

The “Nervous Conditions” of the Female Characters in a Colonial and Patriarchal Society.

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Résumé : Piégée dans une culture phallo-narcissique dont les instruments institutionnels la laissent insatisfaite, la femme développe des troubles psychologiques qui vont de la révolte hystérique au sentiment de culpabilité masochiste. L’alternative curative à cette crise née de la tension entre ses désirs les plus intimes et la sévérité d’un surmoi patriarcal qu’est la psychiatrie révèle les limites d’une science incapable de tenir ses promesses en raison notamment de son incapacité à interroger les causes de ce malaise social.

Mot-clés: Déshistoricisation, schizoïdie, évitement, inhibition, résignation, naturalisation.

Introduction

When the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangaremba’s debut novel *Nervous Conditions* came out in 1988, it was hailed as an act of reassertion of African women in these “perilous times”¹ and of their wish to have their say about their fate in a man’s world. The story of the novel takes place in the ex-Rhodesia then an English colony on the eve of its political autonomy. The main protagonists are a family, the Segaukes, caught between two cultures: the culture of the colonial master and that of the local tradition. But none of these two cultures has any clear function and position for the female and the independence to come offers no perspective for any improvement of their lot.

This situation is all the more a hopeless one that this condition of the female is supported by a culture which holds it that the prevailing cultural norm is natural, immutable and therefore eternal. As a consequence of such a phallo-narcissistic order, female characters of the most sensible nature who find it impossible to cope with such an unfair social system develop forms of psychological trauma. Culture ideally in human communities is the living proof of human capacities to elaborate answers to their existential angst and to step out of the depths of primitivism. When this culture fails to keep its promises towards a whole component of its

¹ Alice Walker, to be completed ...

population who find it impossible to adapt to its order, it is either the psychological state of the latter or the principles of that culture itself that ought to be questioned. What aspects of this culture render it so unbearable to most female characters? How does one get to that open conflict between the female individual and the normative values of her society? How can this tension between an authoritative super ego and a sensitive ego be handled in the mutual interest of the society and its members?

By having recourse to the theory of Freudian psychoanalysis as exposed in the scientist's book, *Le malaise dans la culture*, and other theories inspired by feminists and sociologists of the caliber of Pierre Bourdieu, we wish to lay bare the limits and consequences on female individuals of a culture whose education, belief systems and representation fail to take into account its promises of happiness for every member of its community.

I- From colonial domination to gender discrimination: the role of education

1- The traumatism of an 'off-shore' education

By 'off shore' education, we mean that form of education which is rooted into no solid ground, rests on no concrete reality, on no social value deeply ingrained into the actual experiences and the culture of the people on whom it is imposed. In the traditional context, children are subject to an education that prepares them to face their natural and social environment. This education also prepares their minds to face the challenges they and their society encounter. In no way does that education end up transforming them into plain strangers to themselves and to their social environment. On the contrary, it teaches the children how to live in harmony with a world's order which reflects the daily reality.

The education in modern Africa exemplified by *Nervous Conditions* is rather of the 'off shore' type. The school system which is an institution of that education comes into the picture at that historical moment as a means through which the girl can be freed from cultural injustices, crass poverty and misery which are caused by ignorance. In that, Tambu wishes to avail herself of that opportunity. She will use it to make that qualitative stride that will take her out of the world of poverty made of mosquitoes, bad smells, farms she used to live in and the rags and tatters that she uses as dressing clothes. But beyond these material conditions, she sees it as a giant step "upwards in the direction of [her] freedom." (183) The "price" to pay is high: it is about abandoning Nyamarira her home village and her family she loves so much. But the mere prospect of escaping from this dire poverty, lack of freedom and humiliation that

dependence on others incurs weighs more than anything else in the weighing machine of her personality and even makes her feel “dizzy”, “numb”. Her mother thinks otherwise and what makes her daughter “dizzy” with hopeful prospects makes her “decline ... rapidly” Her fears are based on the outcome of that further education for her daughter. “Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time. (184)

Apart from that individual gain school provides as best summarized by Tambu’s words, this institution remains the place where children acquire a culture that estranges them from their authentic values and leads them into open conflict with their society. What a child learns in classes contradicts the daily social reality. In a nutshell, the child is trapped between two sets of education each having its own pertinence and requiring total allegiance to its precepts.

After attending school thanks to the generosity of her uncle Babamukuru, Tambu has come to reject her community of origin. Being too sensitive though, she develops a guilt complex about her wish to keep distances and abandoning her family to their own fate. She feels guilty of preferring city life, modern school, the home of her wealthier uncle to life in the village with her own people. After a stay in the city, her first come back to the village is pictured as a scene of unease, of “depressing silence” which shows the estrangement that has taken place between her and this environment. Tambu’s mother senses that she is losing her daughter once again as she lost her first son who died in the city after he was taken away from her without her consent. The woman finds it necessary to remind her daughter of her origins thus revealing the frustrating fate of the mother reduced to reminding her offspring the latter’s duty of gratefulness towards the person who gave birth to her. “I’ve been listening to you laughing and talking for a long time and wondering when you would remember that somebody gave birth to you.” (129) Later on, with no effort to refrain a bout of anger and reproach that she too long refrained, she unleashes her frustrations and anger in a long tirade of unprecedented violence against her daughter. This desperate attitude so common to all those who have but implosive insults and anger as their only weapons to face the injustices of life is a reproach to her daughter’s ungratefulness. She reproaches this one with preferring people she identifies in her hysterical anger as strangers and also with becoming ashamed of her origins. “You [Tambudzai] think your mother is so stupid she won’t see Maiguru has turned you against me with her money and her white ways? You think I am dirt now, me your mother.” (40) The first time Tambu is embarking on the journey to the city, she leaves behind her a mother

pictured as “hargard” and “gaunt” (50) with pain and powerlessness but the daughter herself is rather “triumphant” over the rare chance she is given to go to the city. The mother’s longing for solidarity and companionship with her children is always frustrated by the unilateral patriarchal decision to take them where it fits its interests. This is the sad fate of the woman in this universe: she bears children, bring them up and when these ones have reached an age to understand her, share her sorrows, they are taken away from her to be brought back later on as true foreigners to her or worse as dead bodies as it was the case with her late son Nahmo, Tambu’s elder brother.

The aim of any educational system is ultimately to prepare the learner to be part of his community, to learn to live in harmony with the prevailing social values and the other members of that community. This is the first condition for culture to exist and improve. But when people are educated into values that contradict those that they face everyday and are true to their social origin, psychological troubles can be foretold. Nahmo maintains a stubborn silence when back from the city. Tambu as for her will have to find a way out of the puzzle of reconciling within herself two opposing forms of allegiance: that of her origin to which she remains attached through her love for her parents and sisters but whose poverty and ignorance she rejects; the other allegiance is that of her new life in town at the Christian missionary school that her uncle manages.

It is the character of Nyasha who ideally embodies the forms of psychological traumatic troubles as a consequence of that off-shore education. She cannot speak Shona, the local language that most people speak and which is the mother tongue of her parents. She rather speaks English like any Englishwoman and communicates with her parents through that language. The stay in Europe has transformed her into a complete foreigner to her people and their ways. She can no longer play with her cousins who are not conversant with that white man’s language. The justification and even excuse for such an inauthentic behavior is not long to come in the words of their mother Mainini: “They have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their shona has gone.”(42) Apart from the members of her nuclear family, i.e., father, mother and brother, Nyasha is a social misfit. When communication with these latter is broken and that the other person apart from them, i.e. Tambu, with whom she was getting along leaves the home for the boarding school where she is to attend further studies, Nyasha sinks into a psychological crisis that requires she be admitted to a psychiatric clinic. (201) In her delirium, she is lamenting over herself, her family and her people. She is

upset that she and her people have been made strangers to themselves through lies and a political and cultural aggression. “Why do they do it, ... to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they’ve done? They’ve taken us away ... All of us. They’ve deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other ... They have trapped us.” (200-201) For the teenager who is developing hysterical troubles, Babamukuru her father, Takesure, Lucia and all the other African characters are all complete victims of the English colonial system. The lack of any possibility of communication as an ultimate consequence of that inauthentic education alienates people from their real world. Tambu’s mother has established the diagnosis of the psychological and social malaise. The people who attend the new institutions of education and go through mental disorders suffer from a terrible disease which she has diagnosed as “Englishness.” She holds the English culture through its local representatives in the persons of Babamukuru and his wife Mainini responsible for the death of her son Nahmo. The accusation suffers no hint of doubt and is therefore direct. “First you [Baba and his wife] took his [Nahmo’s] tongue so that he could not talk to me and now you have taken everything ... You and your education have killed my son.” (54) It is therefore now easy to understand why the decision of the patriarchal authority which the girl’s father and uncle represent to take her to a higher school in the town in the place of her late brother should work out of the poor woman such an irrational ire. But this wrath which does not influence the decision of the male shows once again the powerlessness of the mother in a society where decision about the children she bore alone and brought up almost equally alone is made without asking her opinion.(56)

Even Babamukuru, the pride of that system of estrangement to one’s personality and culture, is on his own guard in front of that educational system and the English ways it inculcates in teenagers particularly in the female tribe. His own daughter is a living lesson to teach him wisdom to distrust that foreign education. The mere idea of allowing Tambu to attend the convent is far from causing joy in him though he senses the “fine opportunity [it represents] for the girl to receive the finest education in Rhodesia.” (183) The reason for such a dilemma is easy to work out: “it [the white man’s education] may change her character for the worse ...” because with “these whites, ... you never know.” (182)

A female teenager would be entitled to expect from the formal school, that new site of socialization, more freedom and self-valorizing attitudes in front of the inhibiting myths of the traditional culture. But this is not the case in *Nervous Conditions* where school repeats and ingrains into the minds of the teenagers the same prejudices that society has for girls outside

the classrooms. As a girl, Nyasha is expected to behave in a way that fits her gender and sex. But she proves rebel to all the essential categories that have been designed for her and in which she must accept to be encapsulated. She, for instance, is a brilliant student in all the school subjects. But what proves most intolerable is that she beats boys in subjects a so-called nature has disqualified her and those sharing her doomed fate of belonging to the female tribe. This arouses bitterness and jealousy from the boys who do not forgive her for making nature which is believed to have set up laws against which there is no recourse on earth to lie. By beating boys in all subjects and particularly in mathematics, by proving rebel to the strait-jackets of behavior and skills designed for her, she “historicizes”² a skill that was presented as escaping to the order of history and was to be found in biology. The hatred she has to go through in the class has a single cause: “they resent the fact that I do not read their romance stories” she reveals before adding the other pretexts: “They do not like my language, ... They think I am a snob, that I think I am superior to them because I do not feel I am inferior to men ...” She concludes revealing the root of the frustration of the yet to be men of her class: “[a]nd all because I beat the boys at maths!” (196)

Considered a “dominating” subject (Bourdieu), mathematics are regarded as inaccessible to girls because of this subject’s high level of abstraction, its complexity which are so many skills denied to the ideal of femininity as constructed by the patriarchal science. According to that ideological science, teenage girls have a biological incompetence to understand mathematics. This science which has set up precepts that disqualify girls for science, when analyzed by a number of sociologists³, who have undertaken to study that so-called congenital incompetence, reveals its ideological core nature. This phallogocratic “dishistoricized”⁴ incompetence for mathematics is disclosed as a social construction from childhood on in the family and at school.

The atmosphere of the classroom repeats the same scenes of frustrations, humiliations that the young girl goes through in the everyday life. It is difficult to understand why a girl should run away from romance stories and rather opt for mathematics, would prefer political issues of the world news to the narratives of imaginary and light romance fictions. The sanction does not wait long to be pronounced. An allied force is set up to go to the aid of the inviolable natural

² Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine*, Paris, Seuil, 1978, p.114

³ -J.S.Hyde, E.Fennema, S.J.Lamon, « Gender Differences in Mathematics Performance : a Meta-Analysis », *Psychological Bulletin, American Psychological Association*, 107(2), p.139-155, 1991

- Michael S.Kimmel & Amy Aronson, ed., *The Gendered Society Reader*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴ P.Bourdieu, op cit.,

precepts of the patriarchal order which have been violated: Nyasha is charged of being a “whore”, of being “proud”, of being “a snob”, of thinking herself “superior” to others. (196) But the teenager knows well the true causes of these accusations and hatred: “I am convinced that they have other reasons for disapproving of me.”(196)

School is a site of assimilation, the institution that leads to one’s cultural doom, where one loses one’s true identity, where you “forget who you were, what you were and why you were that.” (178-179) “The process”, the young girl adds, is “called assimilation.” She is one of the rare persons able and sensitive enough to understand the colonial process and the personality destruction the colonized Africans go through. As a consequence, she also appears as the tragic figure of the promethean hero who is a favorite figure of African colonial and postcolonial literature: those who have clear-sightedness are those who experience the wrath of the system and end up showing signs of neurotic disorder as a symbolic sanction. Nyasha’s final fate echoes the fate of Prometheus and also the words of poet-philosopher Schiller: “Now human beings must not try the gods/ Nor ever, never wish to see/ What they condescend to cover with darkness and terror.”⁵

This fate of the sensitive teenage girl is made even worse by the fact that those from whom she would normally expect comprehension, compassion and even solidarity are part of the battle but on the wrong side. Girls take sides in the fight against Nyasha but not on the side where a normal and rational mind would expect them to be: they ally with the boys and are conspiring against her out of sheer jealousy. In fact, girls are her worst enemies. They are actually the ones to condemn Nyasha as “proud”, “snob”, “loose” (94) Nyasha does not have to face only boys. She finds it impossible to establish friendship with her female classmates. If she is “missing” so “badly” (196) her cousin Tambu, it is because she is finally the only person in her world with whom she can share her sorrows. “But the fact is I am missing you and missing you badly. In many ways you are essential to me in bridging some of the gaps in my life, and now that you are away, I feel them again.” After this confession, Nyasha explains the problems she faces with her female classmates. “I find it more and more difficult to speak with the girls at school. I try, Tambu, but there is not much to speak of between us.” (196)

As it clearly appears above, the tragedy of the girl is that she must be prepared to fight not only boys but also girls. If it is rather easy to understand the reaction of the men and the boys

⁵ Schiller, *Le Plongeur*, ballade de 1797, vers 91-96. « Et l’homme ne doit pas tenter les dieux/ Ni jamais, au grand jamais, désirer voir/ Ce qu’ils daignent couvrir de nuit et de terreur. »

against a girl wishing to be true to herself, the irrational hatred of other girls and women in her life makes her situation a desperate one. All the female characters in the novel have experienced that lack of solidarity at their individual levels. When Tambu's wish to attend school met with her father's refusal, she went to her mother and grandmother for sympathy and encouragement. But what she heard from them was the most dispiriting advice a person of her nature could receive. Though they understand the fight of their daughters, Tambu and Nyasha's mothers are respectively reluctant to help the girls. On the contrary, they teach them submission as their own mothers did it for them. Tambu summed up the paradoxical attitude of her mother. "I think my mother admired my tenacity, and also felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced up to it. To prepare me she began to discourage me. '... Accept your lot and enjoy what you can of it. There is nothing else to be done.' She confesses the disappointment she felt when she was taught that lesson of defeatism: "I wanted support, I wanted encouragement, warnings if necessary, but constructive ones." (20)

As we see, women's words can be more frustrating than those of men. The attitude of these women is easy to work out. They reproach Nyasha with sending back to them the image of defeated women who accept their lot. By being different from them, she is their guilty conscience. That is why they do not forgive her spirit of independence, which they regard as a lack of humility.

The other problem of the educational system is its lack of connections with the reality. Instead of preparing pupils to face their daily realities, it is concerned with teaching them meaningless sentences and languages that nobody will need in a future real life but which will estrange them even further socially and create an elite disconnected with the social realities. "I did not want to be left behind, so I threw myself into everything: exotic language like Latin and French and Portuguese, with unfamiliar sentence structures ... of their aunts." (195)

The school system that is presented in the novel shows that the modern educational system does not address the issues of the social and gender equality. Babamukuru and his wife are the living consequence of the product of that system of education and there is almost no difference between their attitude and that of Jeremiah and his wife in the village. Wherever they are, human beings, no matter how far they have been in their studies, continue to perpetuate the inequalities. It is easy to foresee the attitudes of Nyasha's classmates when they

get older being so attached to the conviction of the congenital superiority of men over women. In the school system, nothing is proposed in the curriculum to help teenagers think differently from what their parents used to think. And even today, many people continue to believe innocently after high studies in the universities that boys and men are superior to women. School therefore appears as an instrument of perpetuation of an unfair order instead of appearing as an instrument of change.

As we have seen, all the structures of the society seem to have allied against the girls, Nyasha, Tambu and those sharing their fate. As a consequence, the girl begins developing forms of pathological solitude. The verb “withdrew” is recurrently used in the text for many female characters. The term is used to describe Nyasha in her psychological development but the parents are not being insightful enough to see that the psychological sanity of their daughter is worsening:

Not only had she stopped talking to us, but she was growing vague and detaching herself from us. She was retreating into some private world that we could not reach. Sometimes, when I talked to her, quite apart from preferring not to answer, she simply did not hear me. Once, when I passed my hand in front of her eyes, she did not see me either and I had to shout very loudly to bring her back. (118)

The girl who was cheerful and sociable develops forms of an “avoiding personality”⁶ If Nyasha cannot find solace, comfort and comprehension in her family and at school, how could she find peace of mind and happiness in the society and its values at whose service the family and school are set as instruments of these social values’ perpetuation?

II- The gender equality as an impossible quest.

We intend to study the ideological instruments that the patriarchal society equips itself with to perpetuate an order that is willed immutable, natural and therefore eternal. These instruments which are a sexist religion and an unfair ethics support a culture that is traumatic to its female victims.

1- A culture of trauma

Culture ideally and as a general definition can be summed up, in agreement with S.Freud, as the whole set of activities and values that profit its human creators and protect them against the violence of natural forces. It is a communal creation and can be regarded as a collective

⁶ « personnalité évitante » by Christophe André, *La timidité*, coll. Que sais-je ?, PUF., 1997, p.35.

psychic being with the aim to achieve a better civilized social life. But as a paradox, culture in this male dominated Euro-African society carries the interests of one group of the society and also bears the responsibility of the sufferings of the other important victimized group of the people. A close look at the particular society of Rhodesia like many communities in the world reveals a society that grants no consideration to its female components. In spite of his education, Babamukuru is the best mouthpiece of that culture. Through his speech, we have an inkling of the position of women in this community. For this character and his brother Jeremiah who is an illiterate farmer, a girl has no need to attend school and she does not have to busy her mind with things as serious as school knowledge. More than being useless, these intellectual activities might even prove harmful when it comes to assume her natural duties of mother and woman: "My father" confesses Tambu, "became very agitated after he had found me several times reading the sheet of newspaper ... He thought ... that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living." (34) As for his elder educated brother Babamukuru, the latter steadily believes that school education ought to have a single goal: to prepare girls for their future role of good mothers and spouses in a world where men are becoming demanding on the intellectual and moral qualities of their future wives. Thanks to their schooling, the mission school headmaster hopes they will be able to get married to members of the emerging elite. Schooling is useful to girls whose parents are intelligent and careful enough to help them 'marry well.' He explains to his niece the reasons which decided him to give her a chance. "You will be in a position to be married by a decent man and set up a decent home. In all that we are doing for you, we are preparing you for this future life of yours, ..." (180) Faced with the inhibitory authority of the patriarchal figure of Babamukuru, only a personality of exception could assert her personality and make her dreams come true. A girl who follows her ideas to their logical conclusion, tries to make her dreams come true can be but rebel or mad. Indeed the female characters of *Nervous Conditions* who oppose that inhibitory authority fall into that category of rebels. These are Nyasha, Tambu and Lucia. The others disapprove of the order, rebel in some sequences of the narrative but always reconcile with that order in the end out of lack of stamina.

The bitterness that the patriarchal figure Babamukuru feels in front of his daughter's rebellion is better understood only in the frame of that sexist culture. Nyasha finds it impossible to accept a program of life that has been decided for her. (131) Babamukuru's position is in no

way different from that of Jeremiah. Both of them agree that there are no other options of life for girls and women outside those set up for them in marriage. If the uncle offers the chance to attend school to Tambu, it is because there is no other male child in Jeremiah's family after the death of his first son. Babamukuru is presented as someone who does not believe that investing in a girl is a safe investment. "Tambudzai's sharpness with her books" the father laments "is no use because in the end it will benefit strangers." To that and in one of those rare moments in the novel where the two men agree, babamukuru has this to say: "You are correct, Jeremiah" (56) When the schooling of his daughter is mentioned, Jeremiah discloses the worst form of selfishness. He has no patience and wonders what he can gain in a long or short term in investing in the school of a girl. His answer to the school teacher who tries to show him the benefit of allowing his daughter to go to school reveals a rhetoric whose logics is telling: "Have you ever heard of a woman who remains in her father's house?" To that questioning premise, he has a pragmatic conclusion that suffers no hesitation. "She will meet a young man and I will have lost everything."(30)

Babamukuru who is no less a calculating man is nevertheless more generous of that generosity of those who are privileged by the social order. That is why he agrees to give the girl a chance. "Tambu must be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family before she goes into her husband's home." (56) This quotation shows clearly that it is out of sheer selfishness that the male society refuses to give the female the opportunity to go to school. As we see in the quotation and with the two brothers, it is always for selfish motives that they are reluctant to do their duty towards the girls. It is also about getting the maximum from the girl before they lose her for another profiteer.

The situation women go through with these men teaches them that there is nothing to expect from a married woman. Her husband gets the whole of her. Babamukuru's wife is as graduated as her husband and has a monthly pay for her work as him. But he is the one to keep the family's car and uses her salary just as his own. When Tambu first hears about that, she has her initiation into the injustices of the male domination and is forced to acknowledge that the image of the perfect couple of her uncle is achieved through the sacrifice of his wife's claim to more respect. "I thought it was a great shame that Maiguru had been deprived of the opportunity to make the most of herself, even if she had accepted that deprivation." (102) How easy it is now to understand that such a man should be reluctant to give a woman her life opportunities! He realizes that, in keeping with the tradition and culture of their society, the

future husbands of his daughter and niece will be their new masters and will allow them to take care of no other person but themselves and people of their own family. If one can do the same thing with another person's daughter, one should be prepared to see that with one's own daughters.

Babamukuru does not consider the option of further studies for girls, be it his niece or his daughter. He is not taken with the idea of admitting Tambu in the convent. It is only his wife who will decide him to allow her to attend the prestigious school. Nahmo, before his death had adopted that patriarchal rhetoric of his culture at such an early age. That is why he used to invite his sister to learn to obey rather than think. “[h]e told me that I would be better off with less thinking and more respect.” (51) Watching and learning from the habits in his community, he came to understand that tasks and skills are sexually established: a woman must learn to obey and a man to think and give orders for the development of the society.

The mother and grandmother of Tambu teach their daughter to learn to assume her fate, make the sacrifices that are expected from her gender and find some happiness in it. “You have to start learning [the sacrifices] early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easier later on ...What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength.” (16) Culture seems to be possible at the price of sacrificing women's freedom and happiness. This idea echoes Simone de Beauvoir's⁷ statement that women are used as the sacrifice of mankind: it is by their sacrifice that life is renewed and by the repression of their intimate wishes by social ideologies that men want to convince her to accept her part of sacrifice.

2- Religion and gender inequality

Religion in humans' achievements is the mark of a high level of cultural achievement whether one rejects it as a mystification or a manifestation of humans' genius. It settles and humanizes the relations between people belonging to a given community. Thus understood, it can offer itself as an emergency exit that saves individual persons from subjective neurosis. But in the end, it cannot keep its promise of happiness for the price to pay at the psychological level is immense: it demands an “unconditional surrender” to its principles which do not always coincide with individual subject's interests and wishes. These problems are raised to a higher level when this system of belief is at the service of a class to the detriment of all the

⁷ *Le deuxième sexe I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949.

community. In such a situation, it becomes a potential source of general malaise for the women it seems to have abandoned in its support of the male category. It is used as a justification for the domination women go through. People systematically have recourse to systems of belief and traditions to justify the condition of domination in which women are kept. It all appears as if the best way to assert one's collective identity and show one's devotion to divinities is to observe the sexist precepts of a system that is said to have been ordained by a supreme and superior being who does not suffer any debate. In such an ideology, religion is presented as a divine creation that is imposed upon the members of the human community without any slightest contribution on their part. This conception of religion is the favorite weapon in the hands of the patriarchal system to keep the dominated group at men's mercy. That is why the desire for freedom very often coincides with a dismissal of the notion of God and religion. In *Our Father*, a female character of Alice Pickering revolts against God and denounces his sexism. "God had proved time and time again that he didn't like women very much."⁸

Locking oneself into a polemic of interpretation of the divine message is a fruitless exercise as far as the importance of the female in society is concerned. To engage in such an ineffectual debate does prevent from asking the real questions. It is way of blinking the real issues which consist in regarding systems of belief as human creations. Human communities have the systems of belief that they deserve. Holy books are like artistic creations which to a certain extent reflect the contradictions of their community or those experienced by the artistic creator. If they are not a copy of the social conflicts prevailing in the society, they reflect or echo these contradictions. Human beings give themselves systems of belief and cannot invent myths which contradict their fundamental value matrixes from which the spiritual values stem. A phallographic and patriarchal society can but have a patriarchal religion which has no clear position for the female in its system or rather discriminate against them. The revealed religion of Christianity which is dealt with in *Nervous Conditions* comes from the Jewish society which is well known as a male dominated society. There is a general tendency for women to be victimized in such a religion whose myths and legends only celebrate the male class and denies any idea of gender equality. When religion which is expected to harmonize social relations is used as a means of justification to an injustice towards a group of the

⁸ Alice Pickering, *Our Father*, London, Hamilton, 1987, p.22.

community, those concerned with social justice should not feel guilty of questioning its myths. One does not necessarily need to become atheist to engage in such a fight.

The tragedy of the female character here is that she is told that her fate has to be accepted as it is with no hope of improvement for it is the will of the Supreme Being. As a precept of the divine will, she must accept it or become an apostate. Nyasha and the other female are church-goers but find it depressing to accept some attitudes in the church. It becomes difficult to reconcile their wish for freedom and equality and the church precepts which are decoded for them by churchmen. How indeed can one believe in God and rebel against his commandments? How can one reconcile the faith with the desire to assert one's personality with no hindrance?

In this novel, "sin" seems to be an exclusive attribute of the female. Nyasha has a behavior her father classes as "evil", "sinful." Babamukuru's lectures to the girls of the house remind them of the necessity to keep themselves pure and have a "decent" behavior. In their childhood, the girls are constantly taught that "sin absolutely had to be avoided. It had to be avoided because it was deadly." (150) To defy the authority of the father who assumes the figure of the Supreme Being is to side with the devil: "Anyone who defies my authority is an evil thing." (109) Nyasha and Tambu are sometimes "whore[s]", "evil thing[s]" and some other times "indecent" girls. They are often reproached with their ill-bred manners and their lack of decency. (109) This reveals the Freudian opposition between culture and libido and it is the repressed sexuality of the female which will ensure the development of culture.

Tambu always suffers bouts of guilt complexes or remorse whenever she finds it hard to agree with her uncle's decisions. She feels bad and sees herself as the devil incarnate when she opposes his patriarchal figure. Any opposition or conflict with him leaves her with a guilty conscience and a pathological sense of remorse. "If I grew more used to my uncle, would I stop deferring to him, as Nyasha had, and I banished the thought from my mind because it was dreadful." (129) She wonders how Nyasha is able to survive that guilt complex after the fight with her father. She could hang herself if she ever happened to strike back at her father in a conflict. "What I admired most about her [Nyasha] was her capacity to forgive herself. I was quite sure that had I been the one to strike my father I would have done as Babamukuru threatened and hanged myself." (119) If Tambu's guilt complex is more marked than that of Nyasha, it is because Tambu's dependence on Babamukuru's love is equally more marked.

She lives “in dread of the severance of her uncle’s love”⁹ because the severance of that love is fraught with lot of consequences for her. Babamukuru is as magnanimous as he can be terribly revengeful as any divinity. His wrath portends trouble for the whole of her life. He was the one to take her out the trials of village life. She feels indebted to him, a feeling that Nyasha cannot feel and understand. When Tambu thinks she cannot forgive herself any offense to her uncle, Nyasha believes that her father is generous out of pride and narcissism.

Tambu always does the contrary of what she really thinks or wants. Thus she once feels like telling Baba that his ideas are stupid and humiliating but she must say the contrary of that. “I don’t want to be in your stupid wedding’ I wanted to shout. Instead I said quietly and politely, ‘very well, Babamukuru. That will make things much easier for everybody.’” (164)

This guilty conscience goes along with a “masochistic delight” (169) to be punished¹⁰ by a super ego which has sadistic inclinations as is shown in Freud’s examples. She welcomes the punishment almost with relief because she relishes being sanctioned for disobeying. “I went about these chores grimly, with a deep and grateful masochistic delight: to me that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity.” But Nyasah who easily decodes that relish in punishment gives a sound justification for her irrational attitude. “And what would happen ... if nobody punished you? I suppose you would punish yourself.” (169)

The constant accusation and abuse of being “evil” and “indecent” results in Nyasha feeling the same guilt complex. In the long run, she believes she is wrong and that others are right.”I’m not a good girl. I’m evil. I’m not a good girl.” (200) In her age, she ought to be spared that heavy emotional load. But the patriarchal order and its perpetuation is dependent on the development of that guilt complex in the female component of the society. The practical mind that Nyasha used to be develops into a negative ego. She ultimately ends up feeling that she is the one to blame, that it is all her fault. These words of hers echo the pathological self-accusation that has been evidenced by psychologists in some form of social anxiety as displayed by some patients.¹¹ This self-hatred and accusation can but be portent of psychological trouble for the sensitive mind of a teenager. Instead of educating her to feel confident and have a self esteem, she is rather led to self denigrate and despise herself. Nyasha and those who share her unfortunate ‘nature’ are very often reminded their failures

⁹ « L’angoisse devant la perte d’amour », Freud, *Le malaise dans la culture*, op cit.

¹⁰ « un besoin de punition », S.Freud, *Le malaise dans la culture*. p.79

¹¹ Tableau 12 Les attributs causales dans l’anxiété sociale : « Cela vient de moi » C.André, op cit., p.114

and weaknesses. As a consequence, they come to develop forms of self-distrust, self-denigration and hatred and even doubt their usefulness in the community. Nyasha is concerned about her inability to be like the other 'normal' girls or daughters. She wonders why it is so difficult for her to accept what others accept so easily, i.e. how to be false to oneself and be happy. For all these reasons, she has come to excuse people like her father who finds it difficult to get along with her. "[H]e's right, right to dislike me. It's not his fault, it's me. But I can't help it. ... He makes me so angry. I can't just shut up when he puts on his God act. I'm just made that way. Why not? Why can't I just take it like everybody else does? I ought to take it, but really I can't." (190)

This feeling of self-accusation and need for punishment goes along with a wish to confide in an external person, to confess as analyzed earlier. Confession in the Christianity might be traced back to that need to relieve the ego of the individual subject from that guilty conscience. Tambu plays that role of confessor for Nyasha. The latter needs that moral and emotional help that an understanding ear can have for lack of an institution that can help her. In the absence of such a safety valve, the psychological condition of the teenager worsens. With no other recourse, Nyasha sinks into a psychiatric trouble as a consequence of her frustrations and accusations. Even religion is no help being part of the problem with the religious tones of the abuses and accusations. The most realist women have chosen their option: accept their inferiority, hush their wishes for freedom and equality and become members of the community. The other alternative that remains for the others like Nyasha, the extremists of the quest for a more balanced treatment, is to engage into an endless fight with the dominating values of their communities. In this battle, the female is to expect no solidarity and no hope of ever achieving anything. But the parents of the teenager win no positive victory for their daughter ends up at the psychiatrist's. Such is the outcome of a system of belief that excludes a group of its members by its myths and practices. But if female characters experience psychological troubles because of their sex, they have identified for themselves some useful "drugs" to heal from those troubles according to the words of the poet: "he who has worries also has some drugs."¹² Faced with all the aggressive attitude of the male dominated culture and the frustrations women must endure, the ultimate drug, when the other sedative remedies and adjunct ideological constructions have failed, remains the illness itself as an ironic way out.

¹² « Qui a des soucis a aussi de la liqueur », Wilhelm Busch, « Pieuse Hélène » (1872) in Freud, op cit., p17.

III- The illness as a way out

Most attitudes of the female characters which might appear irrational can be explained by this phallo-narcissistic culture that has no position for females in its society. There is no need to be an expert of any specific science to realize that most of the illnesses that are often identified as female can be traced back to the injustices that have been mentioned in earlier chapters. The inevitable malaise that they undergo is the result of those frustrations and the lack of any option of change in this system. For instances, if hysteria is a common illness, it is women who suffer from it most and it can therefore be called gender hysteria. The same goes for anorexia which is a widespread trouble which affects many women and teenager.¹³ The psychoanalysts Eliachef and Raimbault put forward an explanation for this trouble. Beyond the explanations, the loss of appetite can also be interpreted as a need for punishment through abstinences and repentance.

Nyasha goes through a trouble of anorexia. The ritual of the family dinner has become unbearable. When the father wants to make her eat against her will, she spews up. Like the culture that she finds unbearable, Nyasha cannot take in any food. She refuses to take in anything during the food ritual that establishes the authority of her father. “What cannot be taken in” we are taught by the narcissistic ego of Freud, “must be spat out.”¹⁴

For some specialists, mental anorexia and other forms of morbid hunger followed by vomiting and purges as we see with many women in modern societies are but a consequence of a tyrannical wish to get thinner and the obsession to lose weight. This concern about one’s body cannot be satisfactory to explain the anorexia that Nyasha is suffering from. This character has other concerns in life. She even reproaches Tambu for being too concerned about futile things like nail polishing and making oneself up. It is rather the psychoanalysts Caroline Eliachef and Ginette Raimbault¹⁵ who offer a hint of explanation for Nyasha’s loss of the wish to eat. With some women, anorexia is used as a weapon, a logical extremist revolt, a lifestyle to which some girls hold to willingly and is not a mental trouble. It “questions with a rare acumen the meaning of femininity. It is an indication of a strong longing for a form of

¹³ Ilana Lowy & Catherine Marry, *Pour en finir avec la domination masculine*, Seuil, 2007, p.25.

¹⁴ « Ce que je ne peux absorber, je veux le cracher » *Œuvres complètes de Freud (Psychanalyse)*, t.xvii, Paris, PUF., 1988, p.168.

¹⁵ Ginette Raimbault & Caroline Eliachef, *Les indomptables : figures de l'anorexie*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1989.

freedom which does not suffer any limit to its expression and which is different from the 'reasonable' efforts needed to have a certain control over one's fate..."¹⁶

Apart from these individual attitudes of rebellion against the phallocratic order of the prevailing culture, the figure of the social misfit looms ahead and takes an unexpected importance in modern African literature. Indeed, this recurrent figure has established itself as one of the main feature of this literature since the encounter with the colonizing forces. It is surprising and despairing that those who should be in charge of their community should appear as unstable minds and even doubtful personalities at the psychological level. In this type of literature as exemplify the novels of writers like A.K.Armah, K.Awoonor, W.Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the hero has grown into a problematic character who cannot agree with the social prevailing norms. When he does not sink into madness out of despair and lack of comprehension, he withdraws into himself and develops forms of pathological indifference or schizophrenia. This psychological development echoes what has been analyzed as an "escape into illness" or "benefit of illness."¹⁷ Having realized the impossibility to cope with this unsatisfactory social environment, the fiction character seeks refuge into illness to protect himself against an unconquerable reality. Nyasha has come to realize that no social institution or value can be of any recourse to her. All the elements of culture and its institutions seem to have been plotting against her to deprive her of her freedom and wish for dignity. The family, the church, the school system and the other elements of culture seem to have chosen the men's side against women offering no alternative to her despair. None of these instruments of the patriarchal order can be of any help to her. Everyday and everywhere she is being psychology bullied. The only person with whom she has solace is Tambu. But when the latter is away for the convent, Nyasha becomes schizoid¹⁸ and refuses human contact and relationship.

The loneliness, withdrawal into oneself and shunning of other people that Nyasha feels are regarded as forms of protection against the suffering and uneasiness of mind caused by the

¹⁶ « L'anorexie interroge avec une rare acuité la signification de la féminité. Son état est la marque d'une aspiration puissante à une liberté sans limites, très différente des efforts « raisonnables » pour posséder un certain degré de maîtrise de son destin... », Ilana Lowry & Catherine Marry, *Pour en finir avec la domination masculine de A à Z*, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, Seuil, mars 2007, p.26.

¹⁷ S.Freud, op cit., p.27 he speaks of "fuite dans la maladie névrotique" or "benefice de la maladie"

¹⁸ Form of mental illness that causes the sufferer to withdraw from social relationships. Christophe André defines it as "un trouble de la personnalité, ... [un] mode général d'indifférence aux relations sociales, et de restriction des capacités d'expression émotionnelle, apparaissant au début de l'âge adulte ... » in *La timidé*, Que sais-je ?, PUF, 1997, p.40.

unsatisfactory human relationships. But the solution of escaping into illness is no solution for it leads to despair, inactivity, irresponsibility and indifference as a sick person is of no help to improve the system.

Apart from this refuge into illness, there is also the recourse or refuge into some drugs used as a way out. Nyasha's smoking in times of conflict with her father is telling about the use of that stupeficient in reconciling her with inner solace and reveals the unease she goes through. But this "worries killer"¹⁹ also reveals the impossibility for Nyasha to find solace in human beings and their institutions. But what is to be expected from a solution that incapacitates the people from real action?

With the failure of all these compensation strategies, psychiatry comes into the picture to take care of a hysterical Nyasha. Her parents hope that this medical science which welcomes their daughter will help her recover her lost psychological sanity. But we have all reasons to doubt the efficiency of psychiatry to help recover her health. Indeed that medical science appears to many people as a reformist institution whose aim is not to change the social system but to help its patients adapt to a social system they have rebelled against. That disqualification of psychiatry takes us back to the origin of that branch of medicine. It was originally developed as a science to put aside all the people and psychological attitudes that threatened the triumphant bourgeoisie that was emerging and establishing its order as the social norm. The social misfits to this order were thoroughly studied so as to make sure all these irrational attitudes and discourses were taken into account by human Reason in this era of triumphant rationality. The law of 30th June 1838 had no other aim than protecting the "reign of money."²⁰

Psychiatry has no claim to change the social prevailing order. It is in fact at the service of that order. It aims at helping the deviant to adjust his personality to the norms, to make the best of the prevailing practices and values. As long as the deviant personality finds it impossible to adapt to new norms, he will remain shut up in an asylum as a social misfit. On the contrary, the society will welcome him open handed if he makes amend, confesses and acknowledges his attitude as deviant. But the social misfit that Nyasha has become is but a mere victim of a system that is hardly bearable. As is well established in medicine, an attempt to cure the effect

¹⁹ Goethe wrote the following verses: "cette chère vie se soucie de donner des soucis/Le briseur de soucis c'est le fruit de la vigne. » in Freud, *Le malaise*, op cit.,p.21.

²⁰ « Le règne de la pièce de cent sous » in Gabel, « Aliénation et psychiatrie » Actes du colloque d'Amiens, Paris, Anthropos, 1971, p.140

without any effort to look for the causes is a vain effort. To limit oneself to such a Sisyphean task of curing the same disease over and over again does not solve any problem. The Ghanaian writer A.K.Armah has a good image to illustrate this despairing condition of the patient of psychiatry. It is the image of the fish that has escaped from boiling water but which is taken back to that water without having the sense to cool it. There is absolutely nothing to expect from the psychiatrists to whom Nyasha is taken. The first one who admits her in his clinic does nothing but diagnoses that she is only pretending to be sick to attract attention on herself, that she is “making a scene.” (201) This western psychiatrist, with the authority of the expert who knows the Africans and their psychological troubles, argues that Nyasha’s case is not worthy of his medicine. The expert in ‘africanity’ has made his infallible diagnosis: “Africans did not suffer in the way we had described.”(201) The prescription he makes to the parents is “to take her home and be firm with her.”

This opinion of his is not far from the old myths which presented Africa as the land of consensus, of unanimity between people, the individual and his community and the social prevailing values. Psychiatry being a western medicine, it is in vain that the parents of Nyasha will look for an African psychiatrist as the patient willed it. But the second psychiatrist has another cure. He recommends some rest for a few weeks and treats the patient on doses of Largactil. This rest and the care of Nyasha’s mother, aunts and cousin will help her return to her family and society which will not have stopped being the patriarchal society it has always been. She will have to learn afresh to adapt to the society and its values and even find some fulfillment in them. Without having attended any medical school or any university, Tambu’s mother and grandmother understood that well and advised their daughter to accept her lot and enjoy what she could of it. (20) These words were wise words to prevent her the trials her cousin Nyasha is going through. If Nyasha fails to learn to adapt, she will be physically and psychologically destroyed by the triumphant patriarchal system and its seemingly unconquerable and eternal order. The despair of women are to be found in the solitude of their quest and fight. The conflict displays two unequal forces: a mere teenager and a whole social system which seems as old as the world. Indeed, this order seems to have always existed. This disproportion between the forces in conflict foretells the outcome of the conflict. All these elements could but lead to psychological troubles in front of a reality that is too powerful and a victim who finds it impossible to organize a form of collective resistance to impose her vision.

Conclusion

In *Nervous Conditions*, all the social structures of the colonial, postcolonial and patriarchal society seem to have allied to break any resistance to its order. The formal school system and education teach the female teenager to accept her lot as a resigned victim to her world. When all these instruments fail to conform her to the prevailing order, she still has the systems of belief like the myth of an immutable and eternal tradition at the service of a male class to which she can cling. The more a system is rigid in its commandments and norms without any regard for the abilities of the ego to accept limits, the more the culture of that society will cause revolts, neurosis or sufferings. The domination of the super ego cannot be augmented beyond limits determined by the ego.²¹ In the absence of a collective therapy for the masses, culture must be considered as a precious good for all humanity and should develop towards a fairer social justice. If that is not done, the effort of civilization and culture will have been wasted for parts of the community members will find society unbearable.

When all these instruments fail to conform her, there still remain two last despairing alternatives to the female: to submit, hush her most intimate wishes and show signs of happiness about a society whose institutions and norms derange her mind, makes her feel alienated from her society and intimate desires. The other option is to rebel against the norms and run the risk of developing forms of schizophrenia or psychological trauma. Such is the fate of the female in this society: to accept a compromise with a system that alienates them and survive or become a social misfit by undertaking, in a solitary form of fight, to reform the norms for a fairer society. If the female characters fail here, it remains clear though that their revolt can be sensed as the hope for culture: it is all about making the society move forward, improve its culture for more justice for what is culture but that genius in human beings to avail themselves to innovations that take their human kind to an asymptotic social justice!

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²¹ Freud, op cit.,

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