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# Reading Female Identity Creation: Self-realization in Colonial and Postcolonial African Literature

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Reading Female Identity Creation: Self-realization in Colonial and Postcolonial African  
Literature

by:

Katie Johnson Jorgensen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

Approved:

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## ABSTRACT

## Reading Female Identity Creation and Self-realization in Colonial and Postcolonial African Literature

by:

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Utah State University, 2018

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Department: English

The thesis, *Re-defining Madness: Reading Female Identity Creation and Self-realization in Colonial and Postcolonial African Literature*, compares female identity creation in three novels by African female authors. It reveals how the colonial texts represent extreme female identity formation (stagnation vs. transcendent life) juxtaposed with the dynamic and interconnected identity formation represented in postcolonial writing. The analysis begins with *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), to detail how identity stagnation results when the protagonist faces oppression in her culturally defined role as mother, yet returns to this role without further opposition. The second section focuses on *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) to provide the binary opposite view of identity creation, as the protagonist faces her oppression (colonization) and breaks with cultural expectations to further achieve self-realization. Analysis of how Nwapa's character reaches a transcendent (independent) state, details how transcendence in colonial life entails extreme resistance, which the author depicts as life without marriage

and motherhood. The thesis brings in *Nervous Conditions*, by Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwe) to provide evidence that a path between the two extremes offered in colonial life, becomes possible as postcolonial realization. The yet-to-be realized character of Tambu, offers the possibility that a woman can choose both motherhood and reach self-realization. This work furthermore details forms of madness defined by Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* and expounds on the form which proves temporary and necessary, “Hysteria and Hypochondria,” to show its placement in each novel. This thesis relates how these novels show confrontation with oppression leads to hysterical or hypochondriac responses, responses that *if* pushed through can lead to re-birth. The postcolonial life depicted in *Nervous Conditions* offers evidence that back and forth movement between extreme forms of living offers hope for this re-birth as characters embrace struggle and uncertainty to find a middle path that leads to balanced identity progression.

(38 pages)

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Reading Female Identity Creation: Self-realization in Colonial and Postcolonial African  
Literature

Katie Johnson Jorgensen

Three novels penned by African female authors—*The Joys of Motherhood*, *Efuru*, and *Nervous Conditions*—explore identity formation through a female perspective. The first two novels, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Efuru*, demonstrate the extreme forms that identity creation often necessitates in colonial life and extremes that oppression brings into being. When placed in juxtaposition, these first two novels expose binary opposite ends in identity creation as their co-dependent and transcendent narratives separately depict. The authors comment on the need for cultural change and reveal that the extreme outcomes in identities observed in colonial life result directly from oppression. *Nervous Conditions* brings into the discussion a nuanced outlook on possible identity formation after oppression, as Tsitsi Dangarembga depicts a necessary toggling between co-dependence and transcendent life (in its extreme disconnected state) to achieve a middle path between these two extreme states, as the characters in her novel show hope for and begin action toward postcolonial (independent) life.

Transcendence, as this thesis will later illuminate, exists in two distinct forms depicted in the novels and exists on a continuum, where transcendence over harmful cultural expectations represents the desired end that leads to self-realization and identity progression and the other denotes an extreme end where characters disconnect from cultural realities (colonialism and patriarchy) in order to move past these limitations. I put forward that this extreme end can lead to harmful permanent disconnection if not brought back into balance with chosen social connection. Nwapa and Dangarembga depict that

certain characters spiritually transcend their cultural realities through disconnection, while these same characters remain physically at the margin in their respective cultures. When read together, these three novels make clear the need for balance between transcendence over various forms of oppression (colonialism and patriarchy) and balanced chosen social connection. This balance begins as toggling between these extreme states after the probationary phase and necessary madness that leads to re-birth as characters begin identity negotiation. The negotiation continues until a cohesive identity is realized as a middle path represented in less extreme forms of living.

*The Joys of Motherhood*, by Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria) begins as a confrontation with oppression when the author introduces the protagonist, Nnu Ego, who has lost her only child. Faced with her co-dependence on socially constructed roles (which she has subconsciously accepted as her own), she desires to commit suicide. Nnu Ego's "eyes unfocused and glazed" are in this moment "looking into vacancy" (7). This "madness," the author depicts as a hysterical response (a disconnected state) that follows with Nnu Ego's movement "on to the green grass that formed the servants' quarters" (7). This deeply symbolic opening continues as Nnu Ego "felt herself brushing against the white master's washing...this made her whirl...like a puppet reaching the end of its string" (7). Here Emecheta equates loss of a child in Igbo culture with the unraveling of the mother's identity, while at the same time she provides the analogy that female identity creation is interwoven with the national body, also under oppressive (colonial) rule.

In Flora Viet-Wild's *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature*, Viet-Wild notes a difference between European connotations of madness and those in African psychiatry. African psychiatric thought brings a relevant lens to observe

the madness these texts highlight, as the female characters show hysterical responses when faced with cultural oppression. Viet-Wild notes that in African psychiatry a “disease is perceived not so much as a disorder within an individual but as a disturbance in the community” (23). This view on the communal aspect of madness finds relevance to both the issues and solutions this thesis provides. While all three of these novels comment on female identity formation, each character’s creation is interwoven and effected by the overarching colonial rule the authors depict, its effects and after effects. This thesis acknowledges the complex dynamic between the various forms that oppression takes in these novels, while it will focus specifically on female oppression and identity formation to reveal how colonialism (seen to heighten patriarchal gender dynamics that were in place prior to colonial rule) plays out on the female body and mind.

Nnu Ego’s character exemplifies the knowledge that the female identity in Igbo culture exists only when she follows cultural expectations, as depicted when she desires to end her life upon her confrontation with her limited identity as a mother. Due to her enslavement by cultural expectations and her own inexperience, Emecheta reveals that Nnu Ego has not learned her capacity to push through pain and act as an independent body. Nnu Ego has been played like the “puppet” above and believes her identity only exists in attachment to another. Emecheta depicts this belief as a socially engrained method of cultural and social control, that the character then places upon herself without conscious awareness. The author uses this link between belief system and lived reality to also show that a change in beliefs has the capacity to change her characters’ trajectories.

The novel proceeds to relate the transitional period that accompanies significant loss (as represented in Nnu Ego's loss of her child), through depictions of the character's heightened senses. Emecheta uses this experience to signal the beginning of movement forward in identity creation (imagine visiting a country before unseen), as Nnu Ego chooses "to use her eyes, her front instead of her back" (7). The pain and gaze forward combine with the symbol of "brushing against the white master's washing" to signify an opportunity for change. Emecheta relates this painful confrontation with oppression with Nnu Ego's "unsupported" and "aching breasts" mixed with her "choking pain" which are enough to convince her that life is over (8). In the novel, a female onlooker observes Nnu Ego's flight and relates: "She is not mad after all" and that "She has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren" (62). Emecheta offers this textual observation as further insight into the cultural expectation that women in Igbo culture exist for others in subjugation to her own needs, needs that when confronted and left unmet leave the female empty (void of her own identity). Thus, Nnu Ego's seemingly illogical response makes logical sense given her circumstances. Instead of death, the choking pain she experiences symbolizes the madness this paper takes particular interest in, the *necessary* and *temporary* madness that initiates conscious identity creation *if* pushed through. Not only does this push through madness denote a struggle, it also defines a probationary state or an incubation (gestational) period that promises a re-birth when carried to completion.

This push through madness is further illuminated in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. While Foucault's work focuses on European frameworks and discourse, I will nevertheless argue that these frameworks reveal a useful lens for reading the

temporary madness represented in these particular African novels set in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Through a close reading of Emecheta's text through the lens of Foucauldian thought in *Madness and Civilization*, new meanings in the text surface:

Madness is the purest, most total form of *qui pro quo*; it takes the false for the true, death for life, man for woman, the beloved for the Errinys and the victim for Minos. But it is also the most rigorously necessary form of *qui pro quo* in the dramatic economy, for it needs no external element to reach a true resolution. It has merely to carry its illusion to the point of truth...a secret "starting over" ...  
(33-34)

Emecheta reveals undercurrents of this struggle Foucault relates with the "road which *seemed* to be that of blood and water" (italics my emphasis) juxtaposed with the possibility of newness with "the wet grass and the gravel on the ground...glistening with the morning dew" (7). Madness is symbolized in Nnu Ego's confrontation with truth (emptiness in adherence to social and cultural expectations without conscious choice), truth her character begins to see and eventually refuses to further confront.

In his article, "Gendered Hauntings: 'The Joys of Motherhood,' Interpretive Acts, and Postcolonial Theory," Stéphane Robolin further discusses how colonialism and gendered oppression "haunt" Emecheta's novel. Robolin notes that Emecheta employs Nnu Ego's suicide attempt on the bridge as a symbol that relates Nnu Ego's possibility to integrate the challenges that face her into a new reality and also the difficulty inherent in this task. Robolin notes Nnu Ego stands "positioned at the conjunction of multiple and compounding interstices that give rise to her increasing dilemmas and dis-ease" (80). It is the combination of dueling forces that Robolin notes Nnu Ego has the opportunity to

“negotiate” into new understanding (80). To Robolin’s interpretation I would add that this negotiation becomes possible as Nnu Ego confronts her past and possible future. At this point in the narrative Nnu Ego does not jump off the bridge, but instead makes a mistake when she returns to her husband and ongoing enslavement as she seeks to fill her emptiness through a return to previous co-dependent roles. Her resistance to further pushing through her own dependence on cultural expectations, leads to identity stagnation as she forfeits the new beginning promised by the “wet grass” and “morning dew.” Emecheta warns readers that this ease and return to culturally defined oppressive roles hinders identity progression.

We can better understand Nnu Ego’s response when we apply Foucault’s categories of madness in *Madness and Civilization* to reading the text. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault defines two types of madness. The first denotes a biological illness labelled as “Mania and Melancholia,” a madness that will not be examined in detail here and one that lies separate from the *necessary* and *temporary* madness this paper discusses. The second type of madness that this paper takes particular interest in, “Hysteria and Hypochondria,” defines a temporary madness that deals with “the density of the interior landscape” and defines the madness that, according to Foucault, leads to reason if worked through (149). This second type of madness is a *symptom* of oppression, and a madness often observed in the colonized. Foucault continues to explain that Hysteria and Hypochondria together are “two forms of one and the same disease” (137). The difference between the two forms lies in their expressions, where the hypochondriac response is viewed as a “paralysis” and hysteria is seen in an individual’s “frenzied movements” (146). Nnu Ego’s character, in the previous representation, shows a

hysterical response that Emecheta reveals becomes necessary to confront and push through or identity stagnation will result. Instead of viewing hysteria as a negative response, the authors show that confrontation with what lies behind the hysteria has the possibility to change the future.

Emecheta further details the subjugation of Igbo women through textual representations where women are viewed as possessions and are often one of numerous wives. Nnu Ego, unable to get pregnant by her first husband, is told, “if you can’t produce sons, at least you can harvest yams” (33). This representation depicts that a woman in Igbo culture is meant for motherhood and to prove her efficiency as mother and wife and not to enjoy life as an individual outside of these socially defined roles. This example shows that colonialism has heightened patriarchal gender dynamics, and that patriarchal rule mimics the national state. Nnu Ego’s first husband finds a new wife, who gives birth to a child and it is noted that the woman leaves the baby hungry to fulfill her own desires. Emecheta, once again, relates the theme of co-dependence through Nnu Ego’s character, who, upset at this lack of concern, nurses the child as her own and brings shame to both herself and her family. After this experience, Nnu Ego leaves for her childhood home and a new husband is found for her, who later retorts: “Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?” (48). Emecheta shows that Nnu Ego’s character continues to follow deeply engrained cultural practice (female subjugation) that trails her into various situations and due to her inability to face the reality of her co-dependent state, Nnu Ego becomes her own oppressor. Her joy from the marriage, the author relates, comes only when she has her first child and the loss of this child is where she attempts suicide, the beginning of the novel.

After the point of possible suicide, Emecheta relates that Nnu Ego has the opportunity to begin a new life as earlier suggested, but instead continues with this second husband and has many more children, despite “her nail biting agony” and the “cramped room” (167). Emecheta depicts how Nnu Ego’s inability to forge a path out of gender oppression and co-dependence on cultural expectations and social roles, leaves this step to future generations. This new path, which Nnu Ego’s character declines to forge, takes strength and perseverance, traits which Foucault notes further in *Madness and Civilization* women are not socially trained to understand as possibilities of womanhood. He notes: “That is why this disease [hysteria] attacks women more than men, because they have a more delicate, less firm constitution, because they lead a softer life...accustomed...not to suffering” (149). This quote depicts gendered behavior as a social construct and notes how delicacy is not a trait inherent to all women, but rather indicates softness, a result of ease and comfort, as a trained life response, which leads to hysterical responses when individuals are challenged beyond previous capacity. This statement also assumes that strength and firmness are capacities attainable by women who are willing to suffer. This struggle defines the *temporary* madness this work focuses on and is the form that leads to re-birth when pushed through.

*The Joys of Motherhood* acknowledges the possibility of a full woman, a woman with the capacity to create an identity separate from man and child, when Nnu Ego questions: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” and this “she prayed” for “desperately” (186). Emecheta uses this plea to show that leaving oppression cannot be left to God alone and that faith is forfeited with inaction. At novel’s end, Nnu Ego has aged, and has many

children, which include two twin girls, and though she has not created an identity of her own, she shows awareness for needed change when she notes in retrospect: “when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life...But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters?” (187) Though still entrenched in patriarchal cultural expectations at novel’s end, Nnu Ego’s character responds to women’s needs through her bitterness at her past mistakes, represented in her wisdom obtained in the after-life. Those who visit her grave believe she is now a “wicked woman even in death” because she will not “answer prayers for children” (224). Emecheta offers readers this agonized ending as powerful comment on the need to challenge socially defined roles and reveals the capacity that women have to act consciously to achieve desired outcomes (identity progression out of oppression). This stagnation in bitterness and inaction represented in *The Joys of Motherhood* relates one extreme form that colonialism and patriarchy place on the female body, represented in the protagonist who does not challenge and push through temporary madness and instead retreats into co-dependent life.

In the second novel, *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) gives readers a character who also believes her identity is tied to another. But unlike *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist, Efuru, realizes a progressive (though another extreme) path after her push through temporary madness as she confronts her social and cultural realities. This novel begins in co-dependence as well when Efuru tells her partner “that she would drown herself in the lake if he did not marry her” (7). After marriage, Efuru, unable to get

pregnant in the first year, becomes a subject for the neighbor's gossip and "To them Efurū was a man since she could not reproduce" (24). Nwapa relates that woman's identity is once again tied with marriage and motherhood in this alternate representation of Igbo cultural expectations. Efurū's happiness, at this point in the novel, relies on her fulfillment of these roles and the expectations that she allows others to place upon her. Nwapa depicts that adherence to these socially constructed roles without conscious choice is what holds individuals back from self-realization.

Nwapa further relates Efurū's lack of self-awareness when she does give birth: "Tell me how it happened. I was fast asleep" (32). This significant note relates that Efurū has proceeded as a female member in her culture without conscious awareness of the role she has taken. The discourse that follows foreshadows that Efurū's daughter will not live. Efurū also identifies too closely with her child, as did Nnu Ego, and she notes at the possibility of the child's death: "What will I do if I lose her?" and "If she dies, that will mean the end of me" (66). After her child passes away, Efurū "threw herself on the floor...and wept hysterically" (69). She then feels death inside her: "My daughter has killed me. Why should I live?" (73). Nwapa gives readers Efurū's anguished experience as a signal that an independent identity has not fully formed in the protagonist.

Nwapa relates this codependence and hysterical response in Efurū to Nigeria's national identity crisis: Nigerian anticipation and fear of life without colonialism (independent life) is placed as an analogy on Efurū's body through Igbo patriarchal oppression. The author depicts this heart-wrenching separation between child and mother as an opportunity for needed personal growth (national growth), which can lead to transcendence over the temporary madness Foucault describes, if one does not turn from

the experience. Efurū, trained to believe her identity and her child's identity are one, feels the loss of her child as a loss of her personhood and wishes to annihilate the evidence that her physical body provides a different reality. Efurū though, unlike Nnu Ego, uses this moment and propels herself forward when she takes necessary action to change the emptiness she felt at her daughter's death. This confrontation with past roles is where the madness purposed for change begins.

This necessary madness that Efurū's character experiences offers a contrasting view to beliefs held in the patriarchal cultures represented in these texts. Female exclusion from this desired temporary madness and experience that furthers identity formation, finds a mirror in African art through female exclusion in masking ritual. In *African Masks*, a sculpture and mask compilation by Franco Monti, the "Guli Mask" caste in the shape of the devil's head represents this desired journey into the underworld (temporary madness). The red mask, circular in shape, consists of two holes where the initiated place their eyes. The mask totes a teeth-clenched, pain-induced grin and displays two horns that jut out from the mask's top center, each horn a half-moon that turns in toward the other to form an incomplete oval. In the mask's description it notes that the Guli Mask represents the "divinity which women are forbidden to see" (58). This journey into the underworld (the initiation into its possibility), entails the push through the temporary madness this paper details as necessary for identity progression and the one Foucault notes women are socially trained to avoid. This journey expected of the male gender, as this mask depicts, explicitly relates female exclusion from cultural practice and also implies exclusion of the female body from the journey into self-realization and conscious living. Through Nwapa's detailed description of Efurū's

journey, the author relates the female capacity to take this step into the underworld and return with newfound self-awareness.

Efuru begins to experience newness when she takes part in the cleansing of water after her child's death with "a new sponge and new soap" (77). Nwapa uses this ritual to signify a re-birth in Efuru, who chooses to change, one conscious step at a time. When Efuru loses her child, she understands her ability to move past loss and transfers this power to other areas in her life. This newfound strength is depicted as she subsequently leaves her husband, Adizua, when she understands his unfaithful nature. Nwapa shows readers, through these textual representations, that working through temporary madness leads to stronger identities when embraced and that the push through hysteria allows for knowledge of its permeable nature. Though Efuru's movement allows for independent identity formation, the extreme lengths she must travel to exist as an independent body, the author relates, demands extreme disconnection from the realities inherent in colonial and patriarchal life.

Nwapa employs metaphor, dreams, and stories in the novel to reveal the significance and struggle inherent in the journey out of oppressive backgrounds and to relate the consistent push through temporary madness that allows for little ease. Story, metaphor, and dreams are integral to the plot and Nwapa blends these literary devices with the narrative to depict the difficulty in the change Efuru experiences as she leaves her former reality to create a chosen new identity. Efuru goes back to her father's home in a transitional phase after she leaves her first husband. While there, she briefly stays in her deceased mother's room and while in this room "She swept it and rubbed it with red mud and charcoal. Then she rubbed the sitting-room" (88-89). This instance of setting

things right, cleaning, and re-making space depicts the dream-like phase of identity transition as Efurú moves between her internal desire for change (contemplation) and couples it with external action to solidify intention. Nwapa uses Efurú's return to her childhood home as a symbol that Efurú has confronted her past and also as evidence that her character is on the path to identity progression (self-realization) and has experienced a re-birth.

Later in the novel, Efurú marries a second husband, Eneberi, who treats her well in the beginning. After time passes, Efurú cannot conceive a child and goes to a doctor for a consultation. She relates a dream she had to the Doctor: "I was swimming in the lake, when a fish raised its head and asked me to follow it... I got to the bottom of the lake and to my surprise, I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb. When she saw me, she stopped combing her hair and smiled at me and asked me to come in" (146). Nwapa employs this dream narration to symbolize that Efurú has become strong enough to be a woman on her own (independent) and instead of sorrow at her inability to conceive she finds joy in her newfound purpose, given to her through the dream. Her father relates: "'You see, your mother had similar dreams. Now that you are here, I recall these dreams of your mother. Your mother prospered in her trade. She was so good that whatever she put her hand to money flowed in" (149). Nwapa depicts intergenerational growth with this example, while she also clarifies the link between dreams and future reality. After her dream, Efurú chooses to follow the woman of the lake. Where Efurú's mother left off, Efurú has taken course, turning her own dreams into physical reality.

Nwapa further relates through Efuru's forward movement, that a woman willing to act independently and challenge socially defined roles can become a force for cultural change as she leads others to healing. When Efuru is on her own, she heals wounds, because she has healed similar wounds inside herself, though this statement will see further exploration in this thesis. The novel provides numerous examples of this healing power. At one point, Efuru makes the effort to get a doctor's help for a woman whose leg needs to be healed. The doctor relates to Efuru: "'It will take a long time to heal...She had a bad sore and she allowed it to eat into the bones'" (129). Though Efuru leads others to help (identity progression), Nwapa comments on the importance of action and belief on the part of the individual who wishes for healing: "No medicine will heal her. She will have to sacrifice to the ancestors" and the *dibia* follows with the particulars of the sacrifice and notes the importance of action: "She must do it herself. So I am told. It won't be effective if she does not do it herself" (159). Nwapa uses this "operation" metaphor to depict the importance of coupling spiritual intentions and intentional personal action to achieve desired progression as well as to note the painful nature of change from stagnation to identity progression (101).

Efuru makes one final choice in the novel to leave her husband after she, herself, falls ill: "For three days, she was unable to get up from her bed. The illness was so sudden that everybody was afraid" (215). The *dibia* relates that the illness is due to Efuru's neglect of the woman of the lake and she needs to "appease" her with a sacrifice of her own (215). Nwapa uses this example to further showcase the difficulty inherent in independent living for the female in colonial and patriarchal life and the extreme measures Efuru must take to remain an independent body. After Efuru leaves Eneberi she

notes: "I was cured" (221). Though pressure to return to her socially defined place and to her husband exists, she sees these suggestions as betrayals that will lead to her annihilation. It is the realities of colonial life and the difficulty of existing in these oppressive frameworks as an individual that Nwapa notes lead to extreme paths. It is detailed that to remain independent Efuru's character must remain alone, in disconnection from her social and cultural reality. Nwapa highlights the path Efuru's character takes to reach independence as she follows the woman of the lake is a path forged to resist patriarchal oppression and identity stagnation. In the book *"African Spirituality: Forms, meanings, and expressions,"* Sabine Jell-Bahlsen discusses the role that the woman of the lake plays in Igbo cosmology and relates that the woman of the lake "protects, encourages, and empowers those who cannot or would not live up to society's norms" (39). Nwapa represents that Efuru's journey initiates her into knowledge that begins her progression, while she also implies a possible danger in the protagonist's choice to follow the woman of the lake without further challenge. Jell-Bahlsen notes further in relation to Igbo cosmology that before individuals enter Earth they form a pact with the "Supreme God" and that the "person may accept and defend his or her destiny, or may change its course by forming a pact with the mother water goddess" (44). Nwapa signifies through Efuru's decision to follow the woman of the lake that she has chosen a path that leads to certain independence, yet I maintain that Efuru's choice to continue on this course, which places her at the margin in her culture, is not in line with her character's full capacity. To exist in this disconnected state is a choice that Nwapa represents as deterring Efuru from this "destiny."

When Efuru has voiced her intention of being a woman without a husband, she “slept soundly that night” and dreamt of the woman of the lake (221). Again, she is taken into the lake and sees the power this woman possesses: “She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did women worship her?” (221). Nwapa relates that Efuru has become the woman of the lake, capable of transcendence, yet somehow still exists at the bottom. These representations reveal that Efuru’s transcendence exists as disconnection and is another extreme form of living that colonialism and patriarchal oppression bring into being. Though a step out of co-dependence into transcendence is progression, this form of transcendence is revealed in the novel, not as an end point, but another probationary, incubatory state, meant to lead to the next phase in identity creation.

Nwapa reveals that to reach her transcendent state, Efuru leaves society as well as her connections to cultural forms of living that include marriage and motherhood. This form of disconnection depicts a form of madness that reveals how temporary madness exposed to extremes can see more permanent placement (as continual disconnection) if the end goal to reintegrate into culture is dismissed. Veit-Wild notes further in regard to African ideas of madness how it “is sometimes regarded as a form of possession and is often a phase of initiation in the life of a person who is elected by the ancestral spirits to become a healer” (25). Nwapa represents that Efuru chooses to follow the woman of the lake and due to this choice, her push through temporary madness leads to her self-realization as a healer. Though Efuru’s character pushes through bouts of hysteria to find her new role, this thesis argues that the temporary madness that Foucault defines, and which is necessary for re-birth, can turn into a more permanent form of madness, when

transcendence in its extreme state (disconnection) is not brought back into balance with chosen connected living. To maintain her transcendent state, Nwapa relates that Efuru lives in an extreme disconnected state, able to heal others, but not fully healed herself.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Efuru*, the authors show two different choices that are made after the appearance of temporary madness, one choice that leads to identity stagnation, the other to self-realization. Emecheta depicts how Nnu Ego's choice to not push through the unknown gives others without her best interest in mind control over her body, which leaves her in co-dependence (under colonial and patriarchal rule). Nwapa depicts the temporary madness this thesis discusses has permeable boundaries as her protagonist travels their length and shows that cultural oppression and gender constructs (and other forms of oppression) are socially bound as her character transcends these limitations. Yet to do this Nwapa depicts Efuru remaining in a disconnected (if independent) state. This work complicates the idea of womanhood and asks if a woman can take a similar journey as Efuru and reach self-realization, or if like *Efuru* notes, one can either have an independent identity or children and not both. This thesis asks for a third literary character who opposes these oppressive, binary limits. This third character defines a woman who captures what it means to exist as both a self-realized woman (independent) and a woman who chooses motherhood (interdependent). When these two novels are juxtaposed, I argue the authors bring to light this desired middle path, a path where this third character exists to embrace uncertainty and toggle between forms of transcendent life and forms of chosen connected living. This middle path exists in the reality and struggle that postcolonial life brings into being.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga offers the possibility for this third character's creation through the yet-to-be realized character, Tambu. The author represents more balanced identities as postcolonial possibility given through examples where characters show more dynamic movement represented in less rigid adherence to cultural expectations and incremental steps out of oppression. This movement is showcased through conscious challenge to patriarchal rule. Dangarembga depicts that this resistance to forms of colonialism and conscious action lead to hope for a more balanced and cohesive future, where characters begin creation of a middle path that resists the extreme measures taken in the two colonial textual representations previously discussed.

Throughout the narrative, Dangarembga interweaves the protagonist's journey with other characters' paths to represent a more nuanced view of identity creation that relies on individual action coupled with the effects and complications that living and pushing against and alongside patriarchal culture entails. Where *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Efuru* begin in co-dependence (with man, child and culture), *Nervous Conditions* begins with the protagonist, Tambu, in competition with the male gender and her expected role as a female in Rhodesian, Shona culture. This significant difference at novel's beginning relates a marked change in cultural dynamics. Co-dependence in postcolonial life sees consistent challenge as independence becomes the desired aim.

In the opening scene the author relates Tambu's ambivalence at her brother, Nhamo's, death as evidence that adherence to gender dynamics in Rhodesian culture creates imbalance and disruption: "I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it" (1). Tambu's brother leaves their

childhood home to receive higher education and passes away on his journey. Dangarembga uses Nhamo's death as a metaphor for Tambu's steps toward transcendence over socially constructed gender roles as she takes his place and receives the education he did not appreciate nor complete. Tambu's openness to experience and life in general lies in sharp contrast to her brother who "detested" and was "resentful" of life, or the "walk" (4). Tambu's brother receives opportunities and privileges that she must work hard to gain, specifically the right to an education. Her struggle for equal treatment defines her progress, whereas her brother, who experienced too much ease, proves unable to handle the "walk." Dangarembga uses this example to show how privilege without struggle, as seen in patriarchal culture, often leads to apathy and identity stagnation. This ease in privilege proves fatal and leads to Nhamo's death, which the author represents as both spiritual and physical. Dangarembga further shows how gendered expectations do not only cause struggle for the individual (female in this case) who must work to overcome oppressive barriers, but also proves this struggle exists for the male character (depicted as the oppressor), though on different, often unarticulated terms. *Nervous Conditions* shows movement out of the rigidity depicted in colonial life, as Dangarembga reveals her characters now have the time to reflect, act, and aim for balanced, chosen identities as they push against patriarchal oppression.

I see an important limited parallel between the covert oppression that exists in Igbo culture (represented in the first two texts) and in the Shona culture in *Nervous Conditions* with the surveillance methods in Bentham's Panopticon described in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* where the individuals contained inside the Panopticon's boundaries believe they are constantly visible and behave according to expectations set

from the outside (200). A similar belief in constant visibility sees metaphoric placement in all three novels as deeply engrained cultural practice (patriarchy). The characters internalize and often follow cultural expectations without conscious awareness through an engrained fear response. It is these expectations set from the outside that all three authors detail exists as patriarchal expectations that when left unchallenged, disrupt identity progression and hinder characters' self-realization. In *Nervous Conditions* we specifically see overt physical oppression in addition to this deeply engrained, often silent, type.

In *Nervous Conditions* oppression exists in various degrees and Dangarembga depicts how gradual steps to confront patriarchal oppression create a distance from the influence of harmful cultural expectations. The characters who continue to follow harmful gender roles without challenging or understanding these roles allow oppression to continue and see identity stagnation result. Dangarembga shows that patriarchal influence infiltrates Tambu's home as her father believes in prior ways of living (colonial life) and acts to prohibit her freedom in his attempts to sabotage her efforts to form an independent identity. Tambu, unlike Nnu Ego, challenges these harmful cultural expectations and sees the reality of her situation when she notes early on: "I had discovered my father was not sensible" (16). Tambu's ability to challenge her father and push through temporary madness allows her to progress in her identity.

In her essay, "Melancholic Women: The Intellectual Hysteric(s) in *Nervous Conditions*," Supriya Nair notes the importance of Tambu's education as a means to "[alter] her vulnerable status" as a female in an oppressive patriarchal culture (135). Nair details that Tambu's character has developed a needed critical consciousness, a trait that

distinguishes her character and allows her to logically evaluate her situation.<sup>i</sup> Nair notes that Tambu “is constantly guarding against the possibility of alienation...willing herself to think critically” (137). Nair discusses that this ability to question allows Tambu to work with intended outcomes in mind. I argue that Tambu’s critical stance is a necessary tool that she engages which allows her to move past cultural expectations and limits as she challenges patriarchal rule. Dangarembga showcases that Tambu’s ability to think through her situation and reflect on necessary change allows for incremental and intentional steps forward in her identity creation. When Tambu’s journey in incremental steps is juxtaposed with the passive and rigid (all-or-nothing) examples seen in the extreme representations depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Efuru*, a workable framework for identity cohesion (hybridity) is revealed as postcolonial difference.

Dangarembga further depicts the manipulative energy taken to deter the female gender from achieving a separate identity and the need to challenge patriarchal rule when Tambu’s father notes regarding her desire to obtain an education: “Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables” (15). Tambu’s father as well as her brother (before his death) seek to sabotage her progress and halt her education, which education Dangarembga makes clear is a necessary component in identity progression. The author also uses these references to show that the female body who seeks progress, threatens the social dichotomy (a result of patriarchal control) and often exists as competition with the male characters, outside of her culturally defined roles. Thus, extreme measures are employed to keep her in her socially defined place. Dangarembga showcases the extent to which

various forms of oppression are interwoven and the complex process of unraveling their beginnings through this interwoven plot.

In the verbal confrontation above, Tambu's father details the larger cultural expectations for the female gender in Shona culture, as well as his own expectations for the female to remain in marginalized positions. Dangarembga provides these examples to note female intelligence outside the home and identity progression for the female gender promotes a competitive force in patriarchal culture and threatens the males' socially constructed place. Tambu's father's social training blinds him to the abuse he places on his children as well as blinds him to the confines he places on his own progression. Dangarembga depicts Tambu's father's lack of confidence in his own identity when he kneels "down on one knee" and shows "abject obeisance" to his brother, Babamukuru, as evidence of his own inadequacy complex and behavior that Tambu's character realizes leads him to "making a fool of himself" (183). The author uses this representation to depict the complicated familial dynamics and again the interwoven nature of oppressive practice as Tambu's father represents ignorance of his own capacity to progress in his identity. Whether a female placing herself primarily in the home is a method of oppression, lies in many details related to choice, but in the case of Tambu and her mother, the home is represented as an environment of ongoing oppression.

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks details the interrelatedness of various forms of oppression and sets out ideas and theories that challenge hegemony and patriarchy, and that seek revolutionary living for men, women, and society. The feminism hooks advocates for is feminism that challenges practice that tailors only to a specific demographic (such as class) and challenges feminism with easily

defined categories. Dangarembga provides evidence in *Nervous Conditions* that supports hooks' theory on interrelated oppression. In addition to representations that depict that subjugation of the female gender leads to identity stagnation in the male characters, Dangarembga provides solutions in *Nervous Conditions* which she represents as the need for shared gender struggle given through examples that showcase interdependent solutions. In hooks' discourse she quotes Hodge who notes: "The domination usually present within the family—of children by adults, and the female by the male—are forms of group oppression" (40). Dangarembga shows how the family serves as a microcosm for the oppressive practice that occurs on the larger cultural level and that to challenge these roles at the familial level, as Tambu's character represents, will lead to needed gradual cultural shifts. Dangarembga also provides the knowledge, through the education metaphor, that had Nhamo worked harder for his education and Tambu had to struggle less, both characters would progress in their identities.

Dangarembga shows the capacity to act differently than a culture dictates and represents possibility for interdependent identity growth, as Tambu's Sunday School teacher shows a softer side of the male gender in his association with Tambu. He teaches her how to sell the "crop" she grew on the "homestead" to earn money for her own education (18). This teacher provides her with tools (transportation and wisdom) and once her crop is ready to sell, he takes her to the market to earn money for her education (which is the means to progress further in her identity). The author uses this example to show that both Tambu and her teacher experience growth in this situation and that to sabotage the female who seeks identity progression is not needed to achieve an outcome that benefits both parties. Tambu's ability to notice her own oppression and to distance

herself from individuals and situations that prohibit her growth, while she maintains chosen social connections that are in line with her new path, the author shows as desirable character attributes. Dangarembga uses this example as well to note a sustained difference between levels of oppression within the male characters in the novel and implies that to look at only one variable or character representation leaves out the complex dynamics the novel portrays. Tambu's brother and father are depicted as oppressed members of society who act out of naivety of their own oppressed state and whose stagnation lies in their resistance to embrace change.

While Tambu begins her brave push through and past socially gendered expectations (though it takes her much time and observation of how other women who have begun to make the break with cultural expectations act), Tambu's mother shows life inside oppressive bounds. Her bitterness and stagnation taint the book with an unfulfilled and often indulgent life filled with self-pity (what Foucault would call the hypochondriac response). Tambu's mother has not created a separate identity for herself and expects her children to fulfill her needs as did Nnu Ego. Dangarembga uses this representation to once again show the generational effects a mother has on her children as well as the capacity to act in opposition to oppression as she showcases the power in individual choice depicted when Tambu leaves her home. At one point, Tambu's mother falls ill and Tambu's contemplation and awareness of the truth behind her mother's illness follows: "Besides, I knew what was worrying my mother. A medium could not help whereas I could, by not going to Sacred Heart. But this was asking too much of me" (184). Dangarembga portrays that Tambu's break from the confines of her mother's expectations, allows her freedom. Her mother's deterioration exists due to her own

inability and unwillingness, not Tambu's, to free herself from the expectations society has placed on her. Due to Tambu's awakening self-awareness, she understands her mother as yet another oppressive force. Dangarembga uses this example to show how Tambu's identity creation exists and is strengthened by her push to become different from her mother and represents that women who follow harmful cultural expectations take part in and allow cultural oppression to continue. Tambu's mother recedes into co-dependent ways of living as Tambu works for realization of a desired independent postcolonial future.

The temporary madness that Foucault details defines the madness the oppressed characters in *Nervous Conditions* must also go through to obtain the next phase in their identity creation. Tambu's confrontation with cultural expectations exists, though her ability to toggle between forceful, almost unrelenting action (as seen in *Efuru*) and her continued connection with social realities, show that her character strives for balance in her struggle toward a realized identity. Due to the interwoven narrative, the author shows characters in various stages of identity creation and depicts that not all characters have maintained or desire to achieve this balance that Tambu's character seeks. Dangarembga also notes the possibility for change in her characters as she depicts characters in various stages of progression and details few stagnant identities.

In the novel, Tambu's cousin Nyasha, characterized as worldly and wise, has experienced repeated temporary madness. Upon early observation of Nyasha, Tambu notes the serious nature and conscious awareness Nyasha's character consistently displays: "She was silent and watchful, observing us all... with an intensity that made me uncomfortable" (52). Dangarembga provides this observation and others throughout the

novel to portray that Nyasha understands patriarchal realities that, according to the narrative, Tambu's character has not yet confronted in the novel's early stage. Tambu notes later in the novel Nyasha's "probing" nature and confrontations with Babamukuru that she does not "think it [confrontational behavior] is safe" (97). Tambu's character notes in retrospect her view of Nyasha and her own inability at the time to challenge her own worldview that "by keeping within those boundaries [not confronting patriarchal dominance] I was able to avoid the mazes of self-confrontation" (116). Dangarembga creates Nyasha as a character whose eyes are open to the reality of familial and societal oppression and portrays that due to repeated oppression, Nyasha's character exists in a disconnected (if spiritually transcendent) state much like Efuru, who both remain at the margin in their respective cultures with little social interaction. The narrative notes Nyasha's disconnection as "self versus surrender" and a necessary step in her survival, though once again, this is not a desired end. Tambu's character uses her observation of Nyasha's disconnection to further inform her own identity choices (118).

While Nyasha does not adhere to gendered expectations and forcefully defies them at home and at school (as is necessary for her existence), Dangarembga notes that Nyasha's transcendence over cultural expectations does not prohibit her character's body from physical abuse from her father nor emotional abuse by those (her schoolmates and father) who wish to define her and keep her in her place. Dangarembga portrays that challenge to patriarchal rule can have severe implications as she represents this reality in the confrontation between Nyasha and her father's patriarchal rule: "You must learn to be obedient," he tells her after she stays out late and returns to her home one evening. With Nyasha's subsequent challenge, he notes, "today she will not live. We cannot have

two men in this house...” (115). Nyasha’s continual resistance to her father’s patriarchal beliefs and practice is necessary for her characters spiritual existence and Dangarembga depicts these observances provide a needed depth to Tambu’s education.

In *Disturbers of the Peace*, Kelly Baker Josephs notes the necessity of madness and relates how the text, *The Hills of Hebron*, “locates madness as a positive space,” a space “from which to imagine new ways of being” (47). Nyasha’s madness can similarly stand as a positive and temporary experience when viewed as a probationary phase and as a means meant to propel her into a self-realized future. While Nyasha’s character represents extreme (necessary) forms of resistance, Dangarembga offers hope that Nyasha’s disconnected state is not inevitably a permanent one, as the narrative notes her “resilience” and “capacity” to move forward (119). Dangarembga furthermore brings Nyasha’s character into the narrative to show that even in postcolonial life, certain outcomes are not always in the individual’s hands and that individual freedom becomes intertwined with cultural and familial expectations. Nyasha exerts the control she does have through her refusal to eat and through her continual confrontation with her father, which shows little if any sign of change. While Dangarembga reveals that this transcendence (spiritual strength) shows willpower, she relates that Nyasha’s physical freedom has yet-to-be realized.

Dangarembga brings Nyasha’s mother, Maiguru, into the narrative to depict another complex character in the identity formation process. Maiguru, who has obtained a master’s level education, represents a character who transcends gendered expectations as well as lives within gender boundaries that continue to confine her. Tambu notes surprise at Maiguru, who holds an advanced degree she obtained while abroad, and

Maiguru notes in a manner uncharacteristic of her character to this surprised reaction: “‘And what do you expect? Why should a woman go all that way and put up with all those problems if not to look after her husband?’ (101). The narrative details that though Maiguru received an advanced education, patriarchal rule continues to dictate how her character uses her knowledge. Later on in the novel, Maiguru chooses to leave the home for a brief time as a method of resistance (protest) to her oppressive husband. Though she leaves for only this brief amount of time, Nyasha begins to hope that her own disconnected state will also change: “‘Sometimes I feel I’m trapped by that man, just like she is. But now she’s done it, now she’s broken out, I know it’s possible” (174). This action as protest, Dangarembga depicts, allows Maiguru’s character to gain a better sense-of-self and when she returns to her home it is a conscious choice. Dangarembga uses this note to comment that no state in identity creation is permanent and that gradual steps and continued struggle are inherent and expected (hoped for) as characters seek the hybridity postcolonial life offers. Though Nyasha’s character sees difficulty at novel’s end and has not broken out of her home and oppressive circumstances, the possibility remains that her character will see future growth and identity cohesion.

The possibility for a self-realized character who can also choose motherhood is exemplified in Tambu’s character who notes at novel’s end that the “‘long and painful process... of expansion” has begun (204). Through this note, Dangarembga gives evidence that Tambu contains the capacity to toggle between transcendence and connected life and does not exist in all-or-nothing states. It is this fluidity and capacity for negotiation represented as character traits that define her character’s continued progression (growth). In contrast to *Efuru*, where Nwapa relates a stunted progression as

she implicitly details that Efuru's character will not achieve an identity outside of her role as healer and will remain alone, Dangarembga shows that due to changes in postcolonial life, Tambu's character contains myriad possibilities. This is seen in the novel's open-ended conclusion, when her character notes: "no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise... Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question" (204). Due to Tambu's gradual and conscious steps into a desired future, her needs are placed above cultural and social expectations. She begins to question her place in the world and define her own expectations to create a chosen life, a life the author shows becomes possible in the post-colony. <sup>ii</sup>

When read together these three novels offer knowledge on how to approach the identity formation process to reach the middle path. Through representations of characters' stagnant states and through characters' movement toward progressive action, the authors reveal that to challenge oppression and work through periods of temporary madness creates more fully-formed, independent identities. This work has also showcased the opposite: the characters who do not push through madness retreat into co-dependent states, reliant on cultural expectations. The authors therefore depict these expectations as allowing oppression (colonial and patriarchal rule) to continue, which prohibits identity progression. While *The Joys of Motherhood* represents an identity in co-dependence and stagnation, *Efuru* provides a protagonist with a self-realized identity, though an identity that to remain intact, lies disconnected from cultural and social life. *Nervous Conditions* reveals postcolonial possibility, where extremes are still present, yet offers hope for identity cohesion as characters confront harsh cultural realities and work

through madness to learn capacity for change. The narrative defines a cultural shift that includes movement toward interdependent life and less extreme identity formation.

Dangarembga depicts negotiation within individual characters as well as negotiation between male and female gender roles showcased through challenge to patriarchal expectations.

While female identity formation has remained the focus in this work, the authors show the interwoven nature of oppression (colonialism and patriarchy) and how national and cultural dynamics play out at the individual level in their protagonists. The authors further note the importance of individual action to overcome oppressive limits as well as note the marked differences between the changes observed in characters' progression under colonial rule with those observed in the representations in postcolonial life.

*Nervous Conditions* offers a solution to the problems and extremes highlighted in the two colonial representations through a dynamic and interwoven plot that depicts interdependent identities (characters capable of independence and balanced connection) toggling back and forth between forms of transcendence and chosen social connection.

Dangarembga represents characters who resist extreme identities through negotiation as the hope for a middle path sees light. The depiction of a chosen life in *Nervous Condition* embraces a postcolonial future and with it the promise of uncertainty, continued struggle (negotiation), and identity progression for those who embrace its necessary, life-giving madness.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> See my discussion of Foucault above on interior density and logic.

<sup>ii</sup> See Gakwandi for discussion on the committed novel, pg. 108.