

GIRL POWER IN NERVOUS CONDITIONS: FICTIONAL PRACTICE AS A RESEARCH SITE

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ABSTRACT. To see a fictional text not only as a literary investigation into issues of concern to its author but also as the site of educational research is a very liberating way of extending our understanding of what counts as research and of what counts as an appropriate site of research. As educators we are concerned to use our theoretical findings and newly acquired knowledge(s) in practical ways in our classrooms. If some kind of relevant knowledge can be acquired through the reading and investigation of a fictional text, and if it can be used to improve our classroom and pedagogic skills, should we not be rethinking the traditional boundaries of the 'research site'? This paper explores the use of a 1988 Zimbabwean novel, *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga as the site of research into gender and oppression in relation to postcolonial education.

RÉSUMÉ. Considérer le texte d'un roman non seulement comme une étude littéraire sur des questions qui intéressent son auteur mais également comme le site de recherches pédagogiques est une façon libératrice de mieux comprendre ce qui compte comme recherche et comme site de recherche adapté. En tant qu'éducateurs, nous nous intéressons à l'usage qui est fait des résultats théoriques et des connaissances nouvellement acquises sur les méthodes pratiques utilisées dans nos classes. S'il est possible d'acquérir certaines connaissances utiles par la lecture et l'étude d'un roman, et que cela contribue à améliorer nos techniques pédagogiques et de gestion d'une classe, ne devrions-nous pas dès lors repenser les frontières traditionnelles du «site de recherche»? Cet article analyse l'utilisation d'un roman du Zimbabwe, *Nervous Conditions*, écrit en 1988 par Tsitsi Dangarembga comme site d'une recherche sur les sexes et l'oppression par rapport à l'éducation post-coloniale.

INTRODUCTION

To close the gap between our research findings and our pedagogic practice could well be described as one of the aims of educational research, along with the application of what we read in theory-driven journals to such practice. What I want to suggest in this paper is the possibility of combining research and reading in the investigation of works of literature as possible sites of educational research. Seeing a novel as more than just a fictional

exploration of certain matters of concern to its author is highly liberating to an educational researcher who is schooled in the belief that to 'do research' is, for example, to investigate classroom practice or to account for levels of literacy in a given group, and that to read relevant material is to peruse journal articles on the theory of education. Seeing a literary text as a site of research – as more than just a literary space – can be a new and exciting way into the exploration of how the ideology of theory might intersect with some of the power differentials involved in the practical application of such theory in the classroom.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* lends itself admirably to an exploration of the relationship between ideology and power – between, in this case, education and the ways in which education serves not only as a means to the empowerment of the young female protagonist, Tambu, but also as a site of her oppression as a black girl in Southern Africa. This novel, set as it is in the pre-liberation years of Rhodesia, and first published in 1988, may well function as a way into understanding some aspects of this relationship in its investigation of how a young girl learns to deal with the traumatising events of her life as a colonised subject desperately seeking an education. In addition to this, *Nervous Conditions* may offer us a way into researching the implications, for girls' education, of some of the complexities of benevolent patriarchy. In her novel Dangarembga presents us with her investigation into the colonial co-option, within the educational system, of the local community patriarch, Babamakuru, Tambu's uncle and school principal, and she offers some exploration of possible feminist strategies of coping with these complexities. It may also serve to offer a way of viewing the female adolescent as someone other than the 'Ophelia'² of much current thinking about young girls and their inevitable fall from innocence into inauthenticity; the benefits of this alone to educational research in relation to girls in school are enormous. The girls represented in this work, Tambu and her cousin, Babamakuru's daughter, Nyasha, are feisty young women who, in different ways and with different degrees of success, try to counter the oppression to which they are subjected. Reading the representation of adolescence – particularly when such representation refuses the stereotypical, if academic, portrayal of this period of teenage development – in a novel as more than just a literary space³ may enable us to 'do educational research' in a way that allows us to cross the apparent boundary between the so-called 'soft' knowledge of fictional explication and the 'hard' knowledge of theoretically based research findings. Such an approach may initiate a dialogue between the (perceived) luxury of reading a novel and the (perceived) solid work of collecting and collating data and of presenting pragmatic research findings.

Feminist fictional practice speaks back to patriarchal colonialism

Nervous Conditions, Tsitsi Dangarembga's literary, feminist investigation of girlhood in Zimbabwe in the late 1960s and early 70s, focuses on the

education of two young women, Tambu and Nyasha – cousins and friends – who struggle against the oppression of their situation within a deeply patriarchal society. One of the strategies that Dangarembga, as a feminist writer, employs to speak back to patriarchal colonialism is her use and subversion in her novel of two literary generic antecedents – the traditional bildungsroman, or novel of growth and development, and the traditional colonial novel. These genres are both based on the belief in the didactic significance of realism, which, to put it reductively and somewhat colloquially, suggests that in offering ‘a slice of life’ to his or her readers, the author, through the omniscient narrator, is enabled, also, to offer them a learning opportunity based on what happens to the characters depicted in the novel. Both genres have to do with cause and effect and, therefore, with the consequences of various actions performed by, and behaviours manifested in, the characters. Because of this didactic orientation, both genres exploit, to varying degrees, the significance of closure: in the bildungsroman the (usually male) hero achieves moral and chronological maturity while the protagonist (again, usually male) of the colonial novel suffers the torn consciousness of the educated person who, upon his return to his family, can no longer fit into the village community into which he was born. The morally (and, often, moralistic) didactic purpose of these realist narratives and the insistence on the power of the omniscient narrator to achieve this purpose, along with its linear (supposedly logical and rational) structure, has much in common with the patriarchal world view out of which realism grew.

Dangarembga’s subversion of some of the conventions of these genres, the most obvious of which is, of course, her use of a female protagonist – in fact it can be argued that she uses two female protagonists, Tambu and Nyasha, thus further subverting this particular convention – is aimed at interrogating the hegemonic patriarchal assumptions behind them, those same assumptions which underlie the systemic oppression of women. We are, invited to see Tambu and Nyasha as representative of two different ways of dealing with aspects of this oppression.

In keeping with the conventions of realism, Dangarembga’s depiction of Tambu as a young girl desperate to go to school is set against the backdrop of local traditional opinions and attitudes. Here we are presented with a belief – so typical of many Sub-Saharan African men – that women count for much less than they do. Near the start of the novel Tambu says: “The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority or even legitimate” (p. 12). She goes on to tell us of her sense of injustice at the fact that her brother, Nhamo, as we have learned earlier, was sent to school so that he, “if given the chance . . . would distinguish himself academically, at least sufficiently to enter a decent profession” (p. 4). Because Nhamo’s education was seen to be a way out of the poverty of the family, the cost of his education was deemed worthwhile. Tambu’s father

voices the traditional point of view when he says to his daughter: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (p. 15). Her mother's observation that "being black was a burden because it made you poor . . . [and] being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband" (p. 16) echoes what is generally held to be the case in Africa. But for Tambu this is reason enough to decide that she shall return to school to complete her education, disrupted because the family's financial precariousness did not allow sending her back to school past Standard Three. It is not only research in developing countries that turns up such beliefs in the superiority of boys over girls: the unequal power relations inherent in patriarchy are patent everywhere. As researchers the exploration of these issues in a novel provides us with a way into an examination of the sexist and heteronormative assumptions and practices we all encounter regardless of where we live and of where we engage in research.

Dear to the bildungsroman and to the colonial novel is the 'adoption' of the intellectually superior boy by a mysterious benefactor who makes his education possible and who gives him the chance to enter worlds previously denied to him.⁴ Dangarembga transfers that seeking after knowledge and improvement of the male hero of the bildungsroman and of the traditional colonial novel onto a young girl in whose community education is a male privilege, thus questioning the very patriarchal basis of the genres themselves. Her generically subversive narrative strategy speaks directly to the plot line and this provides us with an opportunity to investigate the orthodoxy and exclusivity of these male oriented genres. The gifted, traditionally male, protagonist of the colonial novel is replaced by a talented (but also diligent and hardworking) girl. The romanticised rites of male passage, necessary to the often disadvantaged male of the traditional bildungsroman, as he makes his way to success, are replaced by the practical markers of female development: Tambu deals with her first menstrual period. The growth of male confidence in the hero of the bildungsroman that allows him to face the world is replaced by Tambu's learning to use a knife and fork. That awakening into consciousness of the male hero of both genres is wittily and tellingly subverted into Tambu's growing realisation that the seductiveness of that very sought-after white privilege is difficult to resist, as she begins to challenge those markers of patriarchally endorsed success such as winning competitions to gain a place in an elite school. To extrapolate from these fictional manoeuvres into lived classroom experience in an attempt to match our reading to our pedagogic practice can only benefit our students. To use a classroom reading of this novel as a site of research is made easier for the researcher (and, where relevant) for his/her subjects by the distance, as it were, between fiction and life and by the literal geographic distance between Rhodesia, which no longer exists, and wherever it is that such research is taking place. The safety that such distance, in both senses, allows

can be reassuring to teacher researchers and students alike as they begin to see the parallels between their own situation and that of colonial Rhodesia.

Dangarembga's portrayal of Nyasha, daughter of Tambu's benefactor, Babamakuru, is an interesting variation on the colonial theme in that she has this young woman return from England to Zimbabwe – a movement which, while it parallels in geographic terms that of her father, whose higher education took place in England, could not be more different in effect: Babamakuru's patriarchal privilege has been endorsed and consolidated in the very place where Nyasha has been given the liberal education which has taught her to think freely and independently and which has taught her to question the very patriarchal ideology and practice which her father has been empowered to entrench back home in Rhodesia. Inevitably, her return is marked by the pain and ambivalence typical of that torn and unanchored consciousness of the colonised subject. We see, through her eating disorder, her attempt to regain control of her adolescent life. The memories of her freedom in Britain cannot be reconciled to the reality of her life in Rhodesia and we see adolescence for Nyasha in terms of both assertiveness and a kind of regression as she becomes dangerously undernourished and painfully thin – a shadow of her younger self.

While I agree that research into the connections between educational systems and adolescent eating disorders involves a multitude of complexities, Dangarembga's investigation of Nyasha's response to the pressures of her life can provide a useful starting point. Nyasha is oppressed not only by the sexism so entrenched in her community but also by her status as a postcolonial young woman thrust back into a colonial situation in which she is both daughter and student of the ruling patriarchal school principal.

In yet another act of narrative subversion, Dangarembga refuses her readers the comfort of closure, and in so doing, points to her conviction that process, not product, is the point of learning. She has Tambu say, in the final sentences of the novel:

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. . . (p. 204)

The implications of this realization of the importance and value of process within an understanding of the educational goal of life-long learning are of great significance to educational research into, for example, forms of assessment which encourage an emphasis on the processes of learning in favour of some quantifiably measurable product such as a set of an examination answers. Here again, this novel provides us with a research space, as it were, and not just a space of literary investigation. Dangarembga's portrayal of the grade-obsessed Nyasha, at one point in the novel, points to the dangers, for a particular kind of girl, of a secondary school system in which success is

based on examination results. She also offers us a portrayal of a girl for whom it is strategically necessary to play this game by its own rules since this is the only way to the educational success she has decided will be hers as a means to reach at least some measure of independence. A feminist point arising from this has to do with the recognition that there can be no such thing as a post feminist world until there is equality between the sexes and that this requires continuous effort in a seemingly everlasting process. As researchers here we can establish or investigate possible links between reading and becoming aware of social feminist activism: to explore the difference between Nyasha's extreme 'all or nothing' response and Tambu's moderate 'roll with the punches' approach to solving problems is to advocate a feminist strategy based on the recognition that working towards change must take heed of one's goals as well as one's limitations, and that effecting change takes perseverance. It seems to me that to read about Nyasha's failure and Tambu's success in this novel is necessarily to be made aware of the extent to which the kind of colonial educational practice depicted in the book is amenable to a feminist activist research approach.

Girlpower, or the refusal of the 'Ophelia stereotype'

This novel of female empowerment can be characterized as the ultimate Southern African refusal of, or challenge to, what I would describe as the pervasive "Ophelia Myth" which would have us believe that female adolescence is "one long sad slide into the blighted second class citizenry of adult femininity."⁶ Through her representation of Tambu and Nyasha, the adolescent girls, who, in their defiance of the patriarchy, however ultimately successful or unsuccessful, actively refuse that 'long sad slide' into the oppressed adult femininity of their respective mothers, Dangarembga anticipates contemporary notions of 'girlpower.'

It is not merely the plot details of *Nervous Conditions* that illustrate this defiance of those beliefs about adolescent girls that underpin the 'Ophelia Myth;' the fictional strategy of Tambu's first person narration enables Dangarembga to explore the very processes of female self-empowerment as they occur in the protagonist. Tambu is telling the story as a first person memory piece: Dangarembga begins her novel by having her narrator, Tambu, explain that it was only because her brother died that she was able to go to school in the first place. However, not only does she explain this but she also refuses to indulge in guilt about how she was granted this chance to be educated.

I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died, and there are reasons for this more than the mere consequence of age. Therefore I shall not apologize

but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. (p. 1)

Dangarembga presents Tambu as actively remembering her girlhood and she has her offer her own perspective on how she came to terms with her childhood and early adolescent experience of being a girl for whom an education was not a given, but something to be sought after and fought for, often in apparently callous and in competitive ways which were alien to her personality.

For Tambu, early adolescence is not only a time which marks the inevitable growth into adulthood, it is also the space in which her memories of the totally naturalised patriarchal oppression of her childhood threaten to overwhelm her with a sense of her own unworthiness. That innocent eagerness of the child to return to school that drove Tambu to grow and sell mielies (maize) to raise the necessary money gives way to anxiety and despair. We are party to her thoughts on her way to her uncle and benefactor, Babamakuru's mission house:

Had I really thought . . . that these other-worldly relations of mine could live with anyone as ignorant and dirty as myself? I, who was so ignorant . . . deserved to suffer . . . for having been too proud to see that Babamakuru could only be so charitable to our branch of the family because we were so low. He was kind because of the difference. (p. 65)

For Tambu femaleness, poverty and lowliness are equated. It is not until she learns to recognise how powerful the processes of interpellation, or socialisation into prevailing dominant discourse, are that Tambu can deal with her sense of lowliness. Unlike the 'Ophelia-adolescent' for whom victimhood has so much appeal, she refuses such self-pitying inauthenticity and becomes determined to rise, again, above the conditions in which she finds herself. From sliding "into a swamp of self-pity" (p. 65) she becomes, ten pages later, "intrigued and fascinated with one part of [her] mind, the adventurous explorative part" (p. 75) as she becomes aware of the ways in which an education abroad has made Nyasha, her "Anglicised cousin" (p. 76) behave. A little later in the novel she admits, wryly, to being a "bit masochistic at that age, wallowing in [her] *imagined inadequacy* (my italics) a few lines before "reaffirm[ing] [her] vow to use the opportunity [her] uncle has given [her] to maximum advantage" (p. 89) and this self awareness finds full expression three pages later as she describes being at school with Nyasha and living in Babamakuru's home:

Thus began the period of my reincarnation. I like to think of my transfer to the mission as my reincarnation. With the egotistical faith of fourteen short years... 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. In short, I expected my sojourn to fulfil all my fourteen year old fantasies, and on the whole I was not disappointed. (p. 93)

While patriarchy itself is transcultural and transhistorical, its manifestations are not: its power relations are complex, unfixed, highly nuanced and context based, often experienced in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, to articulate. The cultural assumptions behind the refusal to see girls as worthy of being educated finds many different forms of expression, however less extreme than this they might be, in our classrooms and our staff rooms. Of interest here to research into the ways in which young girls view themselves is the observation that Tambu, at first (in the extracts quoted above), speaks of herself as poor, female and dirty in relation to Babamakuru's wealthy maleness. The link between poverty and femaleness is so well documented internationally as to be a given and, here again, we see the workings of a nuanced patriarchy which validates the very wealth of the men, in relation to their poor female relatives, which is both the cause and the result of patriarchal oppression. For Tambu, a poverty over which she has no control is reason enough for her to feel, not only wholly inadequate but unworthy even of charitable handouts. That she rises above this is testimony to her own resilience and determination, and also to her recognition that obtaining an education is worth whatever it might cost. As educators we could use these sequences which demonstrate how subtly nuanced patriarchy actually is and how different kinds of feminist response might work in similar situations as fruitful sites of research. In such ways can novels like *Nervous Conditions* provide more than fictional diversion in opening up such space for investigation into the workings of gender relations in the field of education.

Although Dangarembga has Nyasha, through her anorexia and bulimia, fade from the text as she fades from vigorous protest against the strictures imposed by male hegemonic control in her family and social life, this is a function of her attempt to wrest control over her own life back from her father. In no way is her eating disorder an Ophelia-like response to approaching adulthood. Rather, in this overtly established connection between pathology and forms of narration we see the loss of a young woman to an eating disorder, not as metaphor of compliance to patriarchally determined norms of female beauty and attractiveness but to an illness which is metaphor for the inappropriateness of her excessive and unstrategic response to such oppression. Exerting control over what one eats is not the answer to the patriarchal control of women's access to learning and education in Southern Africa: to fade away is to give up and it is precisely this recognition which forces Tambu to pursue her education in preference to giving it up in order to look after Nyasha.

In this refusal of the adolescent Ophelia myth Dangarembga anticipates some of the more recent theorizing about "knowing childhood" that we see in the work of Anne Higonnet, author of *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* or James Kincaid in his *Erotic Innocence: The*

Culture of Child Molestation. Arguing that the notion of childhood innocence is a social construction that is formulated by adults as a way of ensuring the vulnerability of children, these authors contest the validity of the category 'childhood innocence.' This is in no way to suggest some sort of moral binary: this is not about 'good innocence' as opposed to 'bad knowingness' but is, rather, about attributing active agency to the child instead of assuming some kind of blind passivity. If we refuse to see childhood only as innocence, then we refuse to see adolescence necessarily as fall. Instead, we are enabled to see adolescent girlhood as a productive time and as a space of positive agency. Tambu and Nyasha most certainly fall into the category of 'knowing children' in their quest for fairness in their lives. Educational research into what it means to be such an active agent of change as an adolescent girl struggling against entrenched sexism in the institutions of both family and education could, most usefully, begin with this novel. Tambu succeeds because she tempers this agency with common sense and moderation and Nyasha fails because she refuses to do so: for her no compromise is possible. Tambu, who at age eight or nine is determined to grow enough maize to sell in order to raise money to pay her school fees, is equally determined, years later, not to attend the wedding ceremony the Christianised Babamakuru insists upon to legalise the common law union of her parents. Nyasha's defiance of patriarchal oppression is equally apparent throughout the novel. As a child of nine or ten years of age we see her refusing to go along with her mother's conformity and this refusal to conform remains characteristic of her throughout the text. For neither of these feisty young women is adolescence that "long sad slide into the blighted second class citizenry of adult femininity" (McCarthy, p. 195). Not for them is Ophelia's pond or Alice's rabbit hole.

Postcolonialism, pathology and education

Dangarembga's use of the term 'nervous conditions' in the title of her novel, drawing as it does on Jean-Paul Sartre's observation in his Preface to Franz Fanon's (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth* that "[t]he status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonised people with their consent" (p. 20) carries with it an obvious post colonial referentiality. These 'nervous conditions' are generally thought to be manifested in the women of the novel – Nyasha's eating disorder, Lucia's sometime barrenness, Tambu's mother's lethargy etc. – but an interesting site of research into this novel might be to investigate how we could understand Babamakuru and Nhamo, Tambu's brother, as victims, too, of colonisation as well as recognising them as patriarchal oppressors.

Sartre's discussion of Fanon's observation that the postcolonial (vertical) violence against the coloniser is preceded by that (horizontal violence) perpetuated against those with whom one finds oneself as fellow colonised

subject is based on a similar point to that made by South African writer and journalist Antjie Krog in her (partly fictionalised) account of this country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of my Skull* (1998):

The hearings on human rights violations have forced the Truth Commission to formulate a different position on reconciliation – in a way which takes it out of the colour code and makes it available to all South Africans as a future guideline. The human rights of black people were violated by whites, but also by blacks at the instigation of whites. So the Truth Commission was forced to say: South Africa's shameful Apartheid past has made *people* lose their humanity. It dehumanized people to such an extent that they treated fellow human beings worse than animals. (p. 58, her italics)

Although we often fondly believe in the pervasive myth that suffering ennobles, that those who have suffered will automatically have become compassionate through such oppressive experience, it is a commonplace of psychological research that, for example, men who are brutalised in armed conflict against other men bring that violence back with them into their homes and the domestic abuse of women is often the result. It is the horizontal violence suffered by soldiers fighting other men much like themselves that turns downwards, as it were, into the vertical violence they use against women and children at home after their return from war. They suffer a process of dehumanisation that allows or enables them to dehumanise those weaker or more vulnerable than themselves. For Fanon, the processes of colonisation dehumanise the colonised and this allows them to turn on their colonisers with the violence which so often characterises such revolutions, but I want to suggest that using this model of horizontal and vertical violence in a different, though related way, will perhaps enable us to see that 'nervous condition' of the native being as manifest in Babamakuru, and the boy, Nhamo, for example, as it is in the women under patriarchal domination in Dangarembga's novel. It might also enable us, as teachers, to understand what is happening in our classrooms when we witness the various ways in which the oppressed oppress others. This model involves seeing Babamakuru as 'victim' (in however qualified or relative a sense) of the colonisers who have co-opted him, however eager and willing his own complicity in this, and this sort of horizontal violence perpetuated on him finds its vertical counterpoint in his excessive need to control the women in his community. As a site of research into the oppressive practices of colonial education this aspect of the novel could provide valuable material. It might also yield useful insights into the current debates around diversity management in the classroom, for example.

For Babamakuru's son, Nhamo the distancing function of disgust replaces the need to control: as Hershini Bhana (1999) in her aptly entitled article, "'The Condition of the Native': Autodestruction in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*" points out, Nhamo has so "internalised the collapsing of the

'blackness' of dirt with the 'blackness' of race ... [that] his ostensible disdain for dirt translates into a disdain for the black peasant" (p. 120). His internalisation of the beliefs and attitudes of the colonial mindset is obvious and here again we see the horizontal violence of co-option, of the internalisation of colonial cultural norms, justifying the vertical exercise of oppression. On the first page on the novel Dangarembga has Tambu describe her brother Nhamo's return trips from school to his village thus:

He did not like travelling by bus because, he said, it was too slow. Moreover, the women smelt of unhealthy reproductive odours, the children were inclined to relieve their upset bowels on the floor, and the men gave off strong odours of productive labour. (p. 1)

I want to suggest that education functions in this novel as the point of intersection where, in my new model, the horizontal meets, as it were, the vertical axis of oppression for the young girl Tambu, who, unlike the other women in the text, sees its potential to at least mitigate the oppression of women even if it cannot hope to obliterate it. Babamakuru, in his co-opted colonialism as headmaster of the mission school, directs his control, as educator, downwards through the educational system and as patriarchal paterfamilias, however benevolent, downwards through the institution of the family. Because Nyasha is his daughter and Tambu his niece and because they are both also his pupils, they are in line for this downward oppression twice over. But, through the depiction of these young girls and their response to this vertical oppression, I think that Dangarembga explores the possibility that if education can be made to function in its own right it may serve to move women, to however limited an extent, out of the way of some of this vertical patriarchal oppression. One of the ways in which this can be effected, she suggests in this novel, is through the act of storytelling. It has become a commonplace observation that storytelling – narrating the details of the tribulations and triumphs of one's life, detailing one's sorrow or grief or longing as well as the cost of one's successes – is a process which can help lead to the healing of the damaged or fragmented self. It is through Tambu's own narration of the story of the ambivalence of her life as a colonised subject in pursuit of an education, that Dangarembga offers this possibility of healing, and, through such healing, a way for Tambu to move out of the way of that vertical oppression. For Nyasha, there is no such possibility: her extreme response to patriarchal control causes her to fade from the novel and, presumably, from life.

In an interview with Rosemary Marangoly George and Helen Scott (1993), Tsitsi Dangarembga, in an interesting echo of William Blake's injunction to the Piper to record his songs for posterity, to "sit ... down and write/ In a book that all may read" (cited in Keynes, 1966, p. 111) spoke of the need "to write things about ourselves in our own voices which other people can pick up to read." She concludes: "And I do think that *Nervous Conditions* is

serving this purpose for young girls in Zimbabwe" (p. 310). Dangarembga's fictional practice in her novel implements exactly this theoretical observation. The author has her narrator, Tambu, speak her chosen life into existence while Nyasha, in becoming, as it were, disembodied through her eating disorder, loses her voice completely. Her adolescent protest is too extreme to result in change in her society and she fades from the novel as Tambu, her fragmented self well on the way to being healed, decides to return to school instead of choosing the traditional female role of staying to help look after her.

Educational research into adolescent responses to (colonial) oppression might fruitfully begin in the investigation of a novel such as this which deals with the interconnection between colonialism, education and pathology. From Babamakuru's obsessive need, as the co-opted colonist, to control his world and all its inhabitants, to his daughter, Nyasha's eating disorder, from Babamakuru's well educated wife, Maiguru's use of baby talk in her frustration at being prevented from using her M.A. in Philosophy, to Tambu's mother, Mainini's, inertia and her "unlocalised aches all over her body" (p. 57) her response to her belief that it was because of education that her son Nhamo died and her fear that the same fate will befall her daughter who is determined to go to school, various forms of pathology are seen to be attendant, in some way or other, upon education. As one of the most powerful tools or mechanisms of the colonising endeavour, colonial education could well stand in for colonialism itself, so that Fanon's 'nervous conditions,' or psychiatric disorders, can be seen to be the inevitable lot of those subjected to such education. In its investigation of these 'nervous conditions' of the colonised native, this novel can function as the site of important research into variations of such response in our own students who operate under different forms of the colonisation of patriarchy.

'Colonisation' is a site of ideological and semantic slippage, as Chandra Mohanty (1991) has pointed out. For her,

the term 'colonisation' has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writing in general. From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxisms ... to its use by feminist women of colour in the US, to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements, the term 'colonisation' has been used to characterise everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the 'Third World.' (p. 61)

In her analysis of the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject in . . . [western] feminist texts" she draws attention to the "implicit assumption of the west . . . as the primary referent in theory and praxis." But even if I, as, unavoidably, a descendent of the "avaricious and

grasping . . . [white] wizards” described by the narrator’s grandmother in *Nervous Conditions* (p. 18), a white middle class academic in South Africa, am guilty (and perhaps it is impossible not to be?) of such assumptions, does this, necessarily, condemn me to inertia? Can I not enact my belief, with Mohanty, that feminist scholarship “does not comprise merely ‘objective knowledge’ about a certain subject” but that it “is also a directly political and discursive practice insofar as it is purposeful and ideological” (pp. 61-62) by using such theory to try to effect social change in the classroom? What better way is there, for me as an educator in English literature and Gender Studies, to turn my work on feminist literary theory into such political and purposeful practice than to initiate a dialogue between the exploration and analysis of literary texts of colonised girls’ education and development, on the one hand, and educational research into adolescent learning and female self empowerment on the other?

Dangarembga, like her narrator, Tambu, grew up in what was then the British colony of Rhodesia. Her standard of education was immensely higher than the national average for black women at the time. For this novelist the clash between her ‘First World’ education and her ‘Third World’ location finds some resolution in this novel in that it is her articulation of that consciousness of being a woman in Africa – with all that this means in terms of the ‘double jeopardy’ marginalisation of being both black and female – regardless of her superior education. At the risk of being labelled essentialist I wonder if perhaps women’s research into girls’ education is not often fuelled by a similar consciousness of what it means to be female, and, if this has been the impetus for a novel about girls and education, then surely such a novel is a good place to begin such research? For men researching such a subject, this novel could well present them with what they may not have experienced firsthand and thus provide a space in which to both learn about, and to investigate, oppressive educational or pedagogic practice.

For Dangarembga, I believe, the adolescence of these two female characters represents the potential movement of Zimbabwean society from the childhood of colonial submission to the ideal postcolonial status of full adulthood in which (feminist) equality can be pursued. Made explicit in the novel is the realisation that adolescence itself is the space in which the seeds of further change can germinate. Tambu’s concluding observation reads thus:

I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart [school] and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, 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. . . . (p. 204)

Dangarembga’s use of adolescence as trope, therefore, encourages an examination of how her work might be linked to other texts which concern

themselves with girlhood in the world – texts of, for example, Young Adult fiction, those of Development Education and those of feminist explorations of gender.

Discussion

Thus, while the representation of adolescence occurs in *Nervous Conditions* as a literary space of personal narration, it can also be seen as an exploratory space in which very specific issues of childhood and adolescence in relation to education can be investigated and understood, not only by the readers of this text as a work of fiction, but also by educators researching such issues. Literary space becomes conjoint with that of educational research and, possibly, feminist intervention. As Ruth Saxton observes in her Introduction to *The Girl: Constructions of the Girl in Contemporary Fiction by Women*:

... contemporary stories of girlhood constitute a new and generative lens for literary and cultural study. As they have in the past, girls remain fixtures in today's fiction, particularly in fiction by women; reverberations and dissonances between fictional visions of girlhood call attention to new texts and contexts as it simultaneously provides us a new lens through which to re-vision older and perhaps more familiar plots and tests of girlhood. (p. xiii)

This is something that I explore with my colleagues (Mitchell et al., 1998) in a recent paper on “mapping girlhood as a cultural space.” As we observe of fictional texts dealing with girlhood:

Such texts draw our attention to the significance of imagination in mapping out change, and the ways that literature/story-telling can impel people to action. *Nervous Conditions*, for example, can be thought of as a therapeutic space in which very specific issues of girlhood-in-the-world can be investigated, understood and, at least conceptually, dealt with by girls and young women themselves, as well as by those entrusted with their care and guidance. Similarly, this novel fits effortlessly into the range of works which can be seen to function as agents of social change. That this can be done against the backdrop of the patriarchally determined and maintained literary genres and generic conventions which, in their turn, are being interrogated by Dangarembga, speaks to the ways in which an example of literature can be mapped onto the texts from other disciplines which advocate and/or encourage change. In other words, the didactic (and originally paternalistic) impetus of Realism, in this and other novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb* and Farida Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight* is rechannelled – away from the patriarchal which gave it life towards the feminist which gives it new meaning.

Feminist Literary Criticism and Feminist Social Activism can both lay claim to such novels as *Nervous Conditions* in the investigation of its didactic agenda. Critical Literacy and Critical Pedagogy initiatives can draw from it in their addressing of feminist issues in Development Educa-

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tion. Educational Psychologists could do worse than consider the fictionally represented responses of Nyasha and Tambu, the two girls in the novel, to what it actually means to be educated within the colonial framework – mind set as well as ideologically material reality – which is still so much a part of the developing world. (p. 174)

Using the representation of adolescence in *Nervous Conditions* as a site of research, therefore, we could do worse than consider the relationship between the fictionally represented responses of Nyasha and Tambu and what it actually means to be educated within a colonial framework, one which is still so much part of the developing world and not that removed, in many, if somewhat different, ways, from our own.

NOTES

1. I have co-taught this novel so many times over the past eight years with my friend and feminist colleague, Karen Lazar, that I have long forgotten where my insights into the text end and hers begin; some overlap is inevitable and for this valued result of our collaboration I am most grateful to her.
2. Pipher, M. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York: Putnam's.
3. Here I borrow a little from the title of an earlier paper on fiction for, and about, young adults (1998): "Reading Adolescence as (more than) a Literary Space in some Southern African Fiction."
4. In passing, it is interesting to note that the colonial novel has become known in South Africa as the 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' novel because of the social reality of so much migration to Johannesburg of young people in search of education, employment and a route out of the poverty of rural existence.
5. A useful example of a traditional colonial novel, and one which can, very profitably, be compared with *Nervous Conditions*, is Charles Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain*, which is also set in Rhodesia and which has the standard male protagonist described above.
6. McCarthy, M. (1998). Transforming visions: A French toast to American girlhood in Luc Besson's *The Professional*. In S. A. Inness (Ed.), *Millennium girls: Today's girls around the world*, p. 195. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

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