

Tutorial letter 201/2/2016

**Colonial and Postcolonial African
Literatures**

ENG2603

Semesters 2

Department of English Studies

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

This tutorial letter contains important information
about your module.

BAR CODE

Dear Student

Assignment 01

Question 1

***Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga**

Dear Students

We trust that you have read both the novel and the relevant section in the study guide thoroughly before answering the question on the ways in which Nhamo's education at the mission affects his personal development and his relationship with his family.

Please note that students who simply retell the plot are generally penalised. This means that whilst you *should* discuss events that occur in the story, you should also explicitly relate these to the question, and as evidence that supports your argument.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's representation of Nhamo's education at the mission and the effects it had on his personal development as well as his relationship with his family indicates that mental and cultural colonization played a large role in shaping the identities of native Rhodesians during British rule. It is evident that Nhamo's general sense of superiority is based on his English missionary school education, as well as his lack of guilt about his callous utilization of his role as the only male child in his family. This prompts the opening statement of the novel by Tambu, "I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangarembga 1988:1).

Tambu recalls her brother's boastful reaction to the announcement that he would be going to the mission school at which his father's brother Babamukuru was headmaster. He had deliberately exacerbated Tambu's feelings of exclusion and resentment in the context of their patriarchal society by informing her of Babamukuru's belief that his nephew's great intelligence made him worthy of a better education. Nhamo often reiterated his belief that girls were not worthy of a formal education, and Tambu had been deeply upset when Nhamo had gleefully concluded that his new life at the mission meant that he would no longer be the son of the unsuccessful Jeremiah, thereby demonstrating a very derogatory attitude towards his adoring father.

After he left for the mission school, the behaviour and beliefs that had emerged earlier when he had deliberately stolen Tambu's mealie cobs to prevent her from raising money for her fees at the local school became even more entrenched. Tambu's recollections highlight his eager and willing acculturation into the lifestyle at the mission and the fact that his new status became the focal point of his identity. This included his development of a faithful adherence to the Christian values propagated by the English missionaries. He became mentally conditioned to glorify their colonial educational system which promoted their own power and domination; and demanded obedience and self-effacement by their colonized subjects. Tambu narrates that when she was later granted the opportunity to go to the same mission school, the informal history lessons she had learnt when she had worked the fields with her grandmother as a child provided her with a background of the cultural history which predated the arrival of the "white wizards"(p.18) who had displaced her grandparents from their own lands, and later, of the "holy wizards" (p.19), who gave Babamukuru the "wizardry" (p.19) of a formal mission school education.

Tambu's memories include the fact that, at the end of his first year at the mission, Nhamo's appearance had improved considerably, as he was noticeably taller and muscular and had developed a smoother, lighter complexion. She adds that, instead of being dusty and wild as it had been in the past, his hair was now "black, shiny with oil and smoothly combed" (p.53). In contrast to these physical changes, however, a "terrible change" (p.53) occurred, as he had ostensibly forgotten how to speak Shona, and when he did infrequently condescend to speak to his mother and sisters in this language, he had a strange accent and spoke in a halting, ungrammatical manner. He preferred to answer them in English, knowing they were not conversant in the language; treating them as though they were mentally deficient. Nonetheless, the fact that Shona did sometimes "miraculously" return, and then began to "disappear again mysteriously" (p.53) during Nhamo's visits to the homestead, was indicative of his clever, manipulative attitude. As an adult, when Tambu looks back at the past, she is empowered to assert, "The more time Nhamo spent at Babamukuru's, the more aphasic he became and the more my father was convinced he was educated" (p.53). Aphasia is a condition which is characterized by the loss of the ability to understand or produce speech, because of brain damage. Tambu is therefore being sarcastic when she implies that her brother's perfect command of his native language would only be utilized on the rare occasions when it was expedient for him to do so. As a male child, he reserved his verbal communication mainly for his father, who was elated by the effects on his son of the mission school education provided by his brother. Jeremiah believed that Nhamo's ability to speak English was the best way forward to the family's empowerment as it signified good breeding and civilization. He did not discourage or

reprimand Nhamo for his lack of courtesy and patriarchal behaviour towards the females in the family, as well as his disregard for other basic family values.

Tambu's representation of this time in her brother's life indicates that both Jeremiah and Nhamo had no pragmatic understanding of the cultural imperialism that reinforced the young boy's negativity towards his Shona cultural identity. Nhamo had clearly begun to consider that he was too genteel and well-bred for his family. This "budding elitism" (p.50) was reinforced by his lifestyle with his uncle at the mission, as he became used to regular baths and delighted in eating with a fork and knife. He disliked the idea of eating the traditional *sadza*, and having to accept the reality that his parents were too poor to afford the meat which was plentiful at the mission. He became increasingly embarrassed by their impoverished lifestyle, and whenever he returned to the rural homestead, he avoided doing his share of the work linked to survival in this demanding context, despite his greater physical strength as a healthy male. Instead, he chose to read books whilst they carried out their gruelling daily tasks. He often chose to remain at the mission during the school holidays on one pretext or another, preferring the Westernized ways of his cousins Chido and Nyasha. He condescended to return to his family's squalid homestead only once a year, and only when he was forced to do so by Babamukuru. Whenever he did come, he preferred being driven to their rural homestead in his uncle's car and hated travelling by bus, because he thought this mode of transport did not suit his new status in life. He complained that the bus was too slow, and he found the odours of the people and animals on the bus intolerable. Whenever he did arrive by bus, he exercised his traditional authority as a male sibling and bullied Tambu and their younger sister Netsai into carrying his heavy luggage on the long road to the homestead, beating them harshly with a stick if they dared to disobey him. Thus, although Nhamo rejected most aspects of the Shona culture into which he was born, he continued to strongly affirm many of its patriarchal practices.

A close reading of Tambu's depiction of her brother's character indicates that, to some extent, Nhamo's attitude was entrenched by his stay at the mission, since Babamukuru expected complete obedience from his wife Maiguru and daughter Nyasha. He did not acknowledge Nyasha's deep emotional turmoil based on the conflict between African and Western cultures nor the fact that his wife's financial contributions as a teacher enhanced their lifestyle and also enabled him to be very generous towards his own family. However, he did try to acknowledge his roots and to fulfil the social and cultural obligations to his extended family in keeping with Shona traditions, despite the fact that his multi-faceted identity incorporated the beliefs and systems of the foreign culture and religion of his colonial masters. Thus, although he exercised his power and authority very autocratically, this patriarch did not think it was beneath his status to put on his shorts and get down to hard labour on his brother's farm whenever necessary. As

an immature young boy, Nhamo seemed unaware of Babamukuru's willingness to acknowledge his roots, though it was conspicuous that whenever his uncle arrived at the farm, he suddenly developed a willingness to assist with the arduous workload, in a bid to impress his mentor.

Their mother, Ma'Shingayi "was alarmed" (p.53) by Nhamo's development as an individual. Tambu's reminiscences encompass the fact that she was visibly unhappy as she felt that "the mission was a Christian place" (p.53) which did not conform in any way to her Shona cultural beliefs. She confided in Tambu that although she did want her only son to acquire a formal education, she also just wanted to communicate with him, although he very seldom deigned to speak to her. She believed that he had been bewitched by evil spirits and needed to be treated by a traditional medium or priest to restore him to a better way of life. However, his lack of respect for her feelings did not diminish her maternal love for him in any way and this became most strongly evident when Babamuku and Maiguru arrived with the sad news of his death in hospital. Ma'Shingayi's immense grief caused her to ignore the customary norms of respect and deference and her earlier statement about Nhamo's education. After verbally lashing out at Maiguru, she angrily exclaimed to her brother-in-law, "And you too Babamukuru, Phtu! I spit at you! You and your education have killed my son!" (p.54)

The narrative reveals that Tambu's perspective becomes more complex after she was invited to live with Babamukuru's family to gain a mission school education in order to assist her poverty-stricken parents. On the first day of her arrival at the very comfortable home of her uncle and aunt, she began to gain some insight into the effects that a change of lifestyle can have on a very poor and impressionable young person, and the possible reasons for the fact that Nhamo had never experienced any cultural conflict or ambivalence about his colonial education. Her recollections are sometimes rueful as she concedes that it was not inexplicable that the "splendour of that house and the mission" (p.61) had made such a discernible impact on his personal development and his relationship with his family.

Bibliography

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. London. Ayebia Press.

By Ms R Latha

OR

Poetry Question

Read the poem “**A Red Blanket Addresses Christians**” by Nontsizi Mqgqwetho on pages 91-92 of *The New Century of South African Poetry*, and answer the question below.

In the absence of shared cultural and religious beliefs, a sense of community is lost.

In the light of this statement, write an essay in which you analyze the poem “A Red Blanket Addresses Christians” by Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, highlighting the feelings and concerns of the speaker. Briefly discuss the attitudes of the speaker towards Western education and comment on the usage of language.

Background

South African poetry depicts a number of characteristics and influences. Michael Chapman (1986) in his anthology *The Paperbook of South African English Poetry*, prompts that

In recognizing that the South African Literary scene is a heterogeneous one, even a hybrid one, we need not bemoan our lack of cultural homogeneity.

Neither should we attempt to evade the fact that our literature arises from within an ‘unevenness of literacy and learning’. Instead ‘hybridism’ may be understood as a defining feature, and even a distinctive strength of our literature.

The above statement clearly celebrates the diverse cultures from which our poets originate, and the fact that in their writings they consciously depict this hybridism. South African poetry is unique in the sense that it celebrates and speaks to and about the communities concerned. For example Nontsizi Mqgqwetho (*A Red Blanket Addresses Christians*), Mongane Wally Serote (*City Johannesburg*), Roy Campbell (*The Zulu Girl*) and others commented on issues that impacted on their immediate surroundings while voicing their concerns and views on the status quo, usually about the detrimental effects of colonialism.

Chapman also points out that there is 'a tendency in South African poetry to connect the 'I' and the 'We', or individual and the communal concern'. For example, we can refer to 'A Red Blanket Addresses Christians' where the speaker in the last stanza prompts that 'We red blankets will roast you like meat'. The poet or the speaker is seen as a spokesperson for those who are concerned about the strange behavior of the Christians. Her tone depicts anger at the behaviour of Christians. The issue at hand becomes a communal one. We can think of the narrative strategy in *Ways of Dying* by Zakes Mda where he employs an omniscient narrator who is part of the community he is writing about. As readers we discover that in the African tradition circulating stories are not owned by the individuals but by all who form part of the community in question. No one can claim stories as their own. This is one of the defining features of South African poetry or African literature written in English.

South African poetry, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, depicted traces of cultural dislocation and alienation which resulted in loss of identity, slavery, protest and general resistance to colonialism. In the 1970s according to Chapman (1986) South African publishers provided greater opportunities for local expression, the decade that saw a rise of the Black Consciousness movements at the same time as a rise in new black poetry. The works of Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali, Mafika Gwala, Wally Serote, Christopher van Wyk and others are examples that mark this period. It is argued by Chapman that these poets experienced the demeaning effects of Verwoerdian Bantu Education, yet they struck a sharp note in their protests against and their resistance to the dictates of the apartheid state. The new black poets of the seventies, or the 'Soweto poets', felt the tension of being called upon to be simultaneously poets and active participants in the political process and struggle (Chapman: 1986).

Feedback

The title of the poem clearly suggests a clash between African tradition (Redness which can be demonstrated by the smearing of red ochre as a gesture to accept the ancestors) and religion (Christianity). The words 'A Red Blanket' are employed metaphorically or as an image in the sense that they are symbolic of an African culture which is now abandoned by the younger generation, who seems to follow Western civilization.

The speaker clearly condemns the manner in which the youth behaves where respect for African culture diminishes and morality degenerating. The young girls do not preserve themselves and their bodies anymore, but they freely give themselves to their lovers without the payment of dowry. The marriage institution has lost its meaning and respect.

The speaker in stanza two and three gives comments on education. Seemingly the younger generation is brainwashed into thinking that after acquiring education they can do as they please without observing the customs. The younger generation is receiving education but seems to do this at the expense of their culture. The speaker highlights the fact that education instead of empowering the youth, has disempowered them because they seem to lack morality and have lost direction. They have turned into thieves and crooks. Education is seen as a disempowering tool, because it performs that which is undesirable, the opposite of what it should actually be doing. This can be deduced from the following lines in stanza 3, 'Goals crammed to capacity, courts jam packed, With the learned products of school education'.

The notion or the understanding of religion and culture by the speaker is questionable because it seems as if she suggests that one cannot be a 'red blanket' and a Christian simultaneously, (stanza 5) 'You still wear red blankets in God's very house'. We can argue that culture should not be seen as contrary to religion. The two notions can exist simultaneously, and should not be seen as competing for the human soul. In the African context both culture and religion are vital for the human spirit. They each play a role in the life of an individual. (This idea is illustrated in a number of texts such as *The Heart of Redness* by Zakes Mda, where both the believers and non-believers display a profound respect for their ancestors).

According to the speaker, those who call themselves Christians behave in strange ways. The image of a hyena is employed to illustrate this point. In stanza 5 'You're Christians by day, hyenas by night'. A hyena cannot be trusted and is dangerous, which means that the so-called Christians cannot be trusted and their behavior is questionable. The mocking statement 'You Christians are suckers for every fad' clearly points out how the speaker is disgusted. The people are neither grounded in culture nor in religion. Another image employed is 'Cloaking God in crocodile hide' in stanza 6. This means that Christians camouflaged themselves in order not to be seen that they are not true Christians either. Their claim to believe in God is questionable.

The behaviour Christians depict raises a question of identity crisis. This can be attributed to colonialism since it displaced people and they lost a sense of themselves. The Christian religion was also introduced by the missionaries in a manner to confuse and brainwash people instead of empowering them. Therefore in the eyes of many, Christian religion was seen as a weapon for the colonialists to conquer Africans, take their stock, land and mineral resources.

The last stanza clearly parades the fact that the speaker also embraces Christianity or at least has respect for God. The last line,

‘But of course I don’t which to imply
That God’s word’s devoid of truth.
Mercy!

The above quoted lines at the end of the poem prove the point that the poet or the speaker is engaging her views from a particular perspective. The poet as a writer is a representative of her community and therefore part of the culture of the very same community. Her identity along with that of her community is questionable.

Therefore both education and religion are questioned as instruments the West employed to conquer Africa, which in the eyes of the speaker threaten the survival and growth of African tradition and culture. Having done the analysis one can actually agree with the statement that **‘In the absence of shared cultural and religious beliefs, a sense of community is lost’**. This has been evident in the manner in which the speaker raised her concerns, and commented on the behaviour of Christians and those who are educated.

References

- Miller & Greenberg. 1981. *Poetry An Introduction*. London. Macmillan
- Chapman, M. (Ed.). 2002. *The New Century of South African Poetry*. AD Donker Publishers. Johannesburg
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By Ms Z Khanyile