

جمهورية العراق
وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي
جامعة الأنبار



AUJLL
مجلة جامعة الأنبار للغات والآداب

مجلة جامعة الأنبار للغات والآداب

مجلة علمية فصلية محكمة
تعنى بدراسات وأبحاث اللغات وآدابها

ISSN:2073-6614
E-ISSN:2408-9680

المجلد (18) العدد (1) الشهر (آذار)

السنة : 2026



جمهورية العراق
وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي
جامعة الأنبار_ كلية الآداب

مجلة جامعة الأنبار للغات والآداب

مجلة علمية فصلية محكمة تعنى بدراسات وأبحاث اللغات وآدابها

ISSN : 2073-6614
E-ISSN:2408-9680

رقم الإيداع في دار الكتب والوثائق ببغداد لسنة ١٣٧٩

المجلد : (18) العدد (1) لشهر آذار - ٢٠٢٦

المحتويات

الصفحة	اسم الباحث أو الباحثين	عنوان البحث	
10-1	م.م رؤى بشير جمعة أ.د. احمد غالب السعدون	الخطاب اللغوي في عيادات طب أسنان الأطفال (دراسة تداولية معرفية لتفاعل الطبيب مع الطفل)	1.
22-11	سليمان الشقيري. أيمن الأحمد	قراءة سوزان ستينكفيلتش لداليتي النابغة الذبياني: "أمن آل مئة" و "يا دار مئة"	2.
38-23	م. د. سلوى شكري شاكر	"الأبعاد التداولية لهجة العامية في الرواية العراقية المعاصرة" شبيه الخنزير، العزيرة، ثغيب: إنموذجاً	3.
46-39	م. د. واجده محمود خلف	الخطاب النسائي في مواجهة سلطة الذكورة رحلات المرأة العراقية لفاضل عبود التميمي اختيلاً	4.
63-47	Asst. Lect. Lamy Rasheed Al-Ali	Overtly Erroneous Errors in the Learner-Oriented Arabic Version of Barclay's <i>The Rosary</i> Using House's TQA Model	5.
77-64	Instr. Milad Ghazi Saeed ¹ (PhD)	Pain Woven into the Body: A Study of Somatics in Emtithal Mahmood and Jasmin Kaur's Selected Poems	6.
92-78	Assist. Lect. Rasha Rahim Tawfiq	Youth, Technology, and Civil Liberties in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction: <i>Little Brother</i> (Cory Doctorow, 2008) as a Sample	7.
115-93	Lect. Firas Muayyad Salih	Assessing EFL University Learners' Attitudinal Shift in Grammar Learning via the Inductive Approach	8.
128-116	Noor Saady Essa	Bullying and Suffering into the Life of the Main Character in Stephen King's <i>Carrie</i>	9.
138-129	Noorulhuda Adnan Aladhami	(Exploring <i>A Doll's House: A Comparative Analysis of Hnath's Sequel and Ibsen's Original</i>	10.
155-139	Asst.Lect. :Sundus Falah Mohammed	Rhetorical Functions of Repetition in Selected Prophetic Traditions	11.
173-156	Bashar Mohammad AL-Kasasbeh Naji Masned AlQBailat Zoubida Mostafa Madani	Euphemism in Arabic and French in Formal and Informal Situations: A Contrastive Analysis	12.
183-174	Zaid Ibrahim Ismael Asmaa Mehdi Saleh	Starving for Recognition: The Body Politics of Eating Disorders in Tsitsi Dangarembga's <i>Nervous Conditions</i>	13.
203-184	Mohanad Abdulkareem Waad Marwah Firas Abdullah Al-Rawe	Decoding Institutional Power: A Mixed-Methods Multimodal Analysis of High Table Symbols in the John Wick Movies Series	14.
217-204	Amjad Bashar MOHAMMED ATTA SALMAN	Sociolinguistic Challenges in Post-Conflict Iraq: A Study of Language Attitudes and Identity Reconstruction	15.
236-218	Lect. Haider Ali Khushan	Strategies of Imam Khamenei's speech in his third televised address to the Iranian people after the Zionist entity's attack)	16.
254-237	Ahmed Sakran Farraj	Some Temporal Expressions in Classical Arabic and Ancient Hebrew A Comparative Semantic Study	17.

Starving for Recognition: The Body Politics of Eating Disorders in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Zaid Ibrahim Ismael

AL Manara University, Meisan, Iraq

zaid79ibrahim@gmail.com

Asmaa Mehdi Saleh

College of Science for Women, Baghdad University, Baghdad, Iraq

asmaams_chem@cs.w.uobaghdad.edu.iq

ABSTRACT:

Received: 2026-01-09

Accepted: 2026-02-04

First published on line: 2026-03-30

ORCID:

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37654/aujll692>

Corresponding author: Zaid Ismael

Cite as:

Saleh, A. ., & Ismael, Z. . (2026). Starving for Recognition: The Body Politics of Eating Disorders in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. *Anbar University Journal of Languages and Literature*, 18(1), 165-174. <https://doi.org/10.37654/aujll692>

©Authors, 2026, College of Arts, university of Anbar. This is an openaccess article under the CC BY 4.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



This article explores trauma-related eating disorders in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangarembga. Previous colonial criticism of the novel sheds light on the protagonist, Tambu, and her coming of age in colonial Zimbabwe. A pivotal issue in the text overlooked by scholars is Tambu's cousin, Nyasha's eating disorder. With its central focus on the character of Nyasha, the research seeks to present an in-depth analysis of the consequences of domestic abuse on pubescent females in an oppressive patriarchal culture. The article examines Nyasha's anorexia as emblematic of her rebellion against the dominant patriarchal system that denies her agency and forces her into silence. This self-destructive form of protest, the study demonstrates, is, paradoxically, a means of survival and control within this authoritative environment. By situating Nyasha's case within the frame of trauma theory, the article seeks to offer an original insight into the discussion of traumatic eating disorders in African women's writing. Feminist and postcolonial critical views are integrated within the analysis since Nyasha's trauma is inextricably linked to the unstable political climate of her community. The research concludes that Nyasha's self-starvation is a language of resistance to the subjugation she endures in her native Shona culture.

Keywords: anorexia nervosa, Dangarembga, domestic abuse, *Nervous Conditions*, patriarchal, postcolonial, trauma

ذاتِ تجوع كي لا تُمحي: سياسات الجسد واضطرابات الأكل في رواية

حالات عصبية لتسيتسي دانغاريمنغا

أ.م.د. زيد إبراهيم إسماعيل

جامعة المنارة، ميسان، العراق

أ.م.د. أسماء مهدي صالح

كلية العلوم للبنات، جامعة بغداد، بغداد، العراق

الملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة بالدراسة اضطرابات الأكل المرتبطة بالصددمات النفسية في رواية *حالات عصبية* (1988) للروائية الزيمبابوية تسيتسي دانغاريمنغا. تُسلط الدراسات النقدية السابقة الضوء على بطلنة الرواية، تامبو، ومرحلة بلوغها في زيمبابوي إبان الحقبة الاستعمارية. ومن أهم القضايا المهمة نقدياً في رواية دانغاريمنغا متلازمة اضطراب الأكل الذي تعاني منه ابنة عم تامبو، نياشا. من خلال التركيز على شخصية نياشا، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تحليل دقيق

لآثار العنف المنزلي على الفتيات في سن البلوغ ضمن ثقافة أبوية قمعية. وتدرس المقالة اضطراب نياشا عن الطعام كرمز لمقاومتها للنظام الذكوري المهيمن الذي يسلبها حريتها ويجبرها على الصمت. وتبين الدراسة ما يمثله هذا الشكل التدميري الذاتي من الاحتجاج، على نحو متناقض، من وسيلة للبقاء ضمن هذه البيئة السلطوية. من خلال وضع حالة نياشا ضمن إطار نظرية الصدمة النفسية، تسعى هذه المقالة إلى تقديم رؤية جديدة لاضطرابات التغذية الناتجة عن الصدمات النفسية وهي قضية لم يتم التطرق إليها بوفرة في كتابات الروائيات الأفريقيات اللاتي غالباً ما يتناولن قضايا العنصرية والاستعمار ودور المرأة كمواضيع قصصية رئيسية. كما ويستند التحليل على آراء نقدية نسوية وما بعد استعمارية نظراً لارتباط الصدمة النفسية التي تعاني منها نياشا ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالسياق السياسي المضطرب في مجتمعها. ويخلص البحث إلى أن أزمة نياشا النفسية ومعاناتها من متلازمة اضطرابات الأكل هو لغة خاصة توظفها لمقاومة القهر الذي تعانيه في بيئتها القبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فقدان الشهية العصبي، دانغاريمبغا، العنف المنزلي، حالات عصبية، النظام الذكوري، ما بعد الاستعمار، الصدمة.

1. Introduction

1.1 Eating Disorders

As a psychiatric problem, eating disorders afflict both males and females. The most common cases of eating disorders are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder. In anorexia nervosa (literally meaning the loss of appetite), the patient tries to control his/her weight through restrictive food intake, like eating small amounts of food and using diet aids to control calorie consumption. Strict body exercises are also undergone to achieve satisfaction with their physical appearance. Garner & Garfinkel posit: "The cultural pressure on men and women to be 'perfect' is an important predisposing factor for the development of eating disorders" (Garner & Garfinkel, 1980, p. 647). Models and athletes are more vulnerable to developing abnormal eating habits due to the severe regimes they follow to maintain their slim figures. Thus, as Hornbacher notes, anorexia nervosa has become a "claim to fame," especially for adolescent females (Hornbacher, 1998, p. 124).

Clinical research has also found that anorexia results from unresolved trauma, emotional distress, and suffocating societal pressures. For instance, in *Eating disorders, trauma, and comorbidity: Focus on PTSD* (2007), Timothy D. Brewerton assumes that anorexia nervosa is sometimes a response to physical abuse in childhood. Likewise, Nicole Moulding states that oppressed women are at a higher risk of developing anorexia nervosa as a compensatory mechanism for emotional wounds: "The distress women experience with their bodies is associated more with living in a culture that subjugates and violates women's bodies than it is with the idealisation of thinness" (Moulding, 2015, p. 1460).

Contrarily, bulimia patients eat large amounts of food and then induce vomiting or use laxatives owing to their anxiety about gaining weight. In "Effect of childhood traumas on eating disorders: Systematic review" (2023), Öрге & Volkan assert that bulimia patients might respond to childhood "emotional, physical, sexual abuse and physical and emotional neglect" via purging habits (Öрге & Volkan, 2023, p. 652). Monteleone et al (2022) similarly agree that "emotional abuse represents the childhood maltreatment experience lying in the pathway between early adverse events and eating disorder-specific symptoms in people with bulimia nervosa" (Monteleone et al, 2022, p. 253).

In binge-eating disorder, the patients also have irregular eating habits—eating excessively and quickly, even when not hungry or when they are full. Subsequent feelings of guilt, shame, and revulsion lead them to depression, maladaptation, and social withdrawal to hide their bingeing behaviours. Their introversion and secretive eating practices make a recovery much more difficult (Smink et al, 2013).

Generally, eating disorders can be life-threatening and negatively affect the individual's physique, heart, and digestive system. Possible serious complications arising from eating disorders are distorted body image, social withdrawal, and even suicidal tendencies. Other physical symptoms and consequences are fatigue, severe dehydration, gastrointestinal disorders, tooth and brain damage, amenorrhea, and, in some cases, strokes. Vulnerable individuals may find it difficult to realise that they have an eating disorder. They deny this and resort to secretive means to maintain their diet. They also become introverted and avoid eating and socialising with people at public occasions when food is served (Kodua et al, 2020).

However, eating disorders can be treated by specialists when diagnosed early. Common treatments for eating disorders are proper diets, medications and therapy. Medication depends on the symptoms and type of the disorder. Though recovery from eating disorders is not impossible, the process of healing is difficult and requires hard work on the part of the diseased, their families, and the eating disorder specialists (Wufong et al, 2019). When all treatment methods fail, hospitalisation becomes necessary. In some extreme cases, patients are forced to eat by their parents and specialists in nutrition to save their lives. Even though contemporary treatment proves to be effective, the risk of death increases in some intense cases (Koutek et al, 2016).

1.2 Literature Review

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* has been acclaimed for its profound portrayal of the hardships women tolerated in postcolonial Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) during the late 1960s and early 1970s. A significant body of scholarship on the book has paid considerable attention to issues of feminism, education and colonialism. Though eating disorder is treated as a main theme, commentators on this novel focus on the bildungsroman journey of the protagonist and overlook the author's handling of the traumatised anorexic female, Nyasha. Some studies have acknowledged Nyasha's psychological breakdown and her suffering from domestic subjectivity and identity crisis. **For instance, in *Colonial and postcolonial literature: Migrant metaphors* (1995), Elleke Boehmer argues that** Nyasha is a victim of cultural displacement due to the impact of colonial education on native African females, which destabilises their indigenous identities. In "Mothers and daughters in African narrative" (2000), Annie Gagiano briefly interprets Nyasha's hybrid identity as a Western-educated female and how cultural clash precipitates her eventual breakdown. However, these previous studies overlook Nyasha's eating disorder as a multi-layered manifestation of her feminist refusal to patriarchal and colonial forms of domination.

A possible reason why Nyasha's eating disorder has been underestimated in earlier research is the fact that eating syndromes, especially anorexia, are often racialised in medical and academic writing, i.e., anorexia is believed to be a Eurocentric mental disorder and it is not contextualised within Black psychology. As far as Nyasha's character is concerned, *Nervous Conditions* raises crucial questions about African female psychology with its focus on her physical and mental breakdown, induced by domestic oppression and social exclusion.

The present article examines Nyasha's disordered eating, advancing the argument that it is not the outcome of any aesthetic or biomedical catalyst, but rather a strategic enactment of her resistance to the socio-cultural norms that force her into silence and conformity. Drawing on feminist, trauma, and postcolonial critiques, this research aims to delve into Nyasha's nervous condition to give this largely unexplored depth its critical due. It investigates the challenging question of whether or not Nyasha's self-destructive act of rebellion is effective in articulating her trauma in a culture where a woman's will and body are not her own.

1.3 Theoretical Background

To understand Nyasha's case, a psycho-feminist theoretical framework is necessary, more precisely, a complex matrix of psychological, feminist, and even postcolonial theories. This is mainly because her psychological collapse is the outcome of her inability to tolerate the burden of domestic violence, colonial expectations, and social segregation. According to Susie Orbach in *Hunger Strike* (1986), anorexia is a defence mechanism enacted by females as a reaction to their disempowerment in patriarchal spheres. She argues that "refusing to eat becomes a means of taking control where all control has been lost" (Orbach, 1986, p. 98).

Trauma theorist Judith Herman (1992) opines that unresolved trauma, experienced by silenced individuals, often erupts through somatic symptoms. In such unsafe environments, traumatised adolescents resort to self-destructive behaviours, inflicting self-harm on their bodies (Herman, 1992). Susan Bordo's treatise on trauma-related anorexia in females, in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), is also fundamental to diagnosing Nyasha's nervous condition. She hypothesises that anorexia is not basically a pathological disorder, but an act adopted by females to demonstrate control over their bodies in a world where the female subject is forced into conformity with the patriarchal social norms (Bordo, 1993).

Nyasha is also a victim of cultural fragmentation and this makes her the subject of triple oppression: domestic repression, colonial subjection, and cultural dislocation. This falls within Frantz Fanon's categorisation of the colonised subject, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008). As a subaltern individual, Nyasha seeks to attain a liminal space by adopting the identity of the coloniser and internalising their oppression. The article, thus, also explores the consequences of Westernisation on Nyasha's life both inside her home and in her Shona culture as her cultural estrangement alienates her and intensifies her eating disorder.

2. Eating Disorders and the Struggle for Autonomy in *Nervous Conditions*

2.1 The Dilemma of Cultural Hybridity

Nervous Conditions portrays a young female character, Nyasha, who suffers from an eating disorder that results from her inability to accept the traditional patriarchal lifestyle of her rural society. Nyasha's difficult experience is presented objectively through the perspective of her cousin Tambudzai (Tambu), the narrator and protagonist. After spending her formative years in England, Nyasha has intellectually absorbed un-African liberal notions. Thereafter, on her return with her family to their conservative Shona community in Zimbabwe, she suffers a culture clash that makes her unable to have normal relationships with other girls from the village. Her adopted English tongue and inability to communicate in her mother language intensify the barrier between her and the native girls and lead her to be more reclusive and depressed. David Aberbach states: "Dangarembga shows how Nyasha is caught between two different cultures that expect her to conform while simultaneously denying her the chance to fully or successfully assimilate" (Aberbach, 2004, p. 223). The

other girls at the mission school make fun of her Anglicised ways: “She thinks she is white” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 94).

Frantz Fanon remarks that colonised subjects often experience a cultural non-belonging due to the colonial pedagogical system. This “zone of nonbeing,” Fanon adds, alienates them from their indigenous world and keeps them marginalised within the hegemonic Eurocentric realm (Frantz Fanon, 2008, p. 8). In her letters to Tambu, Nyasha complains of her confusion and failure to feel at home, especially at school, where she feels like an outsider. She expresses her sense of cultural displacement, saying: “I’m not one of them [the English] but I’m not one of you [the Shona people]” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 201).

Nyasha’s “African notion of identity”, Milena Bubenechik observes, “becomes fragmented and polluted by the appropriation of Western modes of individual autonomy” (Bubenechik, 2013, p. 17). As she fails to assimilate and accept her new life, she becomes utterly estranged from her environment and consequently succumbs to her trauma and becomes a victim of a severe eating disorder.

2.2 Domestic Abuse as a Catalyst for Disordered Eating

As the head of his tribe, Nyasha’s father, Babamukuru, maintains patriarchal control enforced rigidly within his household. He expects everyone, especially the females, to obey him blindly. This mirrors the authoritarianism of the colonisers since Babamukuru’s values are the product of his colonial education. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), **Homi** Bhabha notes that familial issues are inseparable from political circumstances in colonised communities, a phenomenon which he terms the “unhomely” (Bhabha, 1994). Nyasha suffers under the pressures of patriarchy and colonialism as her home becomes an unsafe site where she experiences humiliation and physical abuse.

Nyasha’s father has earned a postgraduate degree from an English university. His education is a unique asset in the village and is a source of pride for the entire family. However, he is unable to understand Nyasha’s situation and cannot realise that the years his daughter spent in England have estranged her from her own people and cultural traditions. Amanda Waugh elucidates:

Nyasha remains entrapped because she is unable to redefine and rename the world around her. [She] constantly struggles between what she believes to be right and what Babamukuru claims is wrong. (Waugh, 2011, p. 87)

Babamukuru’s domineering attitude is also a sign of his hypocrisy and contradiction, as he utilises his British education while denying his daughter the right to enjoy the privileges of her schooling. According to him, Nyasha is spoiled by the liberal ideologies she learns from Western books and by the foreign beliefs she internalises during their stay in England:

I have observed 15 from my own daughter’s behaviour that it is not a good thing for a young girl to associate too much with these white people, to have too much freedom. I have seen that girls who do that do not develop into decent women. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 180)

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Gayatri Spivak comments on the double oppression that subaltern females endure under colonial and patriarchal control. Their efforts

to express themselves and articulate the injustices they experience often end in silence. Nyasha's attempts to speak are met with indifference and violence. She argues with her father about her new life in the village. This marks the beginning of their strained relationship. Nyasha continually resists her father's control over her life and begins to question his patriarchal authority, an act that intensifies the conflict between them with her insatiable longing for autonomy and his determination to force her into conformity. Her father continually warns her: "I expect you to do as I say" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 83), and: "We cannot have two men in this house.... you hear that Nyasha? Not even your brother there dares to challenge my authority" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 115). Her resistance is interpreted as insolence, deviance and even madness. She addresses her father defiantly, following her physical punishment, saying: "But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped." (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 201). Consequently, she "has to face debasement, physical punishment (she is severely beaten) and being expelled from home" (Rabello de Castro, 2018, p. 201).

Nyasha observes that her elite schooling and intellectual empowerment have no value in this tribal environment, which demands submissive females, as these faculties do not shield her from oppression. Judith Herman (1992) points out that in such oppressive environments where language and other means of expression become inactive, adolescents resort to self-destructive behaviours, using their bodies as texts through which they communicate their trauma. Nyasha's eating disorder, thus, emerges as a response to both her cultural estrangement and familial oppression when all means of communication fail.

2.3 Sisterly Empathy and Maternal Silence: Nyasha's Need for Emotional Support

Like Nyasha, Tambu also struggles to come to terms with the tribal limitations imposed upon her as an adolescent black female, which hampers her dreams of being educated and independent. In this tribal culture, males have the right to be educated and their desires and dreams are given priority over those of females. Women are barely given educational or employment opportunities and their roles are confined to doing domestic chores as wives and mothers. Maureen Kambarami points out that in Shona culture, "Shona males are socialised to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of households whilst females are taught to be obedient and submissive housekeepers" (Kambarami, 2006, p. 2). Therefore, in this patriarchal environment, "womanhood is a heavy burden" and "femaleness," as Tambu explains, is "as opposed and inferior to maleness" (Dangarembga, 1988, pp. 16, 116).

Tambu notices that Nyasha is unruly and tries to act like an independent girl by secretly smoking cigarettes and reading books her parents consider inappropriate. Nyasha's radical ways are also conspicuous in her refusal to be subservient and to accept traditional societal norms. Initially, Tambu is disturbed by Nyasha's disrespectful reactions to her mother's advice and her defiant challenge to her father by refusing to act submissively. But later, when the two girls share a room and become intimate friends, she realises the nature of Nyasha's uncommunicative plight. She starts to admire Nyasha's intelligence and rebellious nature, which she finds "glamorous in an irreverent way" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 76). Eventually, Tambu regrets her hasty judgment of Nyasha's behaviours, saying: "In the end I felt stupid and humiliated for making such a fuss over my cousin" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 51).

Unlike Tambu, Nyasha's mother, Maiguru, is less empathetic towards her daughter's predicament. Despite being an educated woman, Maiguru has internalised the patriarchal ideology that Shona females should accept the male-dominated worldview. Bound by

passivity and obedience to wifely duties, she does not dare to intervene to shield her daughter from Babamukuru's violence. Besides, she criticises Nyasha for failing to comply with domestic expectations and for adopting "disrespectful ways in England" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 74). The lack of the maternal solidarity she most needs precipitates Nyasha's eating disorder.

2.4 Nyasha's Anorexic Resistance

What Dangarembga intends to show in *Nervous Conditions* is the consequences of colonial and societal pressures on women's lives. In this tribal community, where women's lives are controlled by the patriarchs and their verbal expression is repressed, body language becomes fundamental and female distress is expressed in corporeal behaviours. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Hélène Cixous contends that silenced women must use their bodies as texts on which to inscribe their rage and grief (Cixous, 1976). Likewise, in *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (1986), Susie Orbach notes: "In starving herself, the anorectic woman is rejecting the body her culture insists she must occupy" (Orbach, 1986, p. 89). Nyasha's refusal to eat and her purging bouts are, thus, mediums of protest—a reaction to the cultural and patriarchal constraints she grapples with.

Nyasha's family initially views her anorexia as a foreign imposition, incompatible with their original African identity. To assert his authority and control over his daughter, Nyasha's father forces her to eat, an act followed by recurrent purging episodes, which become her only means of resistance and control over her body. Her mother's reaction to her eating disorder emphasises her passive role and lack of understanding of her daughter's predicament: "When did you ever go to bed hungry? Not in this house!" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 83). She also tries to force her to eat and similarly, Nyasha reacts by throwing up. Nyasha's anorexia gradually develops into bulimia.

Nyasha's trauma intensifies when one night she suffers a nervous frenzy, breaking the mirrors and clay pots and tearing her books and clothes. These times of stress affect her eating patterns as she loses control over her body. Her rebellious act turns to deadly self-starvation and she becomes extremely underweight. On her school vacation after several months, Tambu is surprised by Nyasha's nutritional deficiency and emaciated body. She observes that Nyasha does not eat enough food and at night, she goes to the bathroom and tries to vomit. Nyasha entrusts Tambu with her troubles, explaining:

... it's more than that really, more than just food. That's how it comes out, but really it's all the things about boys and men and being decent and indecent and good and bad. He [Babamukuru] goes on and on with the accusations and the threats, and I'm just not coping very well. Sometimes I look at things from his point of view, you know what I mean, traditions and expectations and authority, that sort of thing, and I can see what he means. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 190)

Now, her struggle is not for identity, but for survival. Her anorexia gradually develops into bulimia as she endeavours to force herself to eat, but her nourishment plans fail and she succumbs to fits of bulimia and vomiting.

2.5 Colonial Psychiatry and Black Females' Mental Health

Anorexia is primarily associated with pubescent white females in standard medical paradigms. These young women develop this mental disorder under social pressures in their pursuits of the ideals of beauty and thinness. In *Imperial Bedlam: Institutions of Madness in Colonial Southwest Nigeria* (1999), Jonathan Sadowsky indicates that psychiatric asylums in colonial African communities functioned as regulatory and disciplinary rather than therapeutic institutions. These clinics were sites of ideological control. Medication, Sadowsky clarifies, is limited to punitive procedures enacted on socially non-conforming women and political opponents (Sadowsky, 1999). Therefore, mental-health treatment is racially oriented and intended to silence dissident colonised subjects rather than provide effective psychiatric care, supporting their well-being.

When Nyasha is taken by her parents to a white psychiatrist, he claims that she pretends to be mentally ill and “that Africans did not suffer in the way [she] had described. She was making a scene. We should take her home and be firm with her” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 201). This white doctor fails to aptly diagnose Nyasha’s condition because of his Western colonial perspective of Zimbabwean culture. To him, black females, like Nyasha, who live in a male-dominated culture, cannot display symptoms of disordered eating as a response to trauma. This racial exclusion of indigenous women of colour from Eurocentric psychiatric frameworks, as Reyes-Rodríguez et al. (2011) argue, is the byproduct of stereotypical colonial views of Black women’s psychological suffering.

The doctor’s colonial diagnosis of Nyasha’s disordered eating is not much different from her father’s patriarchal assumption that her behaviour is aberrant and dangerous, and is, thus, in need of discipline to preserve the status quo. As a result, when it is too late for her parents to do anything to save her, Nyasha is put in a mental clinic by her parents, “where she stayed for several weeks” (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 202). Though not an effective means of recovery, Nyasha’s hospitalisation is the ultimate solution to her trauma-induced eating disorder, as no one, except Tambu, who is as helpless as Nyasha herself, lends an ear to her somatic language of resistance, which eventually spiralled out of control.

3. Conclusion

In Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, the family becomes responsible for the onset of Nyasha’s eating disorder. The latter’s independent nature, perceived as an unacceptable behavior, and her tendency to revolt against the confining environment of her patriarchal society entrap her in a difficult situation—a conflict with her stiff father who frequently abuses her. Her disillusionment with her education signals an awakening as she fails to utilise her intellectual freedom in her parochial environment. Besides, her hybrid status and the pressure of having to live up to the demands of this oppressive patriarchal environment become the source of her ‘nervous conditions,’ which illustrates the title’s direct reference. As a result, she articulates her resistance somatically via self-destructive anorexic or bulimic behaviours, albeit illegible in her culture, when all means of communication fail. Her body becomes a text on which she inscribes her **dilemma**.

The colonial belief that eating disorders predominantly affect white people makes therapy impossible for Nyasha because of the white psychiatrist’s racial perspective and his inability to understand her suffering. To conclude, *Nervous Conditions* is a poignant indictment of the systems of domination that render native African females powerless.

References

- Aberbach, D. (2004). Enlightenment and cultural confusion: Mendele's *The Mare* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* *. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 41(2), 214-230.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Boehmer, E. (1995). *Colonial and postcolonial literature: Migrant metaphors*. Oxford University Press.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. University of California Press.
- Brewerton, T. D. (2007). Eating disorders, trauma, and comorbidity: Focus on PTSD. *Eating Disorders*, 15(4), 285-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640260701454311>
- Bubenechik, M. (2013). *The trauma of colonial condition: In Nervous Conditions and Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Anchor Academic Publishing.
- Cixous, H. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa (K. Cohen & P. Cohen, Trans.). *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1(4), 875-893. <https://doi.org/10.1086/493306>
- Dangarembga, T. (1988). *Nervous conditions*. The Women's Press.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press.
- Gagiano, A. (2000). *Mothers and daughters in African narrative*. University of South Africa Press.
- Garner, D. M., & Garfinkel, P. E. (1980). Socio-cultural factors in the development of anorexia nervosa. *Psychological Medicine*, 10(4), 647-656. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291700054944>
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.
- Hornbacher, M. (1998). *Wasted: A memoir of anorexia and bulimia*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Kambarami, M. (2006). Femininity, sexuality and culture: Patriarchy and female subordination in Zimbabwe. *African Regional Sexuality Resource Centre (ARSRC)*.
- Kodua, M., Mackenzie, J. M., & Smyth, N. (2020). Nursing assistants' experiences of administering manual restraint for compulsory nasogastric feeding of young persons with anorexia nervosa. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 29(6), 1181-1191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12755>
- Koutek, J., Kocourková, J., & Dudová, I. (2016). Suicidal behavior and self-harm in girls with eating disorders. *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*, 12, 787-793. <https://doi.org/10.2147/NDT.S100017>
- Monteleone, A., Cascino, G., Ruzzi, V., Pellegrino, F., Patriciello, G., Marciello, F., De Luca, L., Aiello, M., Monteleone, P., & Maj, M. (2022). Childhood maltreatment and eating disorder psychopathology: A network analysis. *Eating and Weight Disorders – Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*, 27(5), 253-261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-021-01169-6>
- Moulding, N. (2015). 'It wasn't about being slim': Understanding eating disorders in the context of abuse. *Violence Against Women*, 21(12), 1456-1480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215596243>
- Orbach, S. (1986). *Hunger strike: The anorectic's struggle as a metaphor for our age*. W. W. Norton.
- Örge, E., & Volkan, E. (2023). Effect of childhood traumas on eating disorders: Systematic review. *Current Approaches in Psychiatry*, 15(4), 652-664. <https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.1216836>

Rabello de Castro, L. (2018). The self under domination: A dialogue between Nandy's *The intimate enemy* and Dangarembga's *Nervous conditions*. *Postcolonial Studies*, 21(2), 192-209.

Reyes-Rodríguez, M. L., White, J., Gordils-Perez, J., & Franko, D. L. (2011). Eating disorders in ethnically diverse populations. *Psychiatric Clinics*, 34(4), 671-684.

Sadowsky, J. (1999). *Imperial bedlam: Institutions of madness in colonial southwest Nigeria*. University of California Press.

Smink, F. R., van Hoeken, D., & Hoek, H. W. (2013, November). Epidemiology, course, and outcome of eating disorders. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 26(6), 543-548. <https://doi.org/10.1097/YCO.0b013e328365a24f>

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.

Waugh, A. (2011). "Willing liberates": Nietzschean heroism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. *Pacific Coast Philology*, 46, 80-?

Wufong, E., Rhodes, P., & Conti, J. (2019). "We don't really know what else we can do": Parent experiences when adolescent distress persists after the Maudsley and family-based therapies for anorexia nervosa. *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 7(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-019-0260-7>

Republic Of Iraq
Ministry Of Higher Education and
Scientific Research
University Of Anbar



UNIVERSITY OF ANBAR JOURNAL FOR LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE

Quarterly Peer-Reviewed Scientific Journal
Concerned With Studies
And Research On Languages

ISSN : 2073 - 6614

E-ISSN : 2408 - 9680

Volume : (18) ISSUE : (1) FOR MONTH : MARCH

YEAR: 2026