

## Deeper, Wider Hungers Bulimia as Site of Colonial Struggle in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ('Their History. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.'), breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. 'They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped.'

(Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 201)

Nyasha's hysteria described in the passage above does not come unexpectedly. As the reader reads through Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and sees Nyasha's behavior with her parents, with her father specifically, her modern way of thinking, her questioning stance, her seeming dissatisfaction with the way things are in her country, and her vomiting which she keeps secret, the reader knows that these will all come to a head at some point in the novel. One wonders, though, about how and when exactly it will happen. So when it comes, almost at the end of the novel, and with implications far more serious than what one expects, it makes a point very strong and powerful, urging the reader to take another look, perhaps a new perspective, on what have been called eating disorders.

This paper explores this particular perspective through an analysis of Nyasha's bulimia in the novel *Nervous Conditions*. It focuses specifically on how Nyasha's breakdown suggests that her bulimia is not simply a response to a desire to get thin, or look a certain way, though at first it may seem that way, but rather and more importantly, her bulimia is an act implicated in, and to a great extent, caused by issues of colonialism, patriarchy, female subordination, resistance, and control.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part provides a summary of the novel and details the conflicting aspects of Nyasha's history and culture. The second part explicates Susan Bordo's theory of the body as it has been constructed in the West and the ways by which her theory can be appropriated to explain Nyasha's condition. The third and last part examines Nyasha's condition and the different significations of her bulimia.

### Contextualizing Nyasha's Nervous Condition

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, a novel set in colonial Rhodesia in the 1960s, details Tambudzai's journey from her family's homestead in the village to the mission school in the town to the European multi-racial school in the city. More than this physical journey, however, the novel unravels Tambudzai's coming of age, her thoughts and often conflicting positions on the various issues of colonialism, gender, access, resistance, and struggle as they play off in the lives of this particular African clan.

The novel begins with Tambudzai's life in the homestead. While she is happy to be with her family, she is not content. For one, she cannot go to school because her family has to send Nhamo first, he being the firstborn and the only male child. Her father mocks her desire to go to school and tells her that her place is in the home, a position that Nhamo has never failed to impress upon her. For another, her mother tells her that she should not start dreaming of things she cannot have, like education and her own money; that she should just accept her role as woman.

When Babamukuru, Tambudzai's uncle who is considered the clan's patriarch, picks Nhamo to go the mission school, of which Babamukuru is headmaster, Tambudzai is almost ready to give up on her dreams. However, Nhamo falls ill and dies, and Tambudzai is chosen by Babamukuru to take his place in the mission school.

In the mission school, she is to stay with her uncle and his family—Maiguru, his wife, and Chido and Nyasha, his children. She finds out she has to share a room with Nyasha, who is the same age as she is, an arrangement she did not like at first, because she believed her cousin was a stubborn, ungrateful daughter who would be a bad influence to her. Indeed, Nyasha is stubborn and defiant. It is with Nyasha, however, that Tambudzai starts to make sense of and articulate her own thoughts and issues about her identity as a young African female. Later on, Tambudzai begins to understand Nyasha's stubbornness and seeming ungratefulness in light of their oppression, generally as a people and specifically as women.

When Tambudzai is offered a scholarship to go to Sacred Heart, a multi-racial school run by European nuns, she and Nyasha are already the closest of friends. Nyasha does not want her to go, but Tambudzai has decided she will go, for though she recognizes Nyasha's reasons for not wanting her to go, she believes that education is her way out of ignorance and poverty—to freedom and liberation. She knows that while she and Nyasha may both be constrained because they are women, she believes that Nyasha is better off because she is educated and she has the means to do what she wants.

While Tambudzai is away, Nyasha's condition worsens as suggested by the letters that Nyasha sends her. In one of Tambudzai's breaks from school, she spends some time with Nyasha and notices how thin her cousin has become. On her last night in Nyasha's house, just before going back to Sacred Heart, Nyasha breaks down and delivers a speech, part of which is the passage that begins this paper.

The novel then ends with Nyasha being put in a hospital for some time, and with Tambudzai completing her coming of age. Nyasha's condition is still critical; her doctor is non-committal on her recovery. Tambudzai goes back to school. However, through Nyasha's experience, she has acquired a deeper, and perhaps a more realistic sense, of herself and her world. In the end, Tambudzai says:

I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed (203-204).

Though Nyasha's story is only a subplot to that of Tambudzai, this paper focuses on Nyasha, since it is in her body that a particular eating disorder, bulimia, is fully and consciously embodied, and because in many ways, Nyasha's story is Tambudzai's as well. Nyasha's particular history is full of contradictions. Babamukuru, her father, is the headmaster of the mission school, a position he has worked hard for all his life. Taken in by the missionaries when he was 9, he worked in the fields during the day and studied at night. When he completed his standard education in the mission, the missionaries arranged for him to go to secondary school. Then the Government gave him a scholarship to South Africa. He was offered next a five-year scholarship to England which eventually qualified him for the permanent position of headmaster of the mission. He and his family lived in England for five years. At the time of their return, Nyasha was fourteen years old, the same age as Tambudzai's.

Given this background, it is safe to assume that Nyasha is straddling two different cultures, the one she saw and experienced in England and the local culture to which she has come back. This conflict is made evident by how Tambudzai describes her: a bit awkward, as if unsure about what to do or where to put herself, yet confident and always critical, always watchful. Nyasha, in Tambudzai's eyes, always seems to be negotiating two extreme positions.

For instance, during the welcome party, upon seeing the returning family, Tambudzai notes that her aunt, Maiguru, has not changed given that she is wearing "flat brown shoes and a pleated polyester dress," clothes her mother is also wearing, but that her cousin, "Nyasha, pretty bright Nyasha," Tambudzai thinks, "obviously had." She continues: "There was no explanation for the tiny little dress she wore, hardly enough to cover her thighs." However, she observes that Nyasha "was self-conscious....,

constantly clasping her hands behind her buttocks to prevent her dress from riding up, and observing everybody through veiled vigilant eyes to see what we were thinking” (37). Or later on in the celebration, when the dancing begins, Tambudzai notes that Nyasha really wants to dance, but having been discouraged by her mother, she “clicked her tongue scornfully and switched off.” It amazes Tambudzai that “one minute, she was taking in everything that was happening, the next she would not have heard you even if you had spoken to her” (43).

Much later, when Tambudzai is already in the mission school and sharing a room with Nyasha, she realizes that even Nyasha’s stubbornness and defiance are part of the daily negotiations she has to make. Nyasha wishes to assert herself, and yet, she acknowledges that being in her father’s house, she also has to abide by the rules of the house. At first, Tambudzai does not understand why Nyasha is so critical of her father. For instance, Nyasha thinks that Tambudzai should not be grateful to Babamukuru for sending her to the mission school, because, according to Nyasha, he is doing it out of obligation, and not out of kindness. Her father is merely doing what is expected of him; that is, to help the members of the clan who need help.

While Tambudzai feels there is a certain truth to this view, as she herself has felt the weight of Babamukuru’s power in the clan (e.g. if Nhamo were alive and if it were not for Babamukuru’s decision that she should take Nhamo’s place, she would not have been given the chance to go to the mission school), it is still not clear to her that Babamukuru’s power to decide for the family is accorded to him primarily because he is a man. Tambudzai believes that Babamukuru has the right to decide, because he is, after all, the eldest and the most educated and affluent in the clan. She is yet to understand, as Nyasha already has, that gender factors prominently in the construction of Babamukuru’s authority.

Thus, it has also taken Tambudzai a while to understand that Nyasha’s behavior at the dinner table is Nyasha’s way of negotiating her relationship with her father. In the beginning, she thinks Nyasha is ungrateful and blind to her father’s goodness. For instance, on Tambudzai’s first night in the mission, an argument ensues between Babamukuru and Nyasha over dinner: first, on the matter of Nyasha’s not waiting for her turn to put food on her plate; second, her wanting to read a D.H. Lawrence novel, which her father forbids; and third, her not finishing her food. In

this instance, Tambudzai thinks that her cousin is only being disagreeable, and she does not understand why.

Later on, Tambudzai thinks that Nyasha does not eat, or if at all only a few mouthfuls, because her cousin wants to keep her figure. During breakfast on her second day in the mission, Tambudzai watches Nyasha “work her way daintily through egg and bacon and tea, having declined the porridge and toast, because too much food would make her fat” (91). In another clan gathering, Tambudzai notes that while the members of the clan consume sugar in heaps, Nyasha avoids it as much as she can, because she believes that “angles [are] more attractive than curves” (135). At this point, it is clear to Tambudzai that Nyasha’s avoidance of food simply suggests that she is trying to keep her weight, and there is nothing wrong with doing so.

Tambudzai starts sensing that there is something more to Nyasha’s eating patterns on the eve of her departure from the mission to Sacred Heart. Forced by her father to eat at dinner, Nyasha goes to the bathroom afterwards to throw up. However, since there is no indication that the condition is serious, and because Tambudzai is excited about her new school, she dismisses her worries and tells herself that Nyasha simply does not like to eat much.

While Tambudzai is at Sacred Heart, Nyasha writes her long, cheerful letters with news about the clan and the mission. There is one serious letter, however, in which Nyasha divulges how Tambudzai is essential to her in “bridging some of the gaps in [her] life,” and how now that Tambudzai is away, “[she] begins to feel them again.” She then relates how she feels so out of place in the mission, how it is difficult to talk to the other girls in school, because she knows and they know that she is different. She says that the other girls hate her because of the way she speaks English, because they think that Nyasha thinks she’s superior to them, and because Nyasha does not feel inferior to men. Nyasha talks about how badly she wants to belong (196).

Tambudzai vows to write Nyasha, but she never finds the time to do so, until Nyasha’s next letter arrives. Tambudzai notes that Nyasha seems to be back to her old self, because the letter is once again full of cheer and funny anecdotes about the family and the clan. However, Tambudzai is a little worried about her cousin’s declaration that “she had embarked on a diet ‘to discipline [her] body and occupy [her] mind’ (197). Nyasha tells

Tambudzai: "When you come back you will find a svelte, sensuous me" (197). The school year ends, and going back to the mission, Tambudzai finds that "Nyasha was indeed looking svelte.... In fact, too svelte"(197). Tambudzai tells herself, "By my standards she had grown definitely thin, but I knew that she preferred bones to bounce and so I said nothing" (197).

After this meeting, Tambudzai goes home to her family and does not see Nyasha again until after three months. This time, Tambudzai observes that Nyasha "had grown skeletal. She was pathetic to see, but when she hugged me hello I was surprised at the strength in her arms, so frail they looked, as though they would snap if she as so much picked up a pen" (198). After greeting Tambudzai, Nyasha becomes busy with school work, "absorbed in a history text," and it is not until dinnertime when Tambudzai sees Nyasha again. Tambudzai recalls observing the "beginning of a horribly weird and sinister drama":

Babamuruku dished out a large helping of food for his daughter and set it before her, watching her surreptitiously as he picked casually at his own meal to persuade us that he was calm. Nyasha regarded her plate malevolently, darting anguished glances at her father, drained two glasses of water, then picked up her fork and shovelled the food into her mouth, swallowing without chewing and without pause except to sip between mouthfuls from a third glass of water.... When Nyasha's plate was empty they both relaxed and the atmosphere returned almost to normal. Nyasha excused herself immediately. I thought she had gone to the bedroom to read but when I followed her there the room was empty. I could hear retching and gagging from the bathroom (198).

Later on, in the early hours of the morning, Nyasha awakens Tambudzai, asking Tambudzai to help her with a math problem. The next day, Nyasha does not show up for lunch. Babamukuru is angry, but Maiguru

dissuades him from forcing Nyasha to eat. Babamukuru backs down and consoles himself by saying that at supper, with his supervision, Nyasha eats properly. He tells himself that his daughter is just being disagreeable.

However, at this point, Tambudzai knows Nyasha's eating behavior is no longer normal, that it is indicative of a problem, a suffering inside: "Nyasha was losing weight steadily, constantly, rapidly. It dropped off her body almost hourly and what was left of her was grotesquely unhealthy from the vital juices she flushed down the toilet" (199). Tambudzai observes that Nyasha is getting weaker every day. Nyasha is also working obsessively on her schoolwork—she wakes up Tambudzai "regularly and punctually at three o'clock with a problem" (200)—which Tambudzai finds quite alarming because of its obsessive regularity, and because school has yet to resume.

The dinner table drama also continues until finally, Nyasha passes out on her plate. Babamukuru thinks Nyasha is just making a scene, so he orders her into her bedroom. Nyasha goes and Tambudzai finds her open-eyed and quiet on her bed. Once again, at three o'clock in the morning, Nyasha wakes her up with a question, but this time it is not about schoolwork. Tambudzai recounts:

She ... looked at me out of her sunken eyes, her bony knees pressed together so that her nightdress fell through the space where her thighs had been, agitated and nervous and picking her skin. 'I don't want to do it Tambu, really, I don't, but it's coming, I feel it coming.' Her eyes dilated. 'They've done it to me,' she accused, whispering still. 'Really, they have.' And then she became stern. 'It's not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did,' she whispered. 'To both of them, but especially to him. They put him through it all. But it's not his fault, he's good.' Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. 'He's a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir,' she informed in sneering sarcastic tones. Then she was whispering again.



'Why do they do it Tambu,' she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, '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. We're groveling ... Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him.' She began to rock, her body quivering tensely. 'I won't grovel. Oh no, I won't. I'm not a good girl. I'm evil. I'm not a good girl ... I won't grovel, I won't die (200).

In the end, it is clear to Tambudzai that Nyasha's eating behavior is not simply a case of teenage rebellion or a response to a desire to look a certain way; it is much more complicated than that. It is actually suggestive of a deep and wide hunger that can not be satisfied.

### Theorizing Eating Disorders

In "Reading the Slender Body," Susan Bordo offers a way to explain anorexia, obesity, and bulimia. Bordo starts out by establishing that body shape and size serve two different symbolic functions in Western society: "1) the designation of social position, such as class status or gender role; and 2) the outer indication of spiritual, moral, or emotional state of the individual" (187). She uses for an example mid-nineteenth century politicians or businessmen who, upon acquisition of wealth, would proudly display their bulging stomachs to show off their newly-acquired affluence and secure their place in society. On the other hand, those who belonged to the aristocratic class did not need this physical manifestation, for their wealth and place in society were already secure. Slender bodies, the body type of those belonging to this class, were a symbol of aristocratic status—a symbol that the new and growing middle class in the mid-nineteenth century would start to fervently appropriate. Put this way, the body, Bordo argues in an earlier essay entitled "Anorexia Nervosa," is "constituted by culture" (142). She explains that "the body, far from being some fundamentally stable, acultural constant to which we must *contrast* all culturally relative and institutional forms, is constantly "in the grip'... of cultural practices" [italics in the original] (142).

In "Reading the Slender Body," Bordo claims that the management of the body has become symbolic of the management of desire in Western consumer culture. Through her examination of popular culture, Bordo shows that today's individual is exposed to a wide array of goods and commodities, and is encouraged to consume them; however, this desire that popular culture creates needs to be policed and controlled. What results in this interplay of encouraging desire and controlling it is a set of contradictions that the individual has to constantly negotiate and manage. The body, on which cultural practices are inscribed, then becomes the site of these contradictions. In this framework, Bordo says, "the slender body codes the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self in which all is kept in order despite the contradictions of consumer culture" (201).

With this cultural construction and its inscription on the body, eating disorders such as obesity and self-starvation are outside the norm. Both are seen as transgressions, a going against the convention, with obese people suffering more taunts and mockery than anorectics. Bordo attributes this to Western culture's fascination with those who are seemingly able "to transcend the flesh," an ability that anorectics seem to have (202). She qualifies this fascination, however, by saying that anorectics themselves will hide their emaciated bodies as the disorder progresses, implying that self-starvation is still considered an inappropriate response. On the other hand, obese people do not generate these ambivalent feelings at all. Bordo, using Marcia Millman's documentation in *Such a Pretty Face*, claims that "the obese elicit blinding rage and disgust in our culture and are often viewed in terms that suggest an infant sucking hungrily, unconsciously at its mother's breast: greedy, self-absorbed, lazy, without self-control or willpower" (202). Society in general, Bordo points out, finds it difficult to believe that obese people can be happy as demonstrated in the hostile way a talk show audience reacts to obese guests who claim that they are living happy lives. In between these extremes is the bulimic personality body-type which Bordo suggests, seems to be the norm—the perfect response to the contradictions of consumer culture:

For bulimia precisely and explicitly expresses the extreme development of the hunger for unrestrained consumption (exhibited in the bulimic's uncontrollable food binges) existing in unstable tension alongside the requirement that we sober

up, 'clean up our act,' get back in firm control on Monday morning the necessity for purge—exhibited in the bulimic's vomiting, compulsive exercising, and laxative purges) (201).

However, Bordo also suggests that bulimia is hardly desirable; in fact, it may be seen as the manifestation of the impossibility of managing the contradictions that consumer culture presents without harming oneself.

Proceeding from the fact that women are more conscious about and oppressed by notions of body shape and size than men are, Bordo introduces gender into this symbolic representation. She claims that women's obsession with getting thin and maintaining the right body shape and size does have a lot to do with looking right, but it is more complicated in that the way a woman looks, her maintenance of her body, is actually connected with "the cultural management of female desire, on the one hand, and female flight from a purely reproductive destiny, on the other" (187). Bordo explains the first relationship, "the management of female desire," by looking into the traditional associations attributed to maleness and femaleness: "the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male. By contrast, all those bodily spontaneities—hunger, sexuality, the emotions—seen as needful of containment and control have been culturally constructed and coded as female" (205-206).

By keeping the body contained, devoid of curves and roundness that represent female desire, the woman seeks entrance into the male-dominated world and gains a certain degree of power, without provoking male anxiety over what a fleshy body suggests, and without actually disrupting existing power relations. Bordo writes:

From the standpoint of male anxiety, the lean body of the businesswoman today may symbolize such a neutralization. With her body and her dress she declares symbolic allegiance to the professional, white male world along with her lack of intention to subvert the arena with alternative 'female values' (208).

She explains the second relationship of “female flight from a purely reproductive destiny,” by examining what a fleshy body may symbolize for the woman herself. Bordo suggests that the revulsion anorectics feel toward hips, stomach, and breasts

might be viewed as expressing rebellion against maternal, domestic femininity—a femininity that represents both the suffocating control the anorectic experiences her own mother as having had over her, *and* the mother’s actual lack of position and authority outside the domestic arena [*italics in the original*] (207).

By accepting the new look, the female escapes from what she perceives as the confining, suffocating, and stifling fate of women that her mother embodies. Consequently, she feels empowered by embodying qualities—“detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control—”(209) that are highly valued in her culture.

For Bordo then, eating disorders such as anorexia, obesity, and bulimia are inherent in the construction of gender, and are perpetuated within Western culture in general, and today’s consumer culture in particular. It seems that all women are enmeshed in these bodily embodiments and significations, with perhaps some women faring better than others in how they manage these contradictions and the additional demands made on them by the still dominantly male construction of power in society.

Since Bordo’s analysis of eating disorders is grounded in the workings of Western cultural practices and how they are inscribed on the body, it seems obvious that it cannot account for Nyasha’s case. Bordo’s analysis is inadequate and perhaps inappropriate. Nyasha’s cultural context is very different from the culture of the white, middle-class women whom Bordo assumes and calls attention to in her analysis. It is apparent, however, that the general theoretical framework that underpins Bordo’s work—her Foucauldian reading of how bodies, female bodies specifically, are culturally inscribed in societies—can be used as a general framework in formulating a way of explaining Nyasha’s bulimia.

What is needed is an appropriation of Foucault’s theory of the body and Bordo’s use of it to explain the eating disorders of women coming

from Nyasha's colonial culture. One can begin by looking at the symbolic functions that the body serves in this particular African clan in the same way that Bordo examines the body's symbolic functions in Western culture and tradition. On this general level, it seems that Bordo's reading of the body as a symbol of social position and the manifestation of an individual's inner state applies. Social position in this particular African clan is to a large extent defined by how the body looks and where it is situated. Obviously, male bodies already assume a dominant position, but it is more complicated in that these male bodies are also placed in a hierarchy, and there are female bodies that assume male or patriarchal status.

For instance, in Babamukuru's homecoming party, Tambudzai describes the guests' entrance to the homestead: "Babamukuru stepped inside followed by a retinue of grandfathers, uncles and brothers. Various paternal aunts, who could join them by virtue of their patriarchal status and were not too shy to do so, mingled with the men. Behind them danced female relatives of the lower strata" (37). Later on in the celebration, Tambudzai is assigned to perform a special task—she is to "carry the water-dish in which people would wash their hands," (40) which she finds particularly complicated because she will have to make sure that she follows the hierarchy in passing the water-dish, and it is easy to make mistakes and offend people when one is unsure of their status.

Another example of the importance of status is when Babamukuru calls Tambudzai into the living room to formally welcome her into their home, and Tambudzai is unsure about where to sit. She finally chooses to sit in the chair across from Babamukuru's and Maiguru's, because it seems to be the most neutral place as it is neither too close nor too far from them. Nyasha, however, is not as sensitive as Tambudzai. Nyasha, not understanding the fuss about who has more right to sit in the available chair, or perhaps understanding and trying to defy the signification of such ceremonial arrangements, sits where she pleases and resolves the issue.

From these examples, it becomes apparent that the body is tied to the physical arrangement of things; the body and its physical location define one's social position, or the other way around. Jacquelyn Zita, in her book *Body Talk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender*, identifies this embodiment of subjectivity as premodernist: "bodies belonged to larger social aggregates—the family, the manor, the church, the village, the clan, or the tribe and were in a sense owned and controlled by higher social powers that

determined the body's place, meaning, and use" (87). Thus, it seems to follow too that where one puts her body is indicative of that person's position and her submission to it. For instance, Tambudzai, in taking time to decide where she should sit herself and finally sitting in the appropriate place, has defined herself according to the hierarchy and submits to it. Nyasha, in taking the chair that is not hers, reorganizes the hierarchy (whether consciously or unconsciously), thus, rocking the boat and upsetting the people around her.

In the case of female bodies that assume patriarchal status by virtue of their birth and marriage into the family, it is striking that their bodies seem to take on a masculine signification of strength and power. One example is Aunt Gladys, Jeremiah's (Tambudzai's father) "womb-sister, older than him but younger than Babamukuru" (35) whom Tambudzai describes as "so large, it was not altogether clear how she managed to insert herself into her car ... But her mass was not frivolous. It had a ponderous presence which rendered any situation, even her attempts to remove herself from her car, weighty and serious" (36). Another example is Lucia (sister of Tambudzai's mother) who "was strong," who "could cultivate a whole acre single-handed without rest," who "had managed somehow to keep herself plump in spite of her tribulations" (127). Lucia is also the only female who can talk to Babamukuru without fear. Once, she talks to Babamukuru on Tambudzai's behalf; when she leaves, Babamukuru says, "That one ... she is like a man herself" (171). The weak women in the novel, Maiguru and Tambudzai's mother, are thin and seemingly weighed down by the world's burden.

These bodily significations seem to indicate that physical mass and strength are symbolic of a person's social position. It seems, too, that physical mass and strength are indicative of the internal state of the person. Aunt Gladys and Lucia, both big and strong, do not seem as troubled as Maiguru and Tambudzai's mother. In Tambudzai's eyes, Babamukuru is always dignified, bold and daring, while her own father, looks unkempt and haggard. However, some things need to be qualified here. Even though Aunt Gladys has power, the power she enjoys is still within the bounds of the patriarchy, and Lucia for all her strength is not really considered as behaving within the bounds of society. Lucia is actually an outsider; she is seen as a loose woman who sleeps with everybody and anybody, and is ostracized even by her family. It is interesting though that she has used her otherness to get what she wants, and it is in her otherness that she acquires her freedom.

Suffice it to say, however, that from the examples enumerated, it seems that the slender body, as opposed to the Western ideal, is not desirable in this culture. The men in the novel are not at all slender as suggested by how they tuck themselves manfully every time they eat. Maiguru will always serve Babamukuru hefty chunks of meat and large portions of rice. This is true for the women in the novel, too. Such is implied in Tambudzai's inability to understand why Nyasha prefers angles to curves. That Lucia has always been more attractive to men than her sister (Tambudzai's mother) ever was also indicates that in this culture, women with curves, mass, and flesh are more desirable. Why is slender not desirable? Why is mass desirable?

Perhaps, because the people in this culture are poor, body mass becomes a sign of abundance, a move up in the hierarchy. Or maybe, physical strength is needed to work the fields, and since men and women are both tasked to do this, it is desirable that they both fill out so they can do their tasks. Then again, maybe, it has to do with the belief that big, strong parents will produce big and strong children. For women specifically, it seems that curves, mass, and flesh signify the woman's ability to reproduce. According to Pauline Umakwe in *Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions*, African cultures generally "encourage their women to have rounded curves. Weight is often seen as an indicator of wealth. Some cultures even had a traditional 'fattening-room' where adolescent girls were sent to be groomed into 'robust marriageable maidens'" (qtd. in Whisler, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literary Dialogues*).

While these are all suppositions, they show that bodily significations in this particular African culture are different from those in Bordo's analysis. The question now is: what does Nyasha's eating behavior, her bulimia, mean if examined against this cultural backdrop? Is it her way of resisting patriarchal power that is so embedded in the local culture? Is it her way of claiming power for herself? Or is her bulimia a response to something else?

## Finding Nyasha

Nyasha's five-year stay in England and her interactions with the whites in the mission make her case difficult to analyze. At first, it seems that Nyasha's eating patterns signify only a desire to keep her weight and

her figure. She does not want curves. She thinks angles are more attractive. On the surface, this desire can be attributed to what can be assumed as the ideal body shapes and sizes in England, which she observed when she lived there. This seems a safe assumption given that in the local culture, curves are ideal and not angles, so she is probably taking her cue from European models. On this level, this is simply Nyasha's way of looking right.

On another level, Nyasha's bulimia signifies the contradictions of her culture, much like the women that Bordo examines in her own study. However, unlike Bordo's Western women who negotiate the contradictions in American capitalist culture, Nyasha tries to manage the contradictions of European culture on the one hand and her local culture on the other. Read in this light, her eating disorder is both a symptom and manifestation of her fragmentation. From the very beginning of the novel, Nyasha is described as straddling two cultures, negotiating extreme positions, and embodying certain contradictions. Nyasha's bulimia can then be seen simply as a metaphor of her state of being neither here nor there.

However, in taking the slender body and its significations to Rhodesia, Nyasha uses them in a different way. Perhaps in insisting on being angular, Nyasha is aligning herself with European women whose slender bodies represent power and freedom. It is possible that it is only upon her return to the local culture that she begins to realize and seriously think about what the slender body really means. By keeping her weight and her figure, she refuses the ideal body shapes or sizes in the local culture; in the process, she rejects the patriarchal society that constructs and maintains these standards. She sets her body apart from the bodies of the women in her culture; in doing so, her body signifies that her fate will be different from theirs.

Her slender body then becomes her claim to power and freedom, the material and tangible proof of her resistance to male dominance and patriarchal authority. That she is openly defying her father's authority and criticizing her mother's submissiveness strengthens this particular position. Given this reading, Nyasha's bulimia can be seen as her response to the construction of power in her culture. Since she lives in the house of her father and is situated in a patriarchal culture, she cannot totally extricate herself from their laws and rules, but she can always resist them. In the same manner, by taking in the food that her father provides, she accepts his authority; by throwing it all up later, she resists and defies him and what he



represents. Food, in this case, seems to be symbolic of patriarchal order, which Nyasha accepts and rejects.

Then again, it is not as simple as that. Her speech during her breakdown admits and accepts that her father is a victim, too. The real enemy is “they,” and based on the critical eye with which she has always viewed colonial presence in Rhodesia, “they” apparently refers to the European colonial masters. It is not her father, nor his authority that she is resisting, but colonial power and authority, which become concrete through the food that her father puts on the table. This food is made available to her through her father’s position as headmaster of the mission, a title accorded to him by the colonial masters. Without the education given by the European missionaries to her father, he will not be able to provide food for them. In this case, food becomes symbolic of both colonial and patriarchal order, making the colonizers and her father one and the same in her eyes. So when she takes in food, she takes in both; in her throwing up, she resists and defies both. Michelle Vizzard, in *‘Of Mimicry and Woman.’ Hysteria and Anti Colonial Feminism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions*, contends that Nyasha’s disorder “is always played out in response to manifestations of colonization, and particularly as they are focused through the character, Babamukuru.”

Despite this resistance, she craves for the freedom that the colonial culture has given its women. She knows that women in England have more power relative to the women in her culture. She craves for European standards and ideals because in England, she saw that women could have control over their lives and bodies and be the people they want to be. Yet in her own culture, she finds that these ideals simply do not apply because patriarchy is deeply embedded, and as much as she wants to assert them, she finds that the existing order is legitimized and made even stronger by colonial authority. Ironically, these very same ideals that are supposed to lead her to her freedom as a woman are also responsible for her and her people’s enslavement to the colonial masters. In this case, Nyasha’s bulimia can be perceived as her way of managing these conflicting interests.

Food at this point becomes symbolic of the freedom that she believes colonial culture can give her; at the same time, food is also symbolic of the chains with which the colonial masters have bound her people and herself. Vizzard explains that the consequence of such “a feminiza-

tion of colonized men leaves little space for the voices or representations of colonized women within anticolonial discourse, as they are Other to that which is itself Other and thus, barely within dominant modes of comprehension." Nyasha seems to be in the predicament that Kirsten Holts Petersen addresses in "First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature:" "the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neocolonialism.... In other words, which is more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism?" (251-252). Although for Petersen and Vizzard, the situation is complex, the answer requires that both take place at the same time, that feminist theorizing and practice cannot be a mere appendage to the fight against cultural imperialism or something that has to be done later. The tragedy of Nyasha is that she does not seem to know the answer.

Nyasha tells Tambudzai that her Shona, the native language, is no longer authentic, and her English, which is alien, is real. She warns Tambudzai about the dangers of forgetting one's origin and history. She is afraid that Tambudzai will forget, that "they" will make Tambudzai forget. She believes that her stay in England has led her to forget; in forgetting, it seems she has liberated herself. She is now an empowered young woman who will not allow the males in her culture to bully her. Yet, she hates herself for forgetting. She wants to remember, because in remembering, she will know her culture and her heritage, and her identity as an African.

It is interesting to ask, however, what is there exactly for Nyasha to remember. In an interview featured in *Talking With African Writers: Interviews with African Poets, Playwrights and Novelists*, Dangarembga says:

I personally do not have a fund of our cultural tradition or oral history to draw from, but I really did feel that if I am able to put down the little I know then it's a start ... I think the problem of forgetting—remembering and forgetting—is really important. What is interesting is that Nyasha as an individual does not have anything to forget: she simply doesn't know.... She

obviously feels some great big gap inside her and that she ought to remember it because this is her heritage ... Tambudzai on the other hand is quite valid in saying that she can't forget because she has that kind of experience Nyasha is so worried about forgetting because it's not there for her to remember. Tambudzai is so sure that this is the framework of her very being that there is no way that she would be able to forget it. (qtd. in Androne, *Tsi Tsi Dangarembga's 'Nervous Conditions': An African Woman's Revisionist Narrative*).

Eventually, Nyasha breaks down for she cannot allow herself to be a good girl, she cannot submit to male authority and colonial influence, she cannot be trapped in the existing conditions in her culture, she cannot turn into the girl that they want her to be. Alone, she can keep her identity intact. The sad thing though is that Nyasha does not really have a clear sense of what this identity is, as her speech during her breakdown suggests.

Given this range of interpretations, it is obvious that Bordo's analysis, while able to provide a general framework to analyze Nyasha's bulimia, cannot account for the complexity of Nyasha's condition. Nyasha's bulimia seems to be all at the same time resistance, submission, freedom, entrapment, and self-preservation, and the specific details that allow for these significations are entirely different from the details that Bordo examines in her own study.

After Nyasha's breakdown, she is taken to the clinic in the city for professional help. The first psychiatrist, white and male, says that Africans cannot suffer in the way that Nyasha has. The second one, black and also male, says she needs to rest, and so she is put into a clinic where she stays for several weeks. Tambudzai asks: "If Nyasha who had everything could not make it, where could I expect to go? I could not bear to think it because at that time we were not sure whether she would survive ... Nyasha's progress was still in the balance, and so as a result, was mine" (202). Nyasha's condition is not hers alone. Tambudzai shares it as well as other colonial subjects. Nyasha's struggle implies something bigger—the collective struggle that colonized cultures and bodies have to go through and negotiate every

day of their lives just to get to an understanding of who they are. Appropriately, in the novel's epigraph, Dangarembga quotes from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The condition of the native is a nervous condition."

While Nyasha's struggle is tragic and may have been unsuccessful in the context of the novel, it offers a way of re-examining eating disorders as experienced by women in colonised cultures and re-configuring the extent of colonial power and influence on female colonial bodies. In the end then, Nyasha's struggle cannot be in vain.

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