

Tutorial letter 201/1/2018
Colonial and Postcolonial African
Literatures
ENG2603
Semester 1
Department of English Studies

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BAR CODE

Dear Student

Assignment 01 - Semester 1:

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The first task, as you will remember, is to make sure you understand thoroughly what the assignment question requires you to do. A breakdown of your assignment question must have revealed to you that you were required to discuss how imagery in B.W. Vilakazi's poem "Nightfall" helps the poet to introduce the exploitation of black labourers. So the keywords to keep at the back of your mind as you write your answer are "imagery", "exploitation" and "black labourers." In other words, in your answer you have to discuss the imagery describing the exploitation of black labourers. Yet this is not all you have to bear in mind: the remains how you are going to decide on the structure of your essay, for your answer must be in essay form. In other words, you are going to score marks not only for the relevant content of your answer, but also for the structure of the answer itself.

One of the commonest ways to write a good introduction is by giving an account of the sense of a poem, i.e., what the poem is all about. The introduction has to be brief, so you cannot discuss the required imagery in that part of your essay. All you need do, in addition to summing up the sense of the poem, is to tell the reader of your essay what you are going to do in the body of the essay. If you have not understood what your assignment question requires you to do, you are going to indicate the 'wrong' think you will be doing in the body of your essay. The marker will thus pick up immediately in your introduction that your body and conclusion are going to be irrelevant to the assignment question – even before reading the essay itself. Already you will be losing marks. Of course you could surprise the marker by spelling out your intention in the introduction, of doing something, and then have the body of your essay do something else. For that you will still lose marks – this time for incoherence. Meaning that different parts of your essay will not 'speak to each other.'

Candidates cannot be expected to decide on the same kind of introduction. Those choosing to open the essay by relating the sense of the poem and by promising to analyse the imagery of exploitation later, would do so. You would score a good mark by, right at the introduction, including your observation of a certain achievement the poet has achieved by the effective use of this kind of imagery. For example, you could state that the overall effect of imagery in the poem is the highlighting of a contrast in the content of the poem. It is a contrast of content describing undisturbed, harmonious and friendly nature, with disruptive, alienating and hostile industrialization. Remember, you need not to have used the exact words I use. Other words of your own expressing more or less the same reader response would have been correct.

After such a promise to analyse imagery in the body of your essay, and your interpretation of an existing contrast in the contents of the poem, in order to be coherent in the paragraphs of your essay body must expand on those two premises. If I were you, I would open the first paragraph of the body by stating the two groups of images leading to a contrast I would have asserted in my introduction. Remember at all times that, after making a claim about the content of a poem (a short story, a novel,

a play or any other kind of imaginative writing), you must substantiate by quoting or paraphrasing from the text itself. That is why in the first paragraph of the body I would indicate that images contained in the phrases “swallows ... at rest”, “sea-wind still and silent”, “lurking frogs” and “harbour water-fowl” symbolise/represent attractive nature. On the other hand, images elicited by phrases like “lurking thieves”, “seek their prey like hunters”, “no grass”, “no river”, “dust from off the mine-dumps”, “Jostling home” and “Herded by dusk” suggest unattractive industrialisation.

In the next paragraphs of the body I would then state explicitly that by means of all the images with the negative connotation of inhuman labour in the mines, the poet highlights the discomfort and exploitation of the black labourers. After work the labourers from the mine must walk home in an insecure environment, shown by the fearful words “lurking thieves” in line 2 of stanza 3. From the point of view of black Africans who associate the sighting of bats as a bad omen of death, going to and returning from work for the black labourers is connected with dying that may take place at any moment, as the line “Above me fly the bats” attests, in line 3 of stanza 2. The last stanza describes the workers’ exploitation. The employers do not care about the safety of the workers. This is seen in the image of impersonal abandonment of the employees, contained in the phrase “Herded by dusk.” Any employer who cares about the welfare of the workers and does not merely exploit their labour for the financial gain of huge companies, would arrange safe transport for the workers as they come to work and leave daily.

There are many more images you would discuss in the body of your essay in the manner I have done with my examples above, showing that the black labourers who are the subject of the poem are exploited. Some of them are “hills withdraw their shadows”, “sun, like ochre, reddens.” The image produced by the former phrase symbolizes the human protection that the employers withdraw as the labourers knock off from duty. Hence the personification suggesting the presence of the human owners of the mines, suggested by the action of withdrawing which a literal hill cannot perform. Also, the word “shadows” reveals that the action of only protecting the workers while they are on the industrial site is performed by human beings, because only a human being normally has a shadow while a hill has a shade.

Finally, as you concluded your essays with one paragraph you would have stated that you had demonstrated ways in which the imagery of the poem portrays the exploitation of black labourers.

Assignment 01 - Semester 1: *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga

Question:

There are many instances throughout the novel where Tambu expresses her anger or dismay at her situation and that of the women close to her. The most striking, perhaps, are reflected in her words right at the beginning of the novel: ‘I was not sorry when my brother died’ (P. 1), which appears heartless and callous, and yet articulates all her pent-up emotions and her essential dilemma.

Write an essay in which you explore the kinds of dilemmas in which women find themselves in the novel.

This assignment question requires you to examine the extent to which the Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* deals with the dilemmas or plight of women in a postcolonial society. Put differently, to what extent do women find themselves in really difficult and complicated relationships with men because of patriarchal attitudes which inform traditional African society? Before you could begin answering the question, you were expected to read the text in order to have a good understanding of the plot or storyline. In other words, you should ensure that you understand the sequence of events in the text. Remember that it is important to master or learn every detail of the text so that you are better able to provide evidence as you answer or address the question. Thus, in the process of reading the text, you were expected to make notes which are detailed and clear. The notes should deal with the reasons why women find themselves entangled or trapped within oppressive, patriarchal situations which strictly limit their ability to fulfill their potential as individuals.

As a postcolonial text, *Nervous Conditions* highlights or draws attention to the fact that the women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's society find themselves living lives of bondage to both patriarchy and colonialism. Thus you were supposed to come up with representations of the idea of bondage or the oppression of women in the novel. This entails providing a detailed discussion of how women such as Mainini (or Tambu's mother), Tambu, Maiguru, Lucia and Nyasha are entrapped by patriarchy, or male domination, as well as colonialism.

To begin with, when Tambu, the narrator and protagonist in the novel, says "I was not sorry when my brother died" (page 1), the sentiment she expresses here sets the tone for what the book deals with, namely the plight of women in this particular postcolonial society. This becomes manifest throughout the novel when the reader learns that, whether educated or not, men treat women like second-class citizens. This is largely because of patriarchal attitudes. Little wonder Tambu is not moved by the death of her brother. This is simply because his death gives her the opportunity to go to school. It is clear that Tambu's family resources were reserved for Nhamo, her brother, because the education of boys took priority over that of girls. The nature of Tambu's society is such that boys have more educational opportunities than girls. The fact that she was not sorry when her brother died shows she rebels or protests against aspects of her traditional culture which present women as second-class citizens. The author here introduces the idea of gender inequality or the unfair treatment of women.

Examples of the unfair treatment of women in the novel

1. Mainini, Tambu's mother

- She is uneducated and dominated by her husband in a typically traditional life.

2. Tambu

- It is only after her brother has died that she is given an opportunity to go to school. She would never have gone to school if her brother had not died. This explains why she rebels against such a tradition.
- When she starts school, she is intimidated by the domineering figure of Babamukuru.

3. Maiguru

- Even though she has received a Master's degree in England, and is working, she is completely dominated by her husband. For example her salary goes to her husband and she is subservient to him in every way.
- This is because her husband -- the English-educated headmaster of the mission school -- demonstrates patriarchal authority over her wife, as well as his entire family.

4. Lucia

- Tambu's aunt in her village who feels oppressed by traditional culture

5. Nyasha, Tambu's cousin

- Tambu shares a room with her when she joins her uncle Babamukuru's family.
- She grows up in England and has been westernized but feels oppressed by the domineering figure of Babamukuru -- her father.