

“TO LUCIA WITH LOVE”: LUCIA AS EDUCATOR IN NERVOUS CONDITIONS

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It's bad enough when a country gets colonized,
but when the people do as well. That's the end really,
that's the end. (142)

Lucia had been brought up in “abject poverty” but “her spirit had experimented with living and drawn its own conclusions” (127). Lucia’s poverty places her in the position of a subaltern within the narrative of Tsiti Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. At the level of criticism, therefore, the expectation formed about Lucia as a subaltern is that she has neither voice nor agency. A close scrutiny of Lucia’s spirit, however, reveals a process of thinking that is meaningful to our understanding of the development of her subjectivity. In fact, as the quotation above suggests, the colonization of a country does not necessarily imply the colonization of its people. In the development of Lucia as a character it becomes clear that her agency results from her going through a process of conscientization, a concept developed by Paulo Freire in his writings on ‘liberatory education’. Conscientization refers to the oppressed’s commitment to self-development through the alternation of reflection and action (praxis) that take critical thinking and solidarity, and therefore, dialogue, as its basic tools. Freire argues that only through

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conscientization can the oppressed/subaltern hope to achieve liberation from the mechanisms of control that overpower him/her so as to be able to negotiate his/her own emancipation.

In portraying Lucia as a subaltern who achieves subjectivity, Dangarembga questions the definition of the subaltern fore-grounded in much of the work on postcolonial literature. This definition sees the subalterns as the silenced victims of colonization who are unable to overcome oppression on their own. Whereas the narrative of *Nervous Conditions* leaves no doubt as to Lucia's subaltern position, it also shows that she achieves subject status through the development of conscientization. Ultimately, it is conscientization that enables her to speak out in an effort to negotiate autonomy.

Dangarembga's egalitarian treatment of all the female characters in *Nervous Conditions* can be seen as part of her endeavor to account for the multitude of voices that make up the postcolonial female subjecthood, irrespective of class. This practice relates to her commitment to the struggle toward decolonization as inserted in a feminist perspective. However, critics such as Therese Saliba, Janice Hill and Sally Mc Williams choose to focus their analyses of *Nervous Conditions* primarily on the colonial subjects, mainly Tambu and Nyasha. The colonial subject in a postcolonial novel can be defined as that character who, belonging to the colonized country's middle classes and having been exposed to a Western education, is more readily recognized by critics of a similar background. On the other hand, critics such as Pauline Ada Uwakweh and Supriya Nair discuss Lucia more extensively, even if they maintain Lucia in a secondary position in their critical appraisal of *Nervous Conditions*.

My purpose in this essay is to shift the focus of the analysis of *Nervous Conditions* from its colonial subjects to Lucia, as the representative of the subaltern, in an attempt to contribute to the postcolonial perspective that views subaltern agency as important in the discussion of decolonization. It is central, therefore, to the argument of this essay that Lucia, in spite of her subaltern position, plays a definitive role as the protagonist who voices most effectively the

dissatisfaction with the overpowering mechanisms of male-dominance, coupled with colonialism, which act together as an obstacle to her and her companions' development. Moreover, I will demonstrate that Lucia functions as an 'educator' *par excellence* in her relationship with the other women in the novel, especially Tambudzai. Of course, her efforts as an educator of conscientization can only take place outside conventional school, in the informal meetings with her female companions. By contrasting the conventional school model offered by the narrative, with the education-through-conscientization model that I see evolve in Lucia's dealing with female emancipation, I hope to highlight the importance of Lucia's subaltern agency in relation to Freire's work on critical pedagogy.

According to Teresa Hubel, the voice of the indigenous elite from colonized countries is "too frequently made to represent all of the subject population by critics of the West." This practice derives from the notion, embedded in most postcolonial criticism, that the "subaltern cannot speak because s/he ceases to be a subaltern the moment s/he speaks" (120) Dangarembga demystifies that assumption by constructing a character who achieves subject status, even while retaining those characteristics which make her a representative of the subaltern within the novel. Concurrently, she reverses the colonizer's discourse and frees the voice of the subalterns who have been seemingly unable to speak for themselves.

Dangarembga's concern with the role of the female subaltern in the struggle toward decolonization places her among those African women writers who are considered to be "socially responsible" due to their addressing, in their work, the urgent issues relative to class and gender posed by the conflicts within the societies they work from. It is, therefore, within the context of the discussion of subaltern agency and social responsibility in postcolonial discourse that I have chosen to undertake a critique of *Nervous Conditions* that takes into account the question of the subaltern. Moreover, in place of the already established trend which approaches this novel from the perspective of a hegemonic feminist model, I will look into it from the point of view of the struggle

for decolonization which I see as paramount to the efforts of its female characters.

Decolonization can be seen as the ultimate goal of a postcolonial discourse, however complex and unattainable it may seem at first. It is indeed from the point of view of their commitment to decolonization that the production of African women writers can be understood. *Nervous Conditions* engages in that struggle through enacting the development of a critical consciousness in its female characters as a mode of resistance to the oppression imposed on them by colonialism. The main thesis to be developed in this essay, therefore, revolves around the idea clearly expressed by Nyasha, and included in the epigraph above, that it is not necessary that people from a colonized country be also colonized. Liberatory education, as proposed by Freire and his followers, becomes an essential asset in the hands of people in their battle toward freeing themselves from the burden of colonialism.

It is within the context of the fight against colonialism that the equally urgent need for African women to assert their own rights can be understood. Thus, it becomes apparent that African women writers are faced with the task of representing the fight against oppression on two interconnected levels. That is how one can see that in the women's self-assertive struggle for equal opportunities with men in their own communities, they are simultaneously taking a stand against the processes of exploitation forged in the years of colonialism. Furthermore, male dominance in postcolonial societies is enhanced by a colonial order which systematically portrays women in a stereotyped posture of a locked dependence on men. Showing their rebellion against this situation of gender discrimination, the latest generation of African women writers has chosen to search for more accurate portrayals, ones that suggest female awareness and female action towards change in gender relations.

When Carole Boyce Davies points to the fact that African women writers have worked "to provide truthful assessments of women's lives, the positive and negative, and to demonstrate the specific choices that women must often make" (15), she reveals the degree to which these

writers are involved in the reevaluation of the African female portraiture. In line with these practices, Dangarembga displays the desire to dismantle the stereotyping of African women from the outset of *Nervous Conditions*.

In a clever counter-attack on the common practice of stereotyping, Dangarembga chooses to have five different female protagonists, instead of one. By recounting their lives through the eyes of the youngest of these protagonists—Tambu, a girl in her coming-of-age period—Dangarembga foregrounds a process of learning which can be delineated as the development of a critical outlook of a heterogeneous world. Differences, therefore, rather than similarities, become the raw material for growth. By observing and forming a critical opinion about each of her female relative's mode of resistance to oppression, and by contrasting their different approaches to life, Tambu arrives at her own conclusions in a process of developing conscientization similar to Lucia's. The novel's postcolonial feminist perspective is renewed by this approach to female portraiture, which depicts the sharp differences among its female characters. At the same time, it challenges the Western-based feminist model which encourages a homogeneous representation of the colonized woman.

A readily perceived channel to the feminist concern of the novel is placed at the beginning of the narrative when the reader realizes that only through the erasure of the dominant role of a male character can the five women protagonists take a central position in the story. Such a motif, on its own, would suffice to place *Nervous Conditions* within the feminist perspective. However, I would like to elaborate on the assumption that the kind of feminism Dangarembga subscribes to pertains not to the Western feminist discourse, but to a postcolonial discourse which foregrounds the feminist struggle as just another aspect of the relationship between the powerful, dominant colonizer, and the powerless, subjugated colonized. As a result, an interpretation that views the performance of the female protagonists in the novel as a fight against male dominance *per se* tends to be reductive and ends up not

adding positively to the analysis of the complex situation of women in European-invaded societies. Moreover, it is clear that the problem of gender is not the only variable in the complex equation of female oppression, as enacted in *Nervous Conditions*. Indeed, we will see that the men in the novel are themselves powerless individuals who are likewise subject to the discriminatory rules of colonialism. Dangarembga points to this situation when she responds to the question of the unequal treatment given to Nhamo and his sister, Tambu, in the novel. She argues that the easy answer to this unequal treatment in the West is the “patriarchal system.” She reveals, however, that she has become “increasingly more reluctant to use this model of analysis as it is put forward by Western feminism, because the situation in [her] part of the world has one variable, which makes it absolutely different: the men are also in a position of powerlessness” (345).

Powerlessness, within a colonial context, relates to the absolute inability to overcome one’s situation of dependence due to an over-determined mode of exploitation whereby the colonized is constantly, and often brutally, denied the means to achieve equality with the colonizer. Powerlessness affects all the colonized irrespective of gender. However, powerlessness, in the case of the female colonized, has to be seen also in relation to the model of male-privileging which defines tribal societies and strongly marks the relationship between the genders. It is thus that Dangarembga’s representations of subordination in the lives of women emphasize the complexity of the pattern of the inter-relationship between the experience of colonization and the burden of male dominance.

Nervous Conditions reflects the subordination of women in Zimbabwean society, which remained untouched until the end of the 1970s. This condition meant that the law patronized women and therefore saw them as minors. A woman, for instance, could not leave home or seek work, without the permission of a guardian. Nor could she marry, whatever her age, or open a bank account, without leave. Furthermore, if divorced or widowed, she could not become the legal guardian of her children, who belonged to her husband’s family.

Another concern in the novel that becomes clear from the outset relates to the access to formal education. Doris Lessing in her book *Going Home* reports a Mr. Partridge as saying that for the Africans "education is the path to a better life, or otherwise it is wasted" (184). Although this attitude to education can readily be found in *Nervous Conditions* in the pragmatic way its two successful female characters look up to formal schooling as the path to upgrading their material lives, there is another, less readily grasped aspect to education, which I believe is worth investigating here. This second aspect relates to education taking place not in the conventional schools of the missionaries, but in the exchange of experiences amongst the woman protagonists which amounts to their developing a critical awareness of their reality. Ultimately, it is their critical thinking that enables them to position themselves against the colonizer-colonized model of exploitation and prepares them for agency.

Education as the development of 'conscientization' opposes 'banking education', two concepts Paulo Freire defines in his writings on the 'pedagogy of the oppressed.' I find that Freire's approach to education, because it is vested in praxis, becomes particularly relevant to a reading of *Nervous Conditions*. Working from Zimbabwe, Dangarembga has no doubt designed her novel to be a contribution to her country's movement for decolonization. The novel shows its disposition to become politically engaged from the beginning, when the location and time of the narrative are defined.

Writing *Nervous Conditions* towards the end of the 1980s, Dangarembga looks retrospectively to the period from 1963 to 1979 approximately. Moreover, she locates her narrative in the region of Umtali, where great majority of the land was owned communally by African Zimbabweans. The *Minority Rights Group* Report of 1981, in its account of the position of women in the Zimbabwean society at the time, tells that "'women have begun to scent emancipation, and to take initiatives" (14). In the 1979 elections, for instance, women had shown great enthusiasm and were determined to take a lead. After years of

war, which also meant that women were being subjected to rape and pillage, they were ready to mobilize for an end to the conflict.

In *Nervous Conditions* we find all the female characters already at a stage of revolt against the pattern imposed on their lives by a double-folded mode of oppression translated in colonialism and male dominance. Dangarembga portrays the life-struggle of five women: Tambudzai, the narrator; Mainini, Tambu's mother; Maiguru and Nyasha, her aunt and cousin, respectively; and Lucia, her mother's sister. And yet, in the end, only Tambu and Lucia can be said to have "escaped"—that is, they have been successful in taking control of the opportunities that they succeed in making available for themselves. These opportunities, in both cases, are related to formal education, which both women see as the way out of subjugation to colonialism and male dominance. But even before formal education can be of any avail to them, Tambu and Lucia have to learn to recognize in their own social-political environment those factors which will lead to the development of conscientization, a precondition for a truly successful outcome in any struggle against oppression. At the end of her narrative, Tambu gives us a clear insight into the importance of the development of critical thinking as the tool that leads her to refuse to partake in the privileges attached to the acquisition of conventional education and to embrace solidarity, represented by the writing of the story of her people. Her choice is a sign that she has learnt well from her female counterparts' modes of resistance, particularly Lucia's:

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began.(203)

Tambu's testimony of her process of education through conscientization amounts to a recognition of those factors which are related to the development of her critical thinking and solidarity. She defines the development of her critical thinking as a "long and painful process of expansion" that led her to "question things and refuse to be brainwashed." Just as important, Tambu does not lose sight of the importance of her belonging to a community, to her learning process - including the men, but especially in the form of female bonding which she learns, from Lucia, to see as an important strategy for resistance to oppression and self -development. It is Lucia, indeed, who best represents the fight for female emancipation enacted in *Nervous Conditions*. And yet, much of the critical work published on *Nervous Conditions* gives Lucia very little, if any, attention. This neglect occurs in spite of the fact that Lucia is depicted as a representative of the dispossessed African woman who reaches for, and achieves, voice and agency, in a sharp contrast with other subaltern subjects in the novel, such as her sister Mainini, for instance.

Mainini does not even make an attempt at achieving agency even though she is the character who most strongly identifies the root of her sufferings in imperialism. She is paralyzed in a condition of 'entrapment' in an unhappy marriage, coupled with the loss of her young children and abject poverty. Lucia, on the other hand, not being married and not having any children, senses that she has better chances than her sister in the struggle toward human agency. Her reply to Babamukuru's demand for woman's obedience to man is a good illustration of her awareness of these material differences: "maybe when you marry a woman, she is obliged to obey you. But some of us aren't married, so we don't know how to do it. That is why I have been able to tell you frankly what is in my heart" (171) . Lucia asserts her right to voice her disagreement with the rules of a society which thrives on male dominance, and yet her strength is downplayed by a literary criticism which, unable to understand the subaltern subject, chooses to focus only on the colonial subjects in the novel. It becomes clear, therefore, that the silencing of the subaltern, in the case of *Nervous*

Conditions, happens not within the fabric of the novel itself but outside it, at the level of a criticism which is not in line with Dangarembga's perspective on decolonization.

By portraying Lucia in vivid colors, however, Dangarembga disrupts the expectations brought upon the subaltern subject by a middle-class scholarship which lacks the tools to deal with the particularities of subaltern populations that are, after all, millions strong.

Perhaps the characteristics which best distinguish Lucia from her counterparts in the novel are the ones related to her sexuality, humor, pragmatism, and her reliance on female bonding as a strategy for resistance and self development. A close reading of the novel will assist in determining how these characteristics enable her achieving agency.

To begin with, Lucia is not at all constrained by other people's opinions on her sexual behavior. When she decides to move back with Takesure, she does so 'matter-of-factly', as Tambu remarks. She recognizes that her "body ha[s] appetites of which she [is] not ashamed": "A woman has to live with something [...] Even if it is only a cockroach. And cockroaches are better. They are easy to chase away, isn't it?" (153). Her behavior disrupts the notions of 'decency' connoted in sexual morality—and "being a good girl' connoted in obedience and silence—elements of the colonizer's discourse which Janice Hill identifies as being consistently expressed by Babamukuru -- the character in the novel positioned next to the colonizer -- in his disputes with his daughter, Nyasha. However, whereas Nyasha is forced to fashion her behavior under her father's close surveillance, Lucia, being distant from him, remains free to do as she wishes. When compared with Nyasha's, therefore, Lucia's behavior posits a stronger resistance not only to male dominance, but also to colonial oppression, even if her discontent is voiced in a less sophisticated fashion.

In the struggle against the oppressive system she is subjugated to, humor becomes an intrinsic element of Lucia's resistance. As such, humor replaces for Lucia the various forms of hysteria the other protagonists resort to at different stages of their development. The most

humorous moment in the narrative occurs when Lucia, unable to take in any more lies, decides to walk in and interrupt the meeting taking place among the family's patriarchs in which Takesure tries to excuse himself of his share of responsibility by blaming Lucia for using supernatural powers on him. Through making ridicule of Takesure, she ends with the reverence he has been trying to impart on himself:

'Fool!' snorted Lucia, looming over him, arms akimbo. 'Fool!' And she whirled to face Babamukuru, so that now her left eye glittered. 'Look at him, Babamukuru! Look at him trying to hide because now I am here.' Takesure looked braver when he had Lucia's back to contend with, but his reprieve was brief. 'If you have an issue with me,' Lucia advised him, 'stand up and let us sort it out plainly.' In two strides she was beside him and, securing an ear between each finger and thumb, she dragged him to his feet.(144)

We realize then that making ridicule becomes an efficient weapon in Lucia's hands. Her humor is not a sign of superficiality. As Tambu rightly points out: "Those men! They never realiz[e] that Lucia [is] a serious person. Her laughter, like her temper, [is] hearty and quick, but never superficial"(153). Indeed Lucia's humor always comes side by side with another strong characteristic of hers: an absolute frankness in relating with other people, irrespective of their position of dominance in relation to her. Speaking her mind out is Lucia's proposal of yet another mode of resistance to oppression, one that she establishes at the outset of her participation in the narrative. When Babamukuru finds out that she and Takesure are still living at the homestead, contrary to his wish, he tries to ignore her by not directing his talk to her. She replies forthrightly:

'Even if you do ignore me,[... I it doesn't mean I'm not here. And anyway, Mwaramu, maybe you can tell me plainly:

where do you want me to go? We both know I can't go home. Their sending me here in the first place, it was because there was no food, and no work either at that place, isn't it? It's true, you know it. So where do you want me to go?1(125)

Her daring to voice her protest with such frankness can be traced to her position as a subaltern. The material dispossession inherent to the subaltern class creates in the individual a disposition for fighting with whatever resources become available to him/her. Lucia finds in rhetoric a valuable aid in her struggle against oppression. Through speaking out her mind she makes it clear that her being materially dependent does not mean that she has to be spiritually subjugated to the oppressive forces that surround her.

Unlike Tambu or Nyasha, Lucia is indeed more subjugated by the material limitations of her class position. Whereas Tambu escapes the limitations imposed on her gender and class through her uncle's economic opportunities, Lucia has to be more resourceful and find a way out through her own means. It is within this context that her pragmatism can be understood, as reinforced in Tambu's comment that Lucia's spirit "'had experimented with living and drawn its own conclusions'"(127). Pauline Ada Uwakweh suggests that Lucia's 'escape' from "male control and her attainment of independence and financial security lie in her pragmatism". That is how, for instance, while "complimenting" Babamukuru on his power and benevolence, she "manipulates" him so as to obtain a job at the mission school(82). However, contrary to Miki Flockemann's suggestion that Lucia "play[s] power games" at the expense of the other women in the novelas), I would like to argue that her attitude not only mirrors a valid strategy which compensates for her otherwise absolute lack of power, but also that while being pragmatic Lucia at the same time renews her faith in female-bonding as the path to emancipation. It is this faith that leads her, even at the risk of losing her job, to question Babamukuru on his right to punish Tambu:

'Did you ask her what was on her mind?', she demanded. 'Did you ask my sister whether she wished her daughter was present? Even the wedding. Did you ask my sister if she wanted that wedding? I do not see that the child did you so much wrong by preferring not to be there'.(171)

This passage illustrates well the confrontation between the two educational approaches that I see evolving from the narrative of *Nervous Conditions*: one, in the form of what Freire calls 'the banking system' of education; the other, based on what Freire calls 'conscientization'.

The 'banking system' of education, molded according to the colonialist ideology, is firmly established in Zimbabwean society, and has in Babamukuru its most representative voice. The other educational approach is drawn in a close link with 'conscientization' and the struggle against patriarchy and colonization. As such, it can be seen as a rebellious answer to the former approach and finds in Lucia a truly significant voice. These two educational approaches delineated in opposition to each other disclose Lucia's role as the true educator in the novel.

Paulo Freire's writings on pedagogy become singularly relevant to my goal in so far as they concern the subalterns' struggle to achieve voice and agency. In fact, Freire's literacy program is designed to develop the subalterns' critical thinking, a pre-requisite for the perception of their personal and social realities and their dealing critically with them. However, Freire's own pedagogical concepts derive from his critique of the dominant pedagogical framework from which he writes. This procedure consolidates his belief in praxis, whereby reflection and action alternate in the pursuit of humanization. Therefore, his writings become relevant also for my appraisal of the colonial system of education.

As illustrated by the passage above, Lucia's insistence that opinions be sought before decisions are taken lies beyond

Babamukuru's perspective on education. In a radical opposition to progressive models, Babamukuru's educational strategy aims at obedience and silence, rather than at the development of a critical consciousness achieved through communication, the key factor in Freire's educational model. Such disregard for the educands' points of view conforms with an educational system which is ultimately the result and the cause of an oppressive colonial system preserved by the lack of opposition to its mechanisms. Echoing Althusser's views, Supriya Nair argues that far from posing a challenge to the *status quo*, "the colonial school's ideological power manufactures the consent of both the elite and non-dominant populations that then reproduce the structures of colonial-ism and capitalism" (171). In *Nervous Conditions* this process can be identified as taking place in the passages that depict the colonial school at work.

A glimpse of the sort of uncritical education colonial school children are exposed to is given by Tambu in the following passage:

[O]ur teacher said he had taught us the *entire syllabus* so it was up to us to embed what he had taught us firmly in our *memories*. So, instead of classes, we *had revision periods*. Mr. Sanyati divided us up into *groups* and sent us outside with the *life-cycle* of the *Anopheles* mosquito, the *dates* of the Boer rebellion, the *ordinary, comparative and superlative of irregular adjectives*, and expected us to be able to *recite them by rote* when we came back into the classroom. (176, my emphasis)

Freire defines conventional pedagogy according to what he calls the 'banking system' of education for which the targets are memorization and storage of information, usually of details and topics irrelevant to the educands' political circumstances. By expecting his students to "recite by rote", "dates", "life cycles" and degrees of adjectives, Tambu's teacher is complying with the colonial school "syllabus" which, in place of promoting the discussion of aspects that

could lead to the true development of the students' critical mind, chooses to emphasize those ineffectual details, useless to their taking a position in the world. A discussion of the Boer rebellion, the Anopheles mosquito and even the use of adjectives that would provide for the students' search of the significance of such topics to their own reality, would certainly lead them to taking an active role in their learning process, thus contributing to the development of their critical thinking.

The lack of a critical consciousness allows for Western ideology to be conveyed, regardless of its harm, to the realm of African life. The Convent School depicted in the text epitomizes the sort of "prestigious private school[s] that manufactur[e] guaranteed young ladies"(178). This statement gives an idea of the extent to which Western education affects the lives of African women, and as a consequence, of all the African people. Responsible as they are for the upbringing of children, women perpetuate white supremacy through passing on to their children the values of the Western ideology they have been educated with. Nyasha is deeply aware of this process. She voices discontent with the prospect of colonial education when she points to the fact that "there [are] more evils than advantages to be reaped" from going to a Western-style school:

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, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others -well really, who cared about the others? So they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself. (178)

In spite of the threat of assimilation and cultural homogenization, the struggle to gain an education has been shared by colonized peoples in general who have been quick to recognize that being instructed in

Western knowledge means “access to power”, as Nair points out (134). There is no doubt that Tambu and Lucia, too, see in education a means to have access to power, in the form of better material conditions that will eventually allow for emancipation from male dominance. However, the fact that they can go through the colonial school without jeopardizing their own African identities can certainly be explained by their being exposed to a learning process, prior to and coincident with their formal schooling, which enables the development of their critical consciousness. As a young girl, Tambu observes the other women in her family and senses their strength in their particular forms of resistance. It is Lucia, however, in her reliance on female bonding and humor, and in her acute critical consciousness, who provides Tambu with the most efficient tools in her struggle against patriarchy and colonization.

Lucia realizes the importance of solidarity in the female quest for subjectivity and agency. It is, indeed, in the practice of solidarity that Lucia becomes an ‘educator’ in the modes of the ‘liberatory education’ proposed by Freire in his pedagogic theory.

Perhaps the passage that best illustrates Lucia’s reliance on solidarity as a spring for growth is the one that finds all the women of the Sigauke family gathered in the homestead kitchen in a “fierce sisterly solidarity” over Lucia’s case. A question is raised as to whether the family patriarchs, gathered in the room next door, have the right to discuss Lucia’s case without her presence. Their union is threatened when Maiguru refuses to get involved in “matters of the flesh or the earth” even though she knows that if she remains aloof she will be seen as setting herself apart from the other women. On the other hand, Lucia is determined to have Maiguru’s opinion on the matter: “What do you say, Maiguru? Isn’t it they want to spoil my name? So what do we do, Maiguru? We are looking to you to give us a plan” (138). Lucia’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ is clearly indicative of her faith in solidarity as a form of female resistance to authority. In Freire’s terms, liberation can not be achieved by one’s own efforts alone neither is one liberated by others. My focus on Lucia’s agency, therefore, poses the question of her

ability to engage in dialogue and to critically evaluate and intervene in those events concerning her own and her woman companions' lives.

Tambu's view on the kitchen conflict is worth being quoted as it relates to 'conscientization', a fundamental Freireian concept which combines solidarity and critical thinking in the effort for liberation. Tambu says that,

What was needed in that kitchen was a combination of Maiguru's detachment and Lucia's direction. Everybody needed to broaden out a little to stop and consider the alternatives.(138)

Freire argues that the important aspect from the perspective of liberatory education is for people "to come to feel like masters of their own thinking by discussing [that] thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their suggestions"(118). Furthermore, engaging in critical thinking in the quest for mutual "humanization" compounds the efforts of all the parties involved in the struggle for liberation; this is the meaning of solidarity.

Every time Lucia intervenes either to improve the conditions in her and her companions' lives, or to assert her right to behave as she chooses, she helps to set the path in the direction of female emancipation in her community. As such, Lucia's accomplishments can be equated to the subaltern's "taking history into [his/her] own hands," which according to Freire precedes learning the alphabet. In fact, Freire argues that "the process of literacy is much easier than the process of taking history into [one's] own hands, since this entails the "rewriting' of one's society" (*Literacy* 106). Not incidentally, the narrative of *Nervous Conditions* gives evidence that after all her struggle, Lucia has indeed found the alphabet easy to learn. In a letter to Tambu, Nyasha reports that "Lucia had passed her Grade One so well that they were moving her into Grade Three" (196).

Foremost, Lucia's educational success can be perceived in her role as an "educator' outside conventional school, where the practice of

solidarity and the attainment of a critical consciousness are the main attributes of her pedagogical perspective. Tambu's 'escape', as well as her own, can be seen as evidence of the efficiency of Lucia's educational effort which affirms the idea of change in the form of the struggle toward female emancipation.

In spite of her subaltern position, therefore, Lucia reverses the expectations brought upon her by a literary criticism which disregards the subaltern in favor of the so-called colonial subject. Hubel, borrowing from Jenny Sharpe, delineates the colonial subject as being that character who, having had access to Western education, becomes readily recognizable to the eyes of a middle-class scholarship who makes her/him stand for all the colonized, thus effacing the presence of the true subaltern in the postcolonial narrative. Dangarembga demystifies the concept of the silenced subaltern when she gives Lucia an authentic, reliable voice.

Lucia's authenticity, as I have sought to demonstrate in this essay, relates to her achieving voice and agency while preserving her own African identity. Lucia's process of learning, and her role as an educator, which I have analyzed from a Freirean perspective, consist in the development of conscientization through alternating action and reflection toward subjectivity. Lucia's emphasis on female-bonding, as a strategy for the development of a female conscientization, can be measured in Tambu's growth into a conscious, whole, human being. On the other hand Nyasha, whose critical consciousness has evolved prior to and outside the formation of her female relatives' bonding, and, perhaps even more detrimental, away from her African cultural and emotional roots, represents the unsuccessful, fragmented colonial subject.

My focus on Lucia's agency evolves from my desire to convey Dangarembga's decolonizing project onto criticism. In doing so, I am being coherent with my position as a Brazilian, middle-class, white woman who has grown increasingly dissatisfied with the injustices attached to class position, race denomination and gender, and who is engaging politically in developing strategies to fight against social injustice.

Therefore, it is because I see, according to the Foucaultian perspective, that literary criticism has the power to govern and order literature, that I can claim that the inclusion or non-inclusion of the subaltern subject in postcolonial criticism jeopardizes the objectives set by the creative writer in his/her work. Furthermore, since it is literary criticism that defines canons and lists of books adopted in schools, universities, and so on, the postcolonial writer's aim at bringing into the focus of the public opinion certain issues relevant to social conflicts, for instance, may be upset by a criticism that does not engage with these same goals. In deciding to shift the focus of my critical work of *Nervous Conditions* from the colonial subject to the subaltern subject, my aim, ultimately, is to develop a strategy of criticism which is politically engaged with fighting social injustice, within the realm of literature.

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