an “imported sensibility, the

modern European novel”, he also manages to turn “the language of Western evolutionist anthropology against itself” (43). Not only does Achebe write back to a particular English canonical text, he also parodies “the whole of the discursive field” (Tiffin 23) within which such texts continue to operate, suggesting that, regardless of how “much thought” (TF 183) we devote to the critical enterprise, as long as a false sense of cultural superiority and Western self-definition against a 'primitive other' is maintained, the understandings produced will be fundamentally flawed.

Literary production is, for Achebe, a highly political act. In his view, art is not “pure”, or removed from the context of its creation and reception, but should be actively “applied” to society in order to achieve positive “education” and change (“The Novelist As Teacher” (1965), cited in Osei-Nyame 148). Importantly, Achebe addresses an intended audience not only of white but, primarily, Nigerian readers, aiming to “teach...that their past...was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them” (“The Novelist as Teacher”, in Osei-Nyame 148), and thus to restore a stolen “dignity” (“The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” (1964), cited in Ogungbesan 37) to the African postcolonial self-image.

Achebe asserts that the “world language...forced down our throats” by the history of colonisation (and continuing cultural imperialism) can be used, with skilful appropriation, as a “weapon of great strength” (“The African Writer and the English Language” 63): one with the potential to impact upon a wide reading audience. Although he hopes that the two hundred Nigerian mother tongues will continue to flourish (Rowell 262), Achebe envisages the gradual creation of “a new English” that can be made to “carry the weight of...African experience” (“The African Writer” 65), an idea which

mirrors Bakhtin's conception of words being not only constrained by the traces of previous usages, but also open to the layering of new meanings that fit and validate different social and geographical demands and contexts (Harrow 27). In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe succeeds in forging a written style that echoes oral story-telling, with an abundance of proverbs, "the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (TF 6), facilitating a heteroglossic orchestra of community voices that traverses past and present. The Yeatsian title and epigraph, appropriated from the Western canon, point to the devastation wreaked by empire-building practices as the imperial "knife" attacks the core values of its colonial peripheries, "the things that held us together" (TF 156); exposing, on another level, the fact that the 'heart of darkness', of human cruelty and despair, is not culturally specific but exists wherever "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity" (W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"). However, African intertextualities and resonances are privileged in the text. As such the "straightforward act of bearing witness cracks" (Harrow 66), necessitating a slightly different mode of reading. Achebe paints a paradoxical portrait of a protagonist who is at once a 'typical' Ibo man (even an emblem or allegory of his entire society) and a selfish individualist (Nnoromele 152) who transgresses community values, transforming himself, in death, into an extended proverb or "warning...against taking too-rigid stances" (Harrow 67). As Okhamafe has observed, things begin to fall apart in the nine Umuofian villages long before white missionaries arrive (134), and the civil order crumbles largely because of internal stresses that lead the marginalised (including mothers of twins and osu (outcasts)) to "find relief outside" existing structures (Wren 35). This is not a simplistic acceptance of the "historical inevitability of modernization" on a linear frame à la Hegel (Booker 76) but a complex realisation of the

“seemingly contradictory need for both tradition and transformation” (Harris 109), which can be applied with great effect to the contemporary setting, and the need to fashion an inclusive postcolonial order. We need to avoid equating 'tradition' with stasis, non-change, fixity.

As the world changes, and different voices jostle for attention, the process of writing back will necessarily be ongoing. Despite Achebe's successful illumination, subversion and explosion of the racial stereotypes of paradigmatic colonial texts, it has been suggested that, “for the modern woman writer in Africa,” Achebe's (male) 'author-ity' must seem “as difficult to challenge as [was] the district commissioner's voice” in Achebe's time (Cobham 178). Much as Conrad repressed the perspectives of women excluding Kurtz's European 'Intended' from the domain of masculine reality and further sidelining his African mistress to the river bank several feminist critics contend that Achebe has relegated women to the margins, obscuring a valorisation of patriarchal domination beneath “the rhetoric of racial and cultural retrieval” (Nzenza 216). In particular, Florence Stratton has urged female African authors to refute, or refuse, Achebe's gendered framework. Her essay “How Could Things Fall Apart For Whom They Were Not Together?” points to the systematic exclusion of women from all non-domestic aspects of community power in the novel. Following Stratton, the argument that Achebe's gendered depiction of Ibo life is historically 'accurate' can be challenged on the basis that he “could have done more to question those relations” (Booker 73). Although Traoré has called such readings “culturally illiterate” (66), drawing attention to the manner in which the imposed values of Western feminism might be a form, albeit well-intentioned, of cultural imperialism, it is clear that the “reactionary masculinity” (Hogan 125)

embodied by Okonkwo (driven to despise everything his father loved, he rejects 'effeminate' gentleness along with laziness) is also rife in his wider society. As Traoré concedes, Okonkwo's suicide is in many ways “a direct result of the ... attempt to displace the *Nneka* principle in his private and public life” (50), and it is notable that, while Achebe is consciously concerned with enforcing a sense of the need for societal equilibrium, the overriding proverbial wisdom that 'mother is supreme' never translates from the symbolic to the level of literal or personal experience. Okonkwo's mother remains nameless in the text, alluded to only in reference to the silliness of her stories (TF 66). Even the hospitality of his motherland Mbanta is experienced as a form of punishment for a lesser, that is, female, crime.

Champion wrestler Okonkwo's misogynist tendencies are certainly heightened beyond the cultural norm, with his insistence upon the retelling and reenactment of “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed” (TF 47) contrasted to the compassionate Nwoye's respect, even preference, for women's wisdom. Similarly, Okonkwo's participation in the killing of adopted son Ikemefuna, stemming from his own (feminine) fear of “failure and weakness” (12), is condemned as unnecessary and undesirable by Obierika. However, the general economy of Umuofia also rests on gendered distinctions. Not only was “Yam, the king of crops... a man's crop” (21), but yam ownership was a greater status symbol than marriage: Okoye is lauded as having “a large barn full of yams” and “three wives” (6), in that order. *Agbala*, the word for “woman,” is “also used of a man who has taken no title” (TF 'Glossary'): both, then, are implicitly insulting. Women, as property, are subjected to violence, and it is significant that the earth goddess Ani does not punish Okonkwo for the act of beating Ojiugo (his anger at her having gone to plait her hair instead of cooking was, the narrator decrees, “justifiable” (25)), but merely for doing so during

the Week of Peace. The narrative “backs away” (Stratton 28) from fertile gaps or spaces in which these inequalities might be questioned, as do the female characters. The Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter might be read as a woman-centered paradigm of resistance: three strong females enacting powerful roles priestess, child, courageous mother in a situation where Okonkwo's “machete, the symbol of his male aggression, is of no use at all” (Davies 247). Intriguingly, the priestess interrupts Ezinma just as she is on the cusp of relating how Tortoise and Cat “went to wrestle against Yams” (88), that dominant male symbol, with the unresolved ending of the fable a potential site of disruption. Such possibilities, however, are subsumed within the prevailing phallogocentric story. The feisty Ezinma, who might have figured more in Achebe's narrative, as in Okonkwo's affections, had she been a boy, is, after all, merely one of those infantilised women who, instinctively, “took to their heels” (79) when the (male) egwugwu appeared, fleeing submissively from the centre of political and religious authority. Tellingly, although Achebe does not romanticise Ibo life, the implied male narrator fails to question the injustice suffered by women, and for the most part, the female victims endure with minimal complaint, even silence. Stratton warns that, published at a time when political power was being transferred from the colonial regime to a “Nigerian male elite” (27), such fictional representations risk legitimating the exclusion of women from contemporary public affairs. Indeed, just as the first “nationalist” authors “had to rewrite and reinvent a *presence* that colonialist discourse, in its arrogance, imposture, and triumphalism, had theorized as absence”, so too have female writers been motivated to recover the “submerged female traditions” of artistic expression in order to rise above the seemingly “inevitable, natural *sexism*” (Jeyifo 190, 183) often perpetuated by male writers. In taking the pen into their own hands, female writers are

becoming an increasingly powerful force, asserting rightful demands for respect, recognition and participation in the formation of a range of positive postcolonial futures.

Challenging the reductive representation of women and advocating improvement in their social and material conditions is a major feminist concern, but, in the 'Third World', women's existence is "strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedoms without severe sacrifices or compromises" (Quayson 103-4), a struggle illustrated to great effect in *Nervous Conditions*. As Mohanty has argued in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1994), some feminist writers "discursively colonize" by imagining a composite, singular, "third-world woman" (cited in Quayson 104). This may explain why "the role of 'Africa' in 'post-colonial theory' is different from the role of 'post-colonial theory' in Africa" (McClintock 260): the former often dangerously symbolic, the latter, so far removed from material reality as to be irrelevant, even counterproductive.

Dangarembga's work, the first novel by a black Zimbabwean woman to be published in English (Vizzard 205), is so important to postcolonial understandings (in Africa and in the West) because it displays the vast differences, in aspirations and approaches, both within and between class and generational groupings of Zimbabwean women. Each of the women Tambudzai and her cousin Nyasha, Ma'Shingayi (Tambu's mother) and Maiguru, Lucia, Anne the servant, Tambudzai's grandmother, even the "family patriarch" (NC 142-3) Tete Gladys are aware of the patriarchal incursions upon their lives; but they negotiate very different paths through the complex matrix of "triple" (W.D. Ashcroft 23) colonisation or oppression. These women experience "the poverty of blackness on one side," with the effects of

white colonial rule in 1960s Rhodesia, as well as “the weight of womanhood on the other” (NC 16), with ramifications in both traditional and European frames that compound and intensify as they coincide. In addition, they deal with the fraught fusion of emancipatory strategies in a desired “genuine post-colonial feminism” (W.D. Ashcroft 33), rather than merely an Anglo-American or French body of theory transplanted onto the very different actualities of the former colonies. All of the characters, including the men, are linked in the text to nerves, frustration, powerlessness and anxiety, but the confusion resulting from colliding cultural and gender norms is most palpably apparent in the experience of Nyasha, her body providing “testimony” (Suleri 341) to her psychic disruption as she expels that which she cannot digest, or reconcile. The combination of sadza and foreign sweets and biscuits, along with all they represent, is indeed disturbing; but, unlike Tambu, who can eventually “question things and refuse to be brainwashed” (NC 204) by both imported ideals and imposed inferiorities, asserting the independent will to education and change within the overarching “rules of their community's paradigms” (Kalu 153), Nyasha experiences a kind of homelessness, and emptiness, of self and intellect. Nyasha's socialisation in England may have taught her of her right to stand up for what she believes in (which in turn inspires Tambudzai to look beyond the edges of what she knows), but, alienated from Shona language and norms, she is left without a firm belief for which to fight, only a paralysing sense of the looming problems. Shredding the one-sided history books “between her teeth” (NC 201), Nyasha feels “trapped” by the “Englishness” against which Tambudzai's mother has warned, but she is simultaneously constrained by her father's inability to see his family's, and society's, pre-existing and perpetuated problems of gender inequality,

“punching him in the eye” after he calls her a “whore” (NC 114-5). As Tambudzai observes, “the victimization” is, in many ways, “universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education, or on tradition...Men took it everywhere with them”, such that, at base, all “conflicts came back to this question of femaleness,” and presumed inferiority (NC 115-6).

It has been suggested that Orientalism (and Africanism) are fantasies built upon sexual difference, with the phallogocentric discourse of colonialism inscribing the landscape and population of the exotic 'other' as weak, inferior, yielding and feminine (Yegenoglu 11-12). *Nervous Conditions*, without suppressing “an ounce of its legitimate anger at the misogyny of African men” (Sugnet 36), shows clearly the manner in which those men may themselves be the emasculated products, and puppets, of a colonial hierarchy. The title and epigraph point to Sartre's introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which asserts that “the status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people *with their consent*” (quoted in Booker 191), a kind of psychological subordination. Although Dangarembga's main concern is with “feminizing Fanon's findings on colonial cultural alienation” (Boehmer 228), the male characters are portrayed as having been bewitched by colonialism. Split between loyalty to tradition and the desire to share the perceived material benefits of 'modern' culture, they are led to “accept their own inferiority” (Booker 191), thus cooperating in their subjugation, with both Tambudzai's father and brother suffering “painfully under the evil wizards' spell” (NC 50). Jeremiah, a parody of the 'shiftless native', brandishes an imaginary spear while becoming reliant on the generosity of his Western-educated brother, while Babamukuru, kept “busy” (102) between the demands of life as a surrogate Englishman

and traditional obligations to his extended family, is haunted by the sense that, created by the British colonial system to serve its purposes, his power is illusory. At the Sacred Heart Convent school he, like Tambu, is a mere black face, an (inferior, segregated, undifferentiated) "African" (NC 194). Even Mr Matimba, in order to assist Tambu sell maize to fund her schooling, is forced to perform a subservient and compliant role with white people, speaking "in the softest, slipperiest voice I had ever heard him use" (27). These curtailments and false reshaping of self are spiritually stunting, even fatal: Tambu's brother Nhamo dies, if indirectly, because of his attempt to transcend altogether the 'dirty', cumbersome realities of African communal life. While Tambu herself acknowledges, and for a time even succumbs to, the seductions of a clean, clear-cut white world, Dangarembga ingeniously demonstrates that what colonial discourse defines as 'African' is often really "the debased form of indigenous ways *after* colonialism has disrupted them" (Sugnet 44). The apparently straightforward symbolism of hygiene at first seems clearly arranged in favour of English customs, but Tambu soon reverses her conviction that "the further we left the old ways behind the closer we came to progress" (NC 147). There may be "reproductive odors", children with "upset bowels" and strong "aromas of productive labour" (1) on the slow Umtali bus, but the sparkling white porcelain of Maiguru's bathroom actually suppresses normal bodily functions (making Tambu's menstrual blood seem "nasty and nauseating" (95)), and masks the pathological. The filthiness of the pit toilet is as much a symptom of colonial disease as is Nyasha's vomit: in the "early days" before Tambu's mother 'lost' her children to a new way of life, along with her pride and reason for living, the latrine "had never smelt and its pink plaster walls had remained a healthy pink" (NC 123). Much as an 'unadapted' English vocabulary might be inadequate to convey

African realities, so too do housing structures derived from English circumstances have difficulty coping with the African “dust” (NC 71) which, creeping pervasively in, widens existing class and gender inequalities. Although Maiguru has been educated overseas like her husband, her wages are subsumed within his; her point of view goes largely unacknowledged; and, although she breaks free of her baby-talk to leave his reign for a few days, she ultimately returns to serve at table, and maintain, with the help of servant Anne, the deceptively shiny surfaces of their existence, scrubbing at doubts with an ammonia cleaner which was “efficient but chapped your hands much more roughly than ash dissolved in water from Nyamarira ever did” (NC 67).

It has been suggested that Dangarembga sets the novel “back in history in order to blame the colonizers, rather than Mugabe's government, for the plight of women in Zimbabwe” (Sugnet 46), but it is evident that, in writing about “the things that move” (Veit-Wild 29), affect, enrage and inspire women, traditional African patriarchy does not escape unscathed. Dangarembga has spoken of the need to stop subsuming women's issues, which have not yet received “proper attention or the right kind of analysis”, within the “national question” (quoted in Osei-Nyame, Jnr 55), and *Nervous Conditions* demonstrates the complicity between colonialism and patriarchy, with pre-colonial forms of oppression merely transplanted onto and exacerbated by Western culture. The narrative achieves a “defamiliarization” (Skinner 116) of gender norms by showing them through 8-year-old Tambu's eye to be (like the concept of racial inferiority) mere cultural constructs. The preferential treatments of sons, and the gendered division of housework, labour and authority in traditional society, are magnified in the context of colonial education: the male role as family breadwinner makes Nhamo the 'natural' choice for further schooling,

increasing his privileges exponentially. Tambu's "callousness" to his death (which is also her window of opportunity) is necessary if she is to "escape" the patterns of "entrapment" (NC 1) she sees around her. Convinced of her own worth, Tambu sees the "injustice" (12) of her mother's acquiescence to learning, "the earlier the better," what "sacrifices" (16) will be necessary. The text enters fully into the "woman-centered spaces" (Aegerter 231) the cooking and sleeping areas as well as the mental and emotional terrain mapped therein providing detailed insights denied to the reader in Achebe's male-centered work. As a result, it becomes clear that modes of female resistance from within a tradition-based contemporary African culture are possible. In an echo back to the village elders' adjudication of Mgbafo's marital dispute in *Things Fall Apart* (77-83), where women are excluded simultaneously from proceedings and from readerly view, the perspective of "we, the women and children" becomes the focus in *Nervous Conditions*, making way for the expression of an attitude of "quite violent...opposition to the system" (NC 137) while the *dare* or male meeting regarding Lucia's sexual transgression is conducted. Determining that "she should be there to defend herself" (137), Lucia storms into the house, eyes glittering, and, tweaking Takesure by the ears, demands some "sense" and honesty. Tambu is later unsure whether the "patriarchy" shared her (disrespectful) "laughter" (144), and is herself racked with physical reaction to the wedding which makes a mockery of her parents' existence, as of her own, but the spirit of the moment resonates throughout the work, and beyond the last page.

Just as Tambu questions the success of Nyasha's "rebellion" (NC 1), the reader may fear that the freedom she claims for herself and Lucia is illusory. Notably, Lucia's declaration that Grade One has made her mind "think more efficiently" (160) is overshadowed by both the

colonial ideologies undeniably inherent in the pre-independence syllabus, and the necessity of her “grovelling” to (200) (or, “like a man herself” (171), skilfully manipulating) Babamukuru for assistance. However, Tambu manages to retain positive contact with the spiritual life of the African landscape and her body, immersing herself in “the old deep places” (4) as sources of strength and orientation (rather than succumbing to a reductive identification of the singular subject position, unthinking 'woman', with land and the national identity, able to be raped and lost forever). So too there is a sense that she might be able to break down the “Englishness” (203) to manageable pieces, choosing to consume (rather than be consumed by) some aspects, and rejecting or protesting against others. The young Tambu, fearing that it was “unwise to think too deeply” (39) about sexism lest dissatisfaction “interfere with the business of living”, soon learns that to “bury” (50) thoughts and desires for self-fulfilment is to enact a stifling live burial (much as the burial of the voices of female characters in other texts might have contributed to the social and political stasis of their female readers). To truly know “myself,” Tambu must speak the “knotted” complex issues that characterise her experience of being African, and being female. Although, like her education at the mission and boarding schools, her self-authorship involves the use of the colonial language, her decision is ultimately an empowering one, and she achieves the authoritative status of “interpreter” (Uwakweh 78), rather than the paraphrased or unheard interpreted subject of knowledge. Dangarembga, like other postcolonial women writers, in her “double...perspective of ethnicity and gender” turns “absence into presence” (Begum 27) by giving voice to a multiplicity of previously silenced or marginalised female viewpoints. While there will always be “another volume” (NC 204) to be filled, and new or altered perspectives from which to write back,

this text alone has made important inroads into breaking free of the reductive and stereotypical presentation of African women in literature, thus inspiring positive changes in life.

Appiah has stated that “postcoloniality is the condition...of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers” who have “invented” (149) an Africa for their own use. Such a view might prove as disabling as the notion that 'the subaltern cannot speak', or that self-expression in the once 'colonial' language, English, undermines authenticity: put together, not only would postcolonial writers by definition not be able to communicate but, even if they could, the rest of the world would be too self-absorbed to hear them. Rather, as Darby refreshingly suggests, we may need to alter our mode of approach, so that, instead of becoming caught up in the self-referential requirements of an “often resistant body of theory”, we should give much more weight to the “problems”, and authors, of the so-called 'Third World': in this respect, “Achebe is a better guide than either Derrida or Foucault” (17). Social responsibility, as well as forming the self-professed motivation of the creative work of authors such as Achebe and Dangarembga, “must be the basis of any theorizing on postcolonial literature” (Katrak 157), necessitating a “good-faith effort” to cultivate “readerly tact” (Linton 29, 43) and responsiveness as non-African readers respectfully approach and seek to understand (but not assimilate to their own Eurocentric perspective) different African “ways of knowing” (Kalu xv). *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*, in dialogue with each other and with texts from the Western 'canon' such as that purveyor of Africanist myths, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, provide a positive “way forward” (Dodgson 101) in both the literary and socio-cultural-political domains, encouraging readers to approach the multiplicity of voices they contain in light of the knowledge that, as Achebe has

remarked, postcolonial “travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves” (An Image of Africa” 791).

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