



Tutorial Letter 203/1/2014

Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures

ENG2603

Semester 1

Department of English Studies

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

This tutorial letter contains important pre-examination information and feedback on Assignment 01.

BAR CODE



Dear students

The following material is for your feedback on the assignments you submitted for the module. In the main, we are excited by the learning potential displayed by your responses and encourage you to continuously engage with the texts in a meaningful manner.

We have decided to provide you with as much feedback as possible by writing the responses as bona fide essays. You will notice that what we advocate, things such as using textual evidence to buttress your responses, is how the responses advance. So, for instance, in the example of *A Raisin in the Sun*, it makes little difference to write circularly about the theme of 'dreams' in the play without providing concrete textual evidence through direct quotations to substantiate your argument. This is critical, as it allows the marker to see the extent of your critical engagement with the text you had chosen to answer. It is critical, too, to use the e-reserves to augment and expand your understanding of a text as seen through the eyes of scholars of impeccable reputations. Only by engaging with academics' publications can you broaden your horizons rather than an over-reliance on Internet sources which are not vetted by academics and which, for the most part, are notoriously ill-informed and of dubious intellectual merit.

Please go through the feedback material as another avenue in your learning curve. We hope you will engage with this material meaningfully, and do ask questions regarding any aspect of these responses that you do not understand.

Pre-Examination Preparation

Your examinations are scheduled for May/June, and October/November of this academic year. Please consult myUnisa for an update of your examination dates.

The examination paper is composed of two sections: A and B. You have to answer only one question per section but not both questions from the same section. Please be clear on this matter: it is one question per section.

The four texts are distributed across both sections, and there are no compulsory questions. It is imperative, in order to pass the examination, not to try and determine which text/s will be in which section, as this form of 'spotting' leads to under-preparedness and may seriously harm your chances of successfully passing the module. What is important for us as lecturers is that our students be thoroughly prepared for an examination, rather than trying to either spot which books will be favourably positioned, or try and reproduce the assignment questions of particular books in the examination as answers. This will simply not do. Read the texts as thoroughly as you can, and read as much of the e-reserve materials per text as you possibly can as part of your examination preparation.

Please recall that your final mark is determined out of the semester mark, which you obtained for your assignments, plus the mark you will have obtained in the examination itself. It is thus important that you assiduously work at your assignments as well as prepare for the examination.

We wish you the best in your endeavours!

The ENG2603 Team.

8.4 Assignments

ASSIGNMENT 01: Poetry and *Nervous Conditions*

Due Dates:

First semester:

10 March 2014

Assignment 01: *The New Century of South African Poetry* edited by Michael Chapman and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga.

Read the following statement and answer the question below.

“It may be argued that the texts in the module, ‘ENN2603’, are concerned with the utilisation of colonial tools (such as the English language and Christianity), and that no attempt is made to critique these tools.”

Do you agree with these assertions? In an essay of not more than 2 000 words, discuss how the following **2** excerpts support and/or contradict these assertions. In your essay, you should consider how the texts represent the impact of the English language and religion on its users.

EXCERPT 1:

Then when Nhamo came home at the end of his first year with Babamukuru, you could see he too was no longer the same person. The change in his appearance was dramatic. He had added several inches to his height and many to his width, so that he was not little and scrawny any more but fit and muscular. Vitamins had nourished his skin to a shiny smoothness, several tones lighter in complexion than it used to be. His hair was no longer arranged in rows of dusty, wild cucumber tufts but was black, shiny with oil and smoothly combed. All this was good, but there was one terrible change. He had forgotten how to speak Shona. A few words escaped haltingly, ungrammatically and strangely accented when he spoke to my mother, but he did not speak to her very often any more. He talked most fluently with my father. They had long conversations in English, which Nhamo broke into small, irregular syllables and which my father chopped into smaller and even rougher phonemes. Father was pleased with Nhamo’s command of the English language. He said it was the first step in the family’s emancipation since we could all improve our language by practicing on Nhamo. But he was the only one who was impressed by this inexplicable state my brother had developed. The rest of us spoke to Nhamo in Shona, to which, when he did answer, he answered in English, making a point of speaking slowly, deliberately, enunciating each syllable clearly so that we could understand. This restricted our communication to mundane insignificant matters. (*Nervous Conditions*)

EXCERPT 2:**Ntsikana kaGabha**

“Ntsikana’s Bell

Sele! Sele!
 Ahom, ahom, ahom!
 Sele! Sele! Come, hear the Word of the Lord.
 Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

[call to worship]
 [belt sound by striking a rock]

Respond! Respond! You are called to heaven.
 Come, all you multitudes! Come, all you children!
 Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

It has been fenced in and surrounded, this land of your fathers.
 He who responds to the call will be blessed.
 Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

Sele! Sele!
 Ahom, ahom, ahom!
 Respond! Respond! You are called to heaven.
 Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.
(tr. isiXhosa J.K. Bokwe)

Model Response: Assignment 01: *The New Century of South African Poetry* edited by Michael Chapman and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga.

Prepared by: Professor J. Murray & Dr. S. Maithufi

The texts in this module represent the different ways in which colonial tools shape characters and their experiences. The English language and Christianity are two particularly powerful colonial tools that had wide-reaching influences on the colonised. In the essay, I explore how Ntsikana kaGabha’s poem, “Ntsikana’s Bell”, and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel, *Nervous Conditions*, respectively depict the impact of these tools. The essay suggests that neither English nor Christianity is represented in an unproblematic or simplistic manner. The discussion also proposes that these are politically loaded instruments in colonial contexts and that the authors highlight the complexities surrounding these tools’ utilisations.

In the extract from *Nervous Conditions*, it is clear that the English language is a potent tool and that Nhamo’s usage of this instrument changes him as well as his relationships with his family members. However, I do not agree with the assertion that “no attempt is made to critique” English as a tool of colonial oppression. Dangarembga highlights both the positive and the negative consequences of Nhamo’s exposure to a Western mission education and his training in English. The given text shows that, after a year at his new school, the “change in his

appearance was dramatic". There is also the suggestion that this makeover extends beyond his appearance and that his identity itself has been altered. The changes are so far reaching that he "was no longer the same person".

Dangarembga first mentions the more positive changes that made him look much healthier as he was now "fit and muscular". The narrator, Tambu, then goes on to note that, while "[a]ll this was good, there was one terrible change". She identifies the "terrible change" as his feigned loss of his mother tongue, Shona. In other words, Dangarembga is offering an explicit and unambiguous critique of the English language in the colonial context. In the relatively short time that he has been at the mission school, he had ostensibly "forgotten how to speak Shona". It appears that he can now only manage a few halting, ungrammatical words in a different accent when he attempts to speak Shona to his mother. His assumed inability to speak fluent Shona impedes communication with his mother. His other family members insist on addressing him in Shona and his reaction reveals the power that resides in him thinking that he has the advantage in the form of speaking English well. When he responds to his family members in English, he makes "a point of speaking slowly, deliberately, enunciating each syllable clearly so that [they] could understand". This description makes it sound as if the young boy is taking on the role of a person who addresses his relatives slowly as if they are his pupils who are struggling to understand something. By speaking in English rather than Shona, Nhamo's interactions with his nuclear family members are compromised, since English "restricted [their] communication to mundane insignificant matters".

The reasons for Nhamo's decision to claim that he has forgotten how to speak Shona within the space of a year are not difficult to establish. It could be that he realises how the mastery of speaking English opens up economic opportunities. This says a great deal about how dominant languages retain their power and perpetuate their authority. When one considers the content of the rest of the novel, it becomes clear that freedom from poverty is an important motivating factor. Early in the novel, Tambu remembers that it was her "uncle's idea that Nhamo should go to school at the mission" so that he could have a career that would enable him to lift his "branch of the family out of the squalor in which [they] were living" (Dangarembga, 1988: 4). Education and English are intricately connected in this quest to escape from poverty. The novel does, however, suggest that this adoption of English has a strange and unsettling impact on Nhamo and that the taking up of this language alienates him from his community. For instance, Tambu notes that only their father "was impressed by this inexplicable state [her] brother had developed". By pointing out the alienation that results from a colonial education and language, the novel thus offers a critique of these colonial tools rather than simply representing their utilisation. The novel establishes this critique by engaging a conflict between, on the one hand, the narrator who presents the drama of Nhamo's homecoming and, on the other hand, his family members' expressions of dismay at his sudden change in appearance and attitude.

A cautious approval of an example of a Western colonial tool is also apparent in Ntsikana kaGabha's poem, "Ntsikana's Bell". First and foremost, it is imperative to recognise the context that this poem conjures up. The references to Christian fellowship are repeated throughout: "Sele! Sele!" – explained in the paratext as a "call to worship", the title's "bell", "the Word of the Lord", "the call" and "heaven". The call-and-response mode of this poem, suggested in the motif,

Sele! Sele!
Ahom, ahom, ahom!

implies a form of communal incantation or prayer session. It is as if the reader hears the poem's speaker engaged in a dialogue or two-way communication with the audience, reminiscent of a Christian church service. This is a context where the minister, upon appealing to the worshippers to heed God, hears them responding in the affirmative. The usage of the exclamation marks underlies the authority with which the request is made. The parishioners do not appear to be expected to protest, as the percussive sound of the "bell", being persistent, is musically enticing. In addition, Ntsikana, who seems to resemble the missionary school teacher carrying a "belt" (see paratext in line 2), sometimes the stick, presumably threatens to discipline the flock into compliance. The suggestion is that the performance resembles people who show unity in purpose by virtue of responding positively to the instruction of God, represented in the poem by Ntsikana. In turn, hearing this poem being chanted frames the reader/audience into a worshipper.

The poet's locating of this poem within the Christian ritual space is in itself a rhetorical device that sets the scene for another kind of politics: that which saw the rise of black "liberation theology". The first indication of this politics is hinted at in the title: it alludes to the visionary and counsellor, Ntsikana, "the Xhosa Christian prophet (d.1822)" (see J. Pieres, 1989: 137) or, according to T.J. Stapleton (1994: 27), "the first Xhosa convert to Christianity". Ntsikana is credited with initiating literacy projects and spreading the Christian gospel among the Xhosas across the Eastern Cape at the time when Christianity was an integral component of the English colonial invasion of Southern Africa. In other words, Ntsikana was both a Western educated teacher and a Christian lay preacher.

The centrality of Ntsikana to this poem emphasises a dimension which contrasts with the colonial missionary's Christian ethos which ostensibly privileged the spiritual above material concerns. In contradistinction to the ethereal, this poem foregrounds the Xhosa people re-using Christian mysticism in order to mediate the English colonial conquest. The poem mentions this agony again in the second line of the fourth stanza, where Ntsikana introduces the emotive land question: "It has been fenced in and surrounded, this land of your fathers".

In the quotation above, Ntsikana is heard articulating the liberation struggle using the syntax and idiom that are not typical of Standard English. In this line, he identifies the subject phrase, "the land", with an article, "It", in the main clause and substitutes this subject with a noun, "this land", in the supporting clause. This seeming anomaly intensifies the rhetorical or persuasive nature of the climate of the struggle for material issues, and also underscores how the Xhosas have "translated" both the English language and Christianity into the call to resist colonial invasion. The assumption is that the primary audience in this poem are Xhosa home language speakers, as the nature of colonial domination – implied in "fenced in and surrounded" – connotes the early form of South Africa's Bantustan system with which they are familiar. In short, Ntsikana is heard telling the Xhosas that the "land" belongs to them by virtue of prior occupation or of being their ancestors', as opposed to the Christian God who allegedly does not recognise sectarian boundaries and the kind of property ownership that is defined in terms of ancestral lineage.

This is why, in this poem, the audience hears the call to action being articulated by Ntsikana, as opposed to a Christian prophet; by a popular intellectual who graced the Xhosa shores, in contrast to an ancestral figure who the traditional Xhosas do not recognise as Xhosa; and by a

visionary who the Xhosas associate with the early history of their liberation struggle, as opposed to a figure who the dominant Western history depicts as someone who contributed to the demise of the Xhosa anti-colonial resistance (see Stapleton, 1994: 29). The form of Christianity that informs this poem is therefore localised, popular and charismatic.

To conclude, this poem shows the Xhosa people having a troubled attitude towards Christianity. The central symbol of this dilemma is Ntsikana, an early Xhosa prophet, because he invoked Christianity's broad framework in order to resist English imperialism. The character of Ntsikana signals a new form of modernity where, many years after his death, the poet uses the persona of Ntsikana rallying the Xhosas to action by sounding a "bell". Therefore, the poem's depiction of Ntsikana telling the "multitudes" that they are being called to "heaven" can only mean that he implores the Xhosa to forge ahead with the nationalist struggle. The given excerpt from *Nervous Conditions* also sounds off a comparable cautious attitude towards a tool of colonisation; paradoxically, Western education is a source of a crisis internal to the black family and a beacon of emancipation from white racist modernity.

References

Dangarembga, T. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. Banbury, Oxfordshire: Ayeibia Clarke Publishers.

Pieres, J. 1989. *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7*. Johannesburg: Ravan, London: James Currey, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Stapleton, T. 1994. *Maqoma: Xhosa Resistance to Colonial Advance 1798-1873*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.