

Hysteria as *Bildungsroman* in Emily Brontë's
Wuthering Heights and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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First published in 1988 and then winning the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is considered one of the most important novels in contemporary African literature, and perhaps the most important novel of contemporary African feminist literature. As such, it's been passed through the eye of literary criticism's needle time and again. However, it has never been put in conversation with Emily Brontë's 1847 novel, *Wuthering Heights*. This is an oversight. Dangarembga, whose primary education occurred at elite, white-run private schools and who admits to "reading all the English classics" (George 311), would have certainly been exposed to Emily Brontë and *Wuthering Heights*. Moreover, the text of the novel includes the Brontë sisters among the specific authors (the other being Enid Blyton) that Tambu reads in the "period of her reincarnation," stating that she "knew [she] was being educated" and was "filled with gratitude to the authors for introducing [her] to places where reason and inclination were not at odds" (Dangarembga 94).

While it can only be conjectured as to whether Dangarembga considers Emily Brontë to be a key influence, the allusion to the Brontës in the text as a means of educating the protagonist is not insignificant. Female madness and hysteria are presented at the forefront of Emily and Charlotte Brontë's seminal novels (and, one could argue, male madness and hysteria presented at the forefront of Anne's). It is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, however, that presents the hysterical outburst of its deuteragonist Catherine Earnshaw as something not to be reviled or pitied (as Charlotte Brontë does to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*), but as a righteous

act of self-assertion and will – an act of rebellion. Consequently, Dangarembga's descriptions of Nyasha's hysterical outburst takes on a mimetic quality, following nearly beat-for-beat Brontë's descriptions of Catherine Earnshaw. The narrative expression of, and interest in, the pathology of largely female hysteria in the face of oppression unites the writing of Emily Brontë and Tsitsi Dangarembga across time and cultural context.

Both novels take the form of a *bildungsroman*, the "novel of formation." Charlotte Goodman observes that "several critics ... have suggested recently that there are significant differences between those *Bildungsromane* written by men and those by women" (Goodman 29), and cites Elaine Hoffman Baruch's assertion that "while the aim of a male protagonist in [Bildungsroman] is life within the larger community, the aim of the female protagonist ... is marriage with a partner of her choice" (Hoffman Baruch 335, Goodman 29). These two aims are not markedly different from one another, and in fact the female aim of "marriage with a partner of her choice" is subordinate to the male aim of life in the larger community, especially in patriarchal societies like those of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Yet, female and male coming of age remain vastly different, particularly in the patriarchal societies where education is divergent and based on gender (Goodman 29).

Annis Pratt and Barbara White characterize the difference in *bildungsroman* in the following way:

"[the female protagonist] does not choose a life to one side of society after conscious deliberation on the subject; rather, she is ontologically or radically alienated by gender role norms from the very outset. Thus, although the authors attempt to accommodate their heroes' *bildung* or development to the general pattern of the genre, the

disjunctions we have noticed inevitably make the woman's initiation less a self-determined progressing toward maturity than a regression from full participation in adult life." (Pratt & White 36, Goodman 29).

If we consider peak hysteria as a climactic externalization (outburst) of the internal struggle toward maturity and development, we can see the resulting regression manifest clearly and literally in both Nyasha and Catherine. Nyasha "curl[s] up in Maiguru's lap looking no more than five years old" (Dangarembga 205), while Catherine becomes "no better than a wailing child" (Brontë 123) and fully dissociates, imagining "the whole last seven years of [her] life" had gone blank (Brontë 124) and that she is once again twelve years old. She is incapable of recognizing her own reflection in the mirror, and is left plucking feathers from a pillow in what the (hostile) narrator calls "baby-work" (Brontë 122). By retreating into the child-world and memory, where the paradoxical concerns of maturity – the need to be both equally be "an intelligent girl and a good woman" (Dangarembga 89) – are not at odds with each other, both Nyasha and Catherine choose regression over compliance with oppressive power structures. It is the choice between "self and security" (Dangarembga 103), where Nyasha and Catherine choose the self over security, as opposed to characters like Maiguru or Isabella Linton.

While the characters ultimately return from their childlike state, their "full participation in adult life" is less clear. Nyasha is institutionalized and dosed on anti-psychotics (Dangarembga 206), with the state of her health and her survival left ambiguous. *Nervous Conditions* ends before a resolution – leaving Nyasha perpetually in an ambiguous state for readers. Catherine, complicit in her own subjugation through her marriage to Edgar Linton, is left a despondent invalid (Brontë 134) constantly fixated on her childhood. Catherine's

pregnancy, her ostensible participation in adult life, is less than perfunctory. The introduction of the pregnancy in the novel is framed entirely in terms of net benefit to her husband – “[the household at Thruscross Grange] cherished the hope that in a little while Mr. Linton’s heart would be gladdened, and his lands secured from a stranger’s grip, by the birth of an heir” (Brontë 134), and Catherine herself, who dies in childbirth, never once mentions the fact that she’s pregnant, expecting a child, or soon to be a mother a single time in the text. She has become a being who things merely happen to, rather than one possessing self-determination or will.

Self-determination and will are essential to the manifestations of Nyasha and Catherine’s hysteria, and one of the key places of divergence in their narratives. Catherine’s illness and hysteria are “caused by the application of her strong mind” (Krishan 35). She actively makes the decision to exacerbate her tempers and the undefined “brain fever” that plagues her. She threatens repeatedly that if anyone should “aggravate [her] temper ... [she] shall get wild” (Brontë 116) and that she should “kill [herself] directly!” (Brontë 120), if she thought it would also kill her husband. Catherine’s spiteful approach to illness and hysteria is directly in opposition to Nyasha, who insists that she “doesn’t want to do it” (Dangarembga 204), but is still compelled to harm herself through anorexia, bulimia and her “kamikaze” hysteric episode.

Even more benign actions, such as reading, become a form of self-harm for Nyasha. After her initial rebuke for reading *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (Dangarembga 84), a novel famous for its obscenity trials, explicit sex scenes and themes of sexual liberation, Nyasha’s reading habits “grow serious” and develop into a “historical phase” that causes Nyasha to have nightmares (Dangarembga 94). She binges on the atrocity and suffering of others, attempting to

“learn it all” (Dangarembga 110) in order to “know the facts if you[re] ever going to find the solutions” (Dangarembga 95). It is this fact-finding mission of Nyasha’s, her deep dive into the suffering and atrocities of others, that causes her to physically starve herself while continuing to constantly feed her hysteria (Rahman). This is in contrast to Tambu’s reading materials, among which is *Wuthering Heights*, that Nyasha calls “fairy-tales” (Dangarembga 95). The implication is that the narrative of Catherine and Heathcliff, a self-willed woman outside of the traditional social order, who subverts gendered expectations and is ultimately complicit in her own subjugation, and a “dark skinned gipsy [sic]” (Brontë 5) who raises himself to wealth and affluence from a life of enforced misery, ignorance and poverty, is a fantasy to Nyasha who sees traces of that narrative in the daily life all around her. She is unable to find a solution to the narrative that doesn’t function as fiction, and it is this preoccupation that leads her to develop her hysteric neuroses.

Books, and the histories they contain, are the catalyst and object of both Nyasha and Catherine’s fury in their moments of externalized hysteria. When Catherine asks what is occupying her husband, Edgar Linton, while she is “on the brink of the grave” (Brontë 120) and Nellie Dean responds that he is “continually among his books” (Brontë 120), Catherine goes into a hysterical spiral. The books, a symbol of Edgar Linton’s urbane detachment and “philosophical resignation” to her supposedly imminent death (Brontë 121), as well as his complete oppositionality to Heathcliff’s elemental existence, are the objects that send her over the edge – they are the last objects on her lips before she descends into ineffable hysteria.

For Nyasha, books are literally the objects at her lips. Where she has previously refused food in favor of constant consumption of (the colonizer’s) texts and histories, the internal

consumption is made external as she “shred[s] her history book between her teeth” (Dangarembga 205), while growling out the words “Their History. Fucking liars. Their Bloody Lies” (Dangarembga 205). If we consider this hysterical peak as the moment of formation or development in Nyasha’s narrative, the climax of the coming-of-age, then this act of hysterical consumption represents her attempts to assert a sense of self-determination against the forces of colonization and patriarchy. It is, at its core, a manifestation of the old Darwinian adage: eat or be eaten. The aforementioned regression, however, illustrates Nyasha’s failure – a person cannot consume a power structure or an idea, even if consumption is a method for perpetuating that power structure (Rahman).

Meanwhile, in *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine Earnshaw “feverish[ly] ... [tears] a pillow with her teeth” and begins “pulling the feathers from the rents” (Brontë 121). If one views the bird motif in *Wuthering Heights* as a symbol of feminine order and the associated cultural expectations that oppress Catherine, (there is immense textual evidence for this, though thus far it has not been compiled into one, citable text), then this act of consumptive destruction performs the same symbolic function as Nyasha attempting to both consume and destroy her histories. They are both externalizing their battles against the destructive forces of oppression that have kept them from finding unity in their respective hybrid identities. (Nyasha is trapped between her Shona heritage and Anglicized life experience and education, whereas Catherine is trapped between the elemental, wild masculinity of her soul and the effete, enfeebled femininity of her situation).

Both Nyasha and Catherine express feelings of entrapment during their hysterical rages, with Nyasha asserting multiple times that “they’ve trapped us” and that she “won’t be trapped”

(Dangarembga 205), while Catherine goes into a macabre story of how she and Heathcliff “set a trap” over a nest of lapwing hatchlings in their youth, and came back in the winter to find “its nest ... full of little skeletons” (Brontë 121). The imagery of entrapment, the violence of empty nests and skeletons – reminiscent of Nyasha’s own “skeletal” figure (Dangarembga 202) – encapsulates the life-or-death struggle of these young women who are viewed by those around them as merely “making a scene” (Dangarembga 206, Brontë 118). Nyasha is entrapped by the colonizing powers, their versions of the wider historical narrative, and the pressure of Shona patriarchy. As she states *they* – meaning her family, all native Zimbabweans – have been trapped with external forces. Her self-determination and refusal to be trapped, though unsuccessful at this point in her narrative, expresses the potential for hope. Though Nyasha has internalized her struggle up until this point in the narrative, there is an external force for her to do battle with in the future if she is able to recover. That is not the case for Catherine, whose entrapment is of her own design.

Both Nyasha and Catherine are victims of societal forces that are ultimately stronger than their attempts at self-determination. Through careful use of mimesis and allusion, Tsitsi Dangarembga creates a bridge between Nyasha and Catherine Earnshaw. In using Catherine’s hysterical peak as a model for Nyasha’s, Dangarembga is inserting herself into the larger literary traditions of *bildungsroman* and female writers, conflating what might be perceived as a niche identity or position with the female condition at large.

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