

Tutorial letter 201/1/2017
Colonial and Postcolonial African
Literatures
ENG2603
Semester 1
Department of English Studies

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BAR CODE

Dear Student

2017 Semester 1, Assignment 01: *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga

The assignment question required you to discuss **how** colonial conditions shape Nyasha's approach to life in *Nervous Conditions*. The question included the instruction that your discussion had to hinge on analyses of significant incidents in the novel.

We are impressed that most of the essays demonstrate an awareness of the themes of colonization and black peoples' chequered responses to it. This enabled most of you to appropriately discuss Nyasha's attitude towards the incidents that reveal the colonized circumstances of her extended family and fellow Zimbabweans in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s.

You should have shown awareness of the need to describe Nyasha's character by means of a number of techniques generally required in the discussion of characterization. These include contrasting Nyasha with characters such as her cousins Tambu and Nhamo (particularly as Dangarembga portrays the two effectively as complementary), brother Chido, mother Maiguru, father Babamukuru, aunt Lucia and others. One evidence of this alter ego characterization is Tambu's consistent resistance against colonial assimilation as she returns to Sacred Heart for her studies (p. 208). In contrast to Nyasha's frustration back home at the mission school, after recess Tambu resumes her studies at Sacred Heart happily because she "would not be brainwashed by the colonial culture there" (p. 208).

Another technique you could have applied is the scanning of relevant incidents in the plot of the novel. As governed by your assignment question, relevant incidents you had to isolate for use in your essay were those rich with the concept or idea of 'colonial conditions.' The crux of your essay had to be a discussion of Nyasha's disposition in reaction to Rhodesia colonial conditions of the historical era constituting the setting of *Nervous Conditions*.

Some of the incidents you could have discussed are:

- ❖ When Tambudzai invites Nyasha to dance during the celebrations of her family's return from England, the latter "takes a long time to understand" (p. 42)
- ❖ During the same incident, Nyasha and Chido fail to interact with their relatives adequately because they "don't understand Shona very well anymore" (p. 42).
- ❖ The situation above is partly responsible for Nyasha and Chido only speaking to Nhamo and not to Tambu at the festivity. By Nyasha's own confession in a conversation with Tambu after the latter had started living with Babamukuru's family at the mission station, a deeper cause of this alienation from her kin was that the former and her brother Chido were frightened because they had forgotten what home was like (p. 79). At your stage of studying English as a major subject, you should be aware of the figurative use of the word or idea of "home." Home in the

context of the novel symbolizes not just the rural homestead of Tambu's as headed by her father Jeremiah. Rather, it represents all that is culturally African in colonial Rhodesia. It is helpful to discern such figurative meaning, for the novel is about the erosion of indigenous African thought and lifestyles by the colonizer, exemplified in the setting of the novel by England and its culture.

- ❖ The mission station's colonial conditions which Dangarembga describes as located twenty miles away from the village and towards Umtali town are such that Babamukuru is "the only African living in a white house" reserved for whites (63). This reveals the headmaster's morbidly hybrid state that has led to his generally nervous approach in the way he manages his school, carries out church responsibilities and runs his family (p. 104). While Babamukuru is relatively content with such appearances of upwardness, Nyasha, in her "egalitarian nature", is not impressed by this due to her convictions about the evils of "oppression and discrimination that she had learnt first-hand in England" (64). Nyasha is acutely aware of the irony of "old boys" such as her father returning to the mission where colonisers fed them a brainwashing education in the early days of the mission "around the turn of the century", to contribute "by becoming teachers in their turn" (p. 64). Nyasha's nervousness among all these is her cognizance of colonialism's inhuman treatment of people of other races, revealed in the aim "to shelter as many people as quickly as possible" (p. 64). These houses that accommodate the returning teacher "[remain] dark and ruddy", unlike the white house Babamukuru is occupying. Using your own reasoning, your essay could have included resolving the hanging strand why Babamukuru is treated differently from fellow blacks at the mission. Exploring this aspect convincingly, with motivating citations from the novel and relevant to your discussion of Nyasha's individual behavioural responses to colonial conditions, would have earned you a good score.
- ❖ Shortly after Tambu had started living with Babamukuru's family, as she is baking in the kitchen and her control of oven temperature is hampered by a broken window in the wall, Nyasha remarks: "You'd think people would find time to fix windows in their own homes. Yet they don't ... It surprises me" (67). This observation should bring to your attention the fact that Babamukuru's white house may appear to be better than the dingy ones occupied by the other black teachers at the mission, while inside it is as psychologically confused as the rest, if not worse. Note that there is a link between the interior of these mission houses occupied by blacks and the interior of their psyche. Their consciousness is as bleak as the houses due to demeaning colonial conditions. This is what the writer means through Nyasha's dialogue stating that, "'You might think that there was no real danger ... that, after all, these were only rooms decorated with the sort of accessories that the local interpretations of British interior-décor magazines were describing as standard, and nothing threatening in that" (p.70).

- ❖ Tambu's resolute standpoint of rejecting the misleading sophistication of colonial mission life upon realizing that "the buses that passed through the mission ... rolled up a storm of fine red dust" is signified by her "Sneezing and wiping [her] nose on the back of [her] hand" and reassuring herself that she "would not go the same way as [her] brother" (p. 71). You should display an awareness of Nhamo's unwise assimilation by colonial culture that has led to him dying on the inside even before his literal demise. Unlike Nhamo in his confused embracing of everything white as good, and Nyasha's unresolved internal conflict with colonial English sensibility, Tambu survives the harm of colonization because of her decisiveness.

I need not spoon-feed you by exhausting all instances that serve to externalize Nyasha's failure to resolve hybrid cultures raging within her. It is important to notice that Nyasha's weakness is not failure to regret her life history that has dislodged her firm African identity. In the same way that her mother Maiguru explains that Nyasha and Chido "are too Anglicised", as she packs the room for Tambu, Nyasha mentions that as children they should not have gone to England because now their parents are stuck "with hybrids for children" (p. 79). Nyasha's tragic flaw is her thinking that she can do nothing about having been to England "and grown into the [her] that has been there" (p. 104).

Nyasha's growing breakdown resulting from her failure to engage soundly with her psychological trauma caused by colonization shows when in an argument about her skimpy dresses she punches her father (p.117), in this way exacerbating general nervousness in the family. Later, with her uncontrollable impulses Nyasha imprudently declares aloud that the Sacred Heart institution is not the right place for Tambu (because of its colonial culture), angering her father extremely (p. 196-197). Once back home in her own mission school, Nyasha becomes progressively more depressed as incidents of the novel move towards a close. She fails to adopt for herself healthy conduct against fellow learners who 'do not like [her] language, [her] English, because it is authentic and [her] Shona, because it is not ... [and] because she does not feel she is inferior to men" (p. 200).

You should have illustrated how such a worsening mismanagement of two consciousnesses in Nyasha boils to a crescendo in the form of her lethal anorexia (p. 206). As I show in my examples above, the incidents you quote from the novel to substantiate your claims about Nyasha's self-destruct would have to be anchored in pertinent incidents of the narrative.

Professor Lesibana Rafapa

Poetry Feedback for First Semester 2017

In his poem 'The Slave Dealer', Thomas Pringle highlights a fractured identity experienced by the speaker as a result of his past.

Discuss how the speaker comes to terms with his plight in order to reconcile and redeem his newly formed identity.

Introduction

Thomas Pringle like most of his contemporaries, through writing poetry, aimed at fighting the plight of slavery and forms of discrimination pertaining to race and class against the natives (black people) of South Africa. This is evident in his poem *The Slave Dealer*.

Black people were forcefully removed from their own land and from their families, and taken across the seas to be used as slaves for the white people in USA and the United Kingdom, for instance. The trans-Atlantic slave trade was effectively practiced in the western part of Africa, in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Angola. Incidents of the slave trade were also reported in other parts of Southern Africa which affected South Africa until 1940s. The slave trade and acts of forced labour can be seen as some of the platforms depicting the colonial encounter.

Brief analysis

The title of the poem, 'The Slave Dealer', introduces the subject matter, contextualizes the poem and suggests a possible theme, that of slavery (forced labour and slave trading). In short, the title tells the reader what to expect in the poem. The slave dealer is thought of as a person who has been at the forefront of the system of slavery, a cruel act that was performed to the Africans (natives of the continent), where they were sold to the people of the west.

Pringle employs the term character of the Wanderer in the first line to depict the emptiness the slave dealer felt at the end of the slave trade system or after he had decided to quit and return home to his mother. The phrase, "From ocean's wave", further illustrates and concretizes the context of the poem, that is, the slave trade was actually performed in the middle of the sea where the captured would find it impossible to escape. If they did escape, they would be diving down to their death in the deep of the ocean.

The term, "Wanderer", implies the loss the slave trader felt inside. It can be argued that initially he had planned to make wealth in order to live a fulfilling life, but being a wanderer suggests that the world has dealt with him. He is alone, no friends, and there is no mention of wealth in the poem which then alerts the reader to the fact that the slave trader failed to attain his goals. Instead he came back home feeling lost and guilty considering what he had been doing at sea. The term **Wanderer** can also be seen as a collective term which refers to all those colonialists who took part in slave trade. The poet may have witnessed how they felt at the end of the slave trade period. They may have looked terrible, like people who seemed hollow inside as a result of creating ill-conditions for the captives and killing people on a wide scale.

The term, 'Mother', in the first and second stanzas suggests that it is a metaphor for all the mothers of the colonialists who took part in slave trade. The mothers did not approve what their sons were doing, that is, forcefully trading black people which resulted in dislocating many of the native people's families, but they could not stop their sons. All they had to do was to watch and wait for that moment when the sons would realize the cruelty and folly of their behavior and actions.

The slave trader is self-incriminating when he proclaims:

'There is blood upon my hands!' he said
'Which water cannot wash; (lines 1 & 2)

In the same stanza (fourth), he then details what he has done in lines (3 to 6) until the end of the stanza. This stanza portrays a new identity displayed by the slave trader. He recognizes that his acts were erroneous because they torture his mind frequently. And perhaps that is why he has taken a decision to return to his mother to confess his sins. This tells the reader that he knew his mother was against his wrong doings but he did not listen. It therefore makes sense to the reader why the slave trader makes his way back to his mother.

The word, 'Negro', serves to highlight the race of those who were captured as slaves, that is, black people. This word also reveals the setting which refers to the post-colonial era when Black people were called Negroes, a term considered to be derogatory at the time.

In stanza 5, the slave dealer reveals that he could not stand the blooded sea anymore and possibly that is why he left for home.

And now all ocean cannot wash
My soul from murder's dye;
Nor e'en thy prayer, dear Mother, quash
That Woman's wild death-cry!

There is a Christian connotation in the above quoted lines which refer to his soul being washed. Christianity embraces the values of baptism in water and the acceptance of God for the ultimate purge or healing. But the slave dealer has lost hope in everything and that is why he has become a Wanderer, and he knows that the only person who can understand him is his mother. That is how the poet, Pringle, asserts the theme of Christianity in the poem.

The phrase, 'That Woman's wild death-cry', may be a reference to a single incident frequenting his mind of a woman who cried when faced with death or it may refer to all women he ill-treated, lashed out at or killed during the process of slave dealing. The capital letter 'W' may further refer to the fact that there were a lot of women who were killed, traded or died as a result of his actions. The slave dealer confesses to his mother that. This is what prevents the slave dealer from being able to live a meaningful and fulfilling life, or at least pray and ask for forgiveness from God.

The fact that the slave trader commissions the phrases "On God's Judgment-day; the Avenging One, Was witness when she died! And now with God I have to deal, And dare not meet His eye!," may suggest that the speaker/ slave dealer is indeed depicting a new identity that portrays the turning point in his life. He decides to turn away from cruel acts of trading people, because he realizes that it is time to stop and face God. It can be attested therefore that Pringle believed in the values of Christianity and that it is in this light that he viewed the system of slave trade.

Pringle gives the speaker a platform to tell the story of a slave dealer from the third person perspective and in the process allows the slave dealer to narrate the gory details from the first person perspective. It can be argued therefore that the speaker and the slave dealer are one person. Pringle executes a rare skill of giving his speaker different levels of narrating his calamity, which makes the poem appealing and compelling because it offers the reader different points of view. This is a rich skill that is rare in South African poetry and it makes sense why Pringle is considered the father of South African poetry.

Conclusion

The students are therefore expected to identify the subject matter (what the poem is about), foreground different themes in the poem, comment on the setting, analyze the language employed by the poet, and to suggest how the speaker redeems his newly formed identity.

Miss Z Khanyile

EXAMINATION GUIDELINES

Please note that examination questions will cover the same scope as both your assignments on *Nervous Conditions*. Assignment and examination questions may be similar, but cannot be identical. Be on the lookout for deceptive similarities between assignment and examination questions, by breaking down each exam question very carefully and making sure that you understand what is required of you. The same way I guide you to approach your answers to assignment questions is how you must approach your answers to exam questions.

Please note that I am deliberately avoiding a repetition of general guidelines to answering questions. Those are found in your other tutorial materials, as you know. Heed all of them to the letter.

N.B. All my page references are to the 2004 edition of *Nervous Conditions*, published by Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd, Oxfordshire, UK.

Best wishes

Professor Lesibana Rafapa