

Identity Crisis In Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions: A Post-Colonial Perspective

Dr. Behzad Anwar¹, Asma Iqbal Kayani², Syed Ali Abid Naqvi³, Ayesha Zahoor⁴

Abstract

The impact of colonizers on the colonized societies and people has been widespread and multi-dimensional. The present paper critically deals with the issue of identity crisis as faced by the natives of Rhodesia when they were colonized by the British colonizers. The text under study is a postcolonial novel Nervous Conditions (1988) written by a black Zimbabwean woman, Tsitsi Dangarembga. Rutherford's (1990) idea of colonizer/colonized and Ashcroft's (2002) idea of place/displacement are utilized to deal with the issue of identity crisis in the selected work. The ideas of mimicry, assimilation, and ambivalence by Bhaba (1994) are also utilized where needed to probe deeply into the dilemma of identity crisis. The novel under consideration is a postcolonial novel giving a description of how colonized native community suffers when it is colonized. The period shown in the novel is that of the 1960s. The present study is delimited to an analysis of only two young female colonized characters, Tambudzai and Nyasha. Nyasha is shown to be a sufferer of this identity crisis while Tambu is saved from becoming a victim of this crisis, though she idealizes the West in the beginning. It is mostly through these two characters that the writer speaks of identity crisis as a threat to natives. The researchers have found that Dangarembga (1988) has condemned colonialism for its disastrous effects on the colonized with a special reference to identity crisis of the natives.

Keywords: Displacement, Identity Crisis, Mimicry, Nervous Conditions, Nyasha, Tambu.

Introduction

Colonialism refers to that setup in which one party i.e., the colonizers take hold of another party i.e., the colonized. The term postcolonial refers to the situation that may be the description of the state during colonial rule or after the colonial rule has come to an end. The Westerners justify colonization as a legal process as Loomba (1998) claims that such a process creates a strong calamity between whites and nonwhites. But the postcolonial researchers and critics consider colonialism as a threat to the colonized nations. Postcolonial literature presents the effects and aftermaths of colonialism on the culture and identity of the colonized nations. The disastrous ¹effects of colonization on the colonized nations have been widespread. Especially the colonies under the British raj resulted in racial and cultural issues. Young (2003) has claimed that the racial tension is increased due to the laws of colonization. These laws are devised by the British to justify and continue its rule. The disastrous effects of the colonial period on the individual and collective life of once colonized people can be identified even today. Ashcroft et al (2003), too, claim that " more

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mirpur University of Science and Technology, MUST, AJK.

³PhD Scholar, Department of Media and Communication Studies, International Islamic University Islamabad, Pakistan.

⁴Lecturer, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, NUML, Main Campus Islamabad, Pakistan.

than three- quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism' (p.27).

The identity crisis has been a life-threatening issue and challenge for the countries which were once colonized by the British Empire. Ashcroft (2002) considers identity crisis as “The conscious or unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model” (p.29). The transmission of the British norms, culture and education in the colonized nations has given birth to hybridity and multiculturalism. As a result, these are the natives who become the sufferers of identity crisis. They are in search of their own identity and individuality when they are engaged with two opposite cultures at the same time. Ashcroft (2007) uses the term native to describe the natives as those, “who were regarded as inferior to the colonial settlers or the colonial administrators who ruled the colonies.” (p, 158). The issue of the natives’ suffering from identity crisis has been dealt with and highlighted by several postcolonial writers emerging from different parts of the world.

The focus of the present study is to analyze a post colonial novel from the perspective of identity crisis. The novel *Nervous Conditions* was published in 1988. Tsitsi Dangarembga, the black Zimbabwean writer, describes the time and state of the natives of a British colony, Rhodesia in this novel. Dangarembga (1988), in this novel, describes the time when the white minority dominated through its colonial rule and the natives were oppressed both socially and culturally. This oppression resulted in identity crisis of the natives. The present study researchers are interested in exploring how the natives in that colonial setup are described with reference to the threat and consequences of identity crisis in the novel. Hence, the major aim of the study is to find out Dangarembga (1988), the writer’s stance on identity crisis. Due to limitation of time and space, the researchers in this paper will examine only two young female characters of the novel i.e., Tambudzai and Nyasha. It will be through the struggle and development of these two characters that the researchers will examine Dangarembga’s (1988) stance on identity crisis.

Research Questions

Following two research questions are set to guide the study:

1. How are the selected characters shown to be suffering from identity crisis as portrayed in *Nervous Conditions*?
2. What is Dangarembga’s stance on identity crisis resulting from colonization as depicted through selected characters in *Nervous Conditions*?

Theoretical Framework

To carry on a fine grain analysis related to the issue of identity crisis, the study utilizes concept of dichotomy and the concept of place and displacement as proposed by Rutherford (1990) and Ashcroft (2002). Rutherford (1990) uses the story of *Lawrence of Arabia*. The metaphor of ‘desert’ is proposed by him to elaborate the concept of identity crisis. Desert is the symbol of loneliness, otherness, and strangeness. Rutherford (1990) puts it “margin between the habitable and the inhabitable” (p.9). Lawrence suffers from crisis of identity as stated by Rutherford (1990):

For Lawrence the desert left him neither Arab nor English: ‘I had dropped one form and not taken on another’. In a more contemporary setting Baudrillard has commented, ‘in the desert one loses one’s identity’. (p.9) He further proposes that identities are formed between the relations of power. The distribution of power is seen from bipolarity of relation, black/white, masculine/feminine, colonizer/colonized and others (p.10)

Other than Rutherford (1990), Ashcroft (2002) too deals with the concept of identity crisis which according to him is a result of displacement. While clarifying this concept of place and displacement, he writes that 'it is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place' (Ashcroft, 2002, p.8). When the colonized is displaced from its own culture and norms, it results in its alienation. This alienation disturbs the self image of the colonized natives resulting in a few results as stated by Ashcroft (2002) with reference to influence of the English. He claims that "the possession and practice of 'Englishness', also show clear signs of alienation even within the first generation of settlement, and manifest a tendency to seek an alternative, differentiated identity?" (Ashcroft, 2002, p.9) The point is that the natives while living in their very own land become alien in the pursuit of the ways of the colonizers. And this displacement and alienation results in their identity crisis. Hence, identity crisis for Ashcroft (2002) is "The conscious or unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" (p, 9).

Other than these two concepts, the postcolonial ideas like hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence as given by Bhabha (1994) also provide the insights to look deeply into the issue of identity crisis in the selected text. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha claims that an individual becomes hybrid when two or more than two cultures mix under the rule of colonization. Bhabha (1994) further explains that this hybridity results in mimicry when the colonized try to imitate the colonizers. Such an imitation of the so-called superiors leaves the natives with a feeling of ambivalence. And this ultimately results in the dilemma of identity crisis faced by the colonized.

Methodology

This study was carried out with the aim to find out how the postcolonial writers project the issue of identity crisis through their writings. To serve the purpose, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by Dangarembga is taken to collect data. Keeping in mind the limitation of time and space, the study is confined to an analysis of only two female characters. This study is basically qualitative research. Thus, exploratory in nature, the present study follows an inductive approach by utilizing the method of close reading as proposed by Greenham (2018). This method allows a researcher to carry out a study stage wise. The five stages that are followed by the researcher are pre-interpretation, critical analysis, evaluation, verification, and the writing stage. The last stage is based on the analysis of selected extracts in the light of postcolonial ideas related to identity crisis.

Discussion

To satisfy the research questions of the study, this section is divided into two parts. The first part presents an analysis of the position and suffering of the selected female characters with reference to their identity crisis. The second part will discuss the views of the writer on identity crisis through an analysis of the utterances allotted to each character. Both the sections will present a qualitative analysis of the extracts relevant to each research question taken from the novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988).

The identity crisis and the suffering of Colonized Natives in Nervous Conditions

Tambudzai, the major protagonist, and narrator of the story is a young African girl. Her character is portrayed through a few developmental stages. She is not the same person throughout the novel. By taking insights from different postcolonial concepts like mimicry, assimilation, and assimilation, the researcher has divided Tambu's development into four stages.

The first stage is that of setting the colonizers as the norm and role model. At this stage the colonized natives are made to consider the colonizers the superior. The natives have a misconception that by adopting the ways and norms of the colonizers, they will be able to enter a new modern world of enlightenment and prosperity. Same is the case with Tambu in the beginning of the novel when she idealizes Babamukuru, her rich and foreign educated uncle living in a mission home. She becomes excited at her prospects while staying at his house. Her idea that “At Babamukuru's I expected to find another self” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 58) clearly hints at how the natives are impressed by the colonizers. This point is further highlighted when Tambu is impressed by the house furnished in English style and by the English food and English manners of eating. Tambu’s comment upon the superiority of colonizers is evident in another extract where she holds the view that: “[...] everybody knew that the European schools had better equipment, better teachers, better furniture, better food, better everything” (Dangarembga, 1988, p.179). The excitement and expectations of the natives are projected through Tambu’s state when she is waiting for future opportunities as the text describes her state “Excitement. Anticipation. Elation and exultation” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 191). This initial happiness of Tambu is a comment upon the colonized natives’ position where they become happy and hopeful when they are allowed to enter in the colonizers’ circle.

After considering the colonizers the superior, at the second stage the colonized natives try to imitate them to identify themselves with the high class. This is again evident in Tambu’s character who tries to imitate the ways of her fellows on her first day at mission school. Again, her desire to become like the English is a comment upon native’s state of mind as Tambu says that: “I wanted to stand outside the church with my aunt and uncle. I wanted to be known to be of their kind.” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 99).

At the third stage, such natives who mimic the English try to hide their real face because of inferiority complex. Tambu’s search for a new identity through adopting colonizer’s education and the British ways of life has resulted in the development of inferiority complex in her. Her father becomes “insignificant” and her mother “superfluous, an obstacle in the path of [her] departure” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 58). Thus, the familial bond is weakened. Her inferiority complex compels her to compare her own living with that of the mission as the text narrates: “This time the homestead looked worse than usual” (Dangarembga, 1988, p.123).

At the next stage, the victim suffers from identity crisis because the person tries to adopt a new identity and tries to hide the old identity. But before becoming a full victim and sufferer of identity crisis, Tambu realizes the threat of this change in her. She is made conscious of it by Nyasha, to some extent. Aegerter (1996), too, highlights Nyasha’s role to bring to light the colonial issues through which she tries to warn Tambu about the hybridity that comes with living in another culture. Tambu’s excitement of getting an opportunity to be admitted to convent is countered by Nyasha who makes her realize that it will end in the loss of her original identity.

The writer makes the readers realize the threat of assimilation through the following words put in the mouth of Nyasha:

It would be a marvelous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation (Dangarembga, 1988, pp. 178-179)

At another point, Dangarembga hints at the threatening effect of identity crisis on the personalities of the natives. The change in Tambu’s personality is pointed out by her mother when Tambu herself narrates about it that “things that had made my mother wonder whether I was quite myself, or whether I was carrying some other presence in me” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 93). Unlike Nyasha, Tambu still has a chance to return and save herself from

identity crisis. After realizing the conflict between her roots and her search for a new identity, her idealistic dreams are shattered. Commenting upon the difference between two cultures and norms she says: "A deep valley cracked open. There was no bridge; at the bottom, spiked crags as sharp as spears" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 64). Hence, the writer, through Tambu, has highlighted the disastrous effects of forgetting one's own roots by running after the ways of others.

Nyasha, Tambu's cousin, is shown on a stage by the writer where she has reached at the peak of her identity crisis. Suffering from its serious effects, she realizes the reality and makes Tambu conscious of the threats. Ashcroft's (2002) idea of displacement resulting in alienation is working in Nyasha's situation. She is affected by foreign culture and education from an early point in her life. Taken to England by her parents at an early age, she was placed in an alien position where she adopted the new ways of life. Hence, displacement at an early age resulted in alienation from her native culture and norms and it was the thing about which she talks to Tambu: "I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 78). Nyasha's identity crisis takes birth when she tries to combine both the cultural norms of the English and Shona society. She tries to explain her condition to Tambu where she regrets the state of not being able to belong anywhere. As a result, her relationship with her father is badly affected and her opinions are mismatched with others.

Nyasha's character is first introduced in the text as a child who has returned from England and is feeling like a stranger in her native place i.e., Shona culture. The disastrous effect of identity crisis has been a change in her character as described by Tambu "When they visited the homestead we had played long, exciting games. Why did I no longer like them?" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 38). Tambu again regrets the loss of her cousin when she exclaims:

I had been looking forward to having my cousins back so that things would be fun and friendly and warm as they had been in the old days, but it was not happening that way. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 43)

Hence displacement results in alienation which puts a character to suffer through identity crisis. Nyasha returned from England a totally changed person and Tambu gives a description of this change as: "I missed the bold, ebullient companion I had had who had gone to England but not returned from there." (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 51). This impact of displacement is again highlighted by Tambu's comment about her that "...something had extinguished the sparkle in her eyes" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 60). Hence, Nyasha's dislocation marred her personality, and she became out of fit in her very culture. Such a situation goes with Ashcroft's (2002) claim that: "A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation, it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" (Ashcroft, 2002, p.9)

The most threatening effect of the loss of one's identity is the loss of one's mother tongue resulting in communication gap between the natives. The comment of Nyasha's mother when Nyasha and her brother remained silent on Tambu's try to communicate with them is pathetic:

They don't understand Shona very well anymore,' her mother explained. 'They have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone.' (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 42)

Dangarembga hints at the pathetic situation that how a nation may lose its identity under colonialism due to its language loss. Such identity crisis sufferers suffer from the identity of their language too as Nyasha says: "They do not like my language, my English, because it is authentic and my Shona, because it is not!" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 196). In Nyasha's

case where she has become a complete alien to its native society, it has become difficult for her to tackle others including her mother. Her mother's comment upon Nyasha's condition is pathetic:

'They are too Anglicised,' explained Maiguru, [...] 'They picked up all these disrespectful ways in England,' she continued conversationally, 'and it's taking them time to learn how to behave at home again. It's difficult for them because things are so different (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 74).

As a result of the Englishness, Nyasha's personality has shattered and as Bubenechik (2013) asserts that Nyasha has a fragmented identity now under the appropriation of Western modes. In the words of Barry (2017) hybridity is "the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture" (p.192). But such a belonging leaves the person with a position of nowhere.

It is through Nyasha that the writer highlights the mental torture and nervous condition of such hybrid characters who are not accepted anywhere and Nyasha is one of such people who cannot recognize herself with any group, neither with the English nor with the Africa.

Ashcroft's (2002) claim that an identity crisis results from displacement is well matched with Nyasha's character. She is presented as a true embodiment of the pain and suffering of those who possess a hybrid identity and who are not welcomed in any group as a part of it. Nyasha's struggle to identify her with any one group results in failure as she tells Tambu: "but I very much would like to belong, Tambu, but I find I do not" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 196).

Dangarembga (1988), through Nyasha, highlights the issue of identity crisis with full force. The realization that one is trapped is painful as Nyasha claims: "They've trapped us. They've trapped us." (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 201). Further, she claims that this idealizing takes one away from the roots and the person reaches nowhere. This she laments again through Nyasha when she says: "Look what they've done to us,' she said softly. 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 201).

The analysis of the extracts has shown that the character of Tambu was ambitious to become "a young woman of the world" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 94) and for the purpose she was ready to even sacrifice her own norms and relations as well. But bit by bit she spots the flaws in Westernization and realizes the threats hidden in it for her identity. Her new experiences at new places, Nyasha's condition and her comments all contribute well to her realization that such a displacement will ultimately result in her identity crisis. It is through her character that Dangarembga (1998) has revealed to the readers the threats of Westernization to the identity of the natives. As far as Nyasha's case is concerned, the writer has shown how the aspirations, dreams and promises attached with Western ways are shattered and the result is deprivation and frustration alone.

The Identity Crisis and Dangarembga's stance in Nervous Conditions

The resistance to colonialism and its effects especially in the form of natives' issue of identity crisis is well portrayed by Dangarembga (1988) through her characters. The selected extracts do voice Dangarembga's stance on the issue of identity crisis. On the one hand this work of hers is a criticism of the colonial powers and on the other it carries a sympathetic tone for the colonized as well. She warns the world against the dangers of identity crisis through the lines uttered by her characters' mouths.

First analyzing the character of Tambu, it can be noted that initially she is shown to be dying for western education considering it the gateway to freedom and new identity. However, later with the development of the story, she becomes a mouthpiece for the writer to speak out though Tambu her ideas on the crisis of identity. It is through her that the writer

teaches the colonized the ways to face this crisis with a sound state of mind. Dangarembga (1988) questions and criticizes the mission of the colonizers when she speaks through Tambu's character: "I often ask myself why they come, giving up the comforts and security of their more advanced homes." (Dangarembga, 1988, p.103). Hence, mercenary mission of the colonizers is exposed through these ideas. But along with this mission, the colonizers have another mission i.e., to hold the minds of the colonized as well. Dangarembga (1988) through Tambu's character alerts the colonized ones to safeguard their identity. She further describes how Tambu's brother had fallen prey to westernization with life threatening effects. Again, through Tambu, she advises the colonized/ once colonized nations that: "Some strategy had to be devised to prevent this entire splendor from distracting me in the way that my brother had been distracted" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 69). And the strategy she suggests through the voice of Tambu is that one must not forget one's origin, culture, and identity as Tambu repeats the piece of advice given to her by all:

Don't forget, don't forget, don't forget. Nyasha, my mother, my friends. Always the same message. But why? If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that, of course, could not happen. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 188)

The second character which becomes a mouthpiece for Dangarembga in the novel is that of a cultural hybrid, Nyasha. Being a victim of identity crisis and suffering from severe nervous conditions, she speaks loudly against colonialism and its effects. "It's bad enough," she said severely, 'when a country gets colonized, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 147). Dangarembga (1988) warns the reader to protect themselves from being intoxicated by the Western ways and fake ideologies. It is through Nyasha that the writer deplors the condition of the victims of this crisis and bewares the remaining that such double minds with a double identity aren't accepted by any group.

Dangarembga (1988) concludes her novel by showing Tambu as a matured and well-informed girl who during her stay at Mission school resisted all kinds of distractions and brainwashing. The words ascribed to Tambu as the final lines of the novel clearly describe Dangarembga's (1988) message for the sufferers that:

[...] something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, [...] It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 203).

Conclusion

The present study has reached certain conclusions. Firstly, it is concluded that the issue of identity crisis is highlighted as one of the sensitive issues faced by once colonized nations by Dangarembga (1988) in her *Nervous Conditions*. Secondly, the study has also found the appropriateness of different postcolonial ideas like colonizer /colonized, mimicry and hybridity for an analysis of identity crisis. The study also confirms Ashcroft's (2002) claim of place and displacement resulting in the crisis of identity. The character of Nyasha has depicted well how displacement, alienation and oppression in her life put her in a situation of in-betweenness. Dangarembga (1988) condemns the colonial system resulting in nervous and disturbed condition of the colonized. Dangarembga (1988) highlights that the effects of colonization are not only physical but can also be personal, cultural social, and psychological.

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