Breaking the Boundaries of Literary Theory in Postcolonial Women’s Writing

Aspects of the *Bildungsroman* in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*

Masterproef voorgelegd
tot het behalen van de graad van
Master in de taal en letterkunde: Engels-Frans

door Hannah Deroo

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Stef Craps
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my research supervisor, Prof. Dr. Stef Craps, for his guidance, understanding, and detailed advice throughout the year. I am especially grateful for his patience and valuable insights, which encouraged me to work harder. I have the utmost respect for his knowledge on postcolonial literature and trauma theory and I am glad to have had the opportunity to write a thesis under his supervision.

A special thanks goes out to Lies, Alix, Heleen, Florence and Fien. These brilliant friends have shown endless support, love, and trust throughout our years at Ghent University, and have taught me the meaning of courage; for which I am grateful. I hope we will forever continue the bond we shared during these four years of hard work and adventure.

I would also like to thank my family: my parents, Elisabeth and Frederik; my flawless sister, Olivia; and my brothers, Florian and Pepijn for their boundless love. They are the most inspiring, intelligent, talented, and kind people, and I am feel blessed for being a part of their lives. A very special thank you to Florian, who keeps me smiling.
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Introduction

“I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling”, the narrator discloses in the first line of *Nervous Conditions* (1988), the first of two novels by Tsitsi Dangarembga which tell the story of Tambudzai, a young, Black, Rhodesian girl who seeks to improve her life through education during the 1960s (1). *The Book of Not* (2006), the compelling sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, conveys Tambu’s experience as a student at a Catholic convent school in Rhodesia, set against the backdrop of the Rhodesian Bush War. Tambu’s narrative has sparked the interest of critics worldwide, who have praised the novels’ contribution to postcolonial African and feminist literature. With regard to the subject matter and form of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, both novels have, however, been the subject of debate as to whether these novels can be regarded as *Bildungsromane*. Critics such as Carolyn Martin Shaw, Gilian Gorle, and Rosanne Kennedy have related the novels to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, and there still is no consensus.

In my analysis, I will discuss how Dangarembga reworks the conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* in ways which relate to alternative models of the *Bildungsroman*, such as the feminist and the ethnic *Bildungsroman*. I will investigate thematic and formal aspects of both novels to determine how Dangarembga blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, recasting the conventional formal and thematic limits of the *Bildungsroman*, in order to form a response to patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. Most specifically, I will analyze how Dangarembga uses other forms of writing such as the form of the trauma narrative, the form of mourning in ethnic literature, and the form of shame in postcolonial literature, to broaden the scope of her *Bildungsromane* in the interest of creating a communal, feminist experience of confession, mourning and healing, and inspiring change for Black, young women in Zimbabwe.
1. The Tradition of the Bildungsroman: An Overview

1.1. The Traditional Bildungsroman

The publication of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the eighteenth century marked the beginning of the *Bildungsroman* genre. According to Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Goethe’s novel was the first to “codify the new paradigm and see youth as the most meaningful part of life” (3). In fact, Moretti considers the very notion of “symbolic” youth the main symbol of the nineteenth century. He writes:

In this first respect youth is ‘chosen’ as the new epoch’s ‘specific material sign’, and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to accentuate modernity’s dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity’s ‘essence’, the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past. And, to be sure, it was impossible to cope with the times without acknowledging their revolutionary impetus: a symbolic form incapable of doing so would have been perfectly useless. (5)

Moretti points out that youth does not last forever. Its symbolic form no longer represents a spatial construct, as was common during the Renaissance, but rather stands for a temporal aspect which is meant to conceptualize the notion of modernity and change in the nineteenth century.

In the *Bildungsroman*, Moretti sees a contradiction between youth as a symbol of change and futurity, and youth as a temporary state of which the ending undermines the very significance of youth. He distinguishes two kinds of ways, or principles, in which “plot generates meaning” in *Bildungsromane*: the “classification principle” and the “transformation principle” (7). When the “classification” principle prevails, “narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending” (7). In other words, the events
in the novel accrue meaning in the light of their ending. The classification principle thus emphasizes that “youth ‘must come to an end’” and that “youth is subordinated to the idea of ‘maturity’” because its meaning is determined by its ending (8). The protagonist’s dynamic and youthful identity eventually develops into “a stable and ‘final’ identity” (8). The “transformation principle”, however, emphasizes “youthful dynamism” (8). Within such a plot, “youth cannot or does not want to give way to maturity: the young hero senses in fact such a ‘conclusion’ a sort of betrayal, which would deprive his youth of its meaning rather than enrich it” (8).

Besides the inherent contradiction of the notion of “youth” in the Bildungsroman, Moretti touches upon the conflict between individual desire ("self-determination") and expectations in society ("socialization") that trouble the protagonist of the Bildungsroman. According to Moretti, the Bildungsroman is a place where the conflict is not resolved but is harmonized (15). On the whole, Moretti does not regard contradictions as problematic in the Bildungsroman. He explains:

> When we remember that the Bildungsroman—the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization – is also the most contradictory of modern symbolic forms, we realize that in our world socialization itself consists first of all in the interiorization of contradiction. The next step being not to ‘solve’ the contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival. (10)

Moretti’s analysis of the Bildungsroman genre has enriched the ways in which Bildungsroman content can be interpreted, and offers an explanation for how “youthful dynamism” can coexist with stability and society in literary forms (8). Nevertheless, over the centuries, writers and readers have constructed simplified mental checklists of Bildungsroman characteristics. In general, a novel featuring a young protagonist reaching adulthood is
defined as a *Bildungsroman*, also called a “coming-of-age” novel. The theme of the traditional *Bildungsroman* genre is uncontestably defined as the evolution of a main character who eventually acquires a stable identity. Due to its universal motif, the *Bildungsroman* genre is thus recognized world-wide, and critics still use the *Bildungsroman* as a model to categorize other works. Since Moretti, postmodern writers such as Pin-Chia Feng and David J. Mickelsen have re-examined the conflict between “*self-determination*” and “*socialization*” (15). Feng and Mickelsen, however, are more interested in the teleological aspect of the *Bildungsroman* than considering how the *Bildungsroman* harmonizes this conflict.

In *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading*, Feng evaluates the importance of chronology in the traditional *Bildungsroman*: “[t]he plot of the *Bildungsroman* is derived from the quest motif in which the hero moves teleologically, and the story usually ends with the completion (or failure) of the heroic task” (2). Feng also describes how the subject of the *Bildungsroman* attains a state of enlightenment consequent to “a linear progression toward knowledge and social integration, and an upward movement toward spiritual fulfillment” (2). The main character eventually reaches maturity by finding his or her place in society and pursuing higher moral purposes.

For Mickelsen, however, the main protagonist’s education in the coming-of-age story is the factor that determines the plot. In the article “*The Bildungsroman in Africa: The Case of Mission terminée,*” Mickelsen defines the traditional *Bildungsroman* as a novel in which “a single, youthful protagonist … moves from naïve idealism (ignorance, innocence) to a more pragmatic consciousness of possible consequences within a particular social context” (418). Mickelsen emphasizes how education determines the protagonist’s choice in life, being the acceptance or the rejection of the values he or she is presented with. This choice thus confirms that the character has “achieved a coherent self” (418). Although Mickelsen acknowledges that the protagonist’s decision generally leads to “the movement from outside the group to
inside it, or at least toward it”, he also adds that the protagonist can move from the inside of a group in society towards the outside of that particular group (418-9). Mickelsen states that this definition of the Bildungsroman is broad enough to include alternate models of “coherent self[ves]” which are included or excluded in groups within society (418). Although the traditional definition of the Bildungsroman focuses primarily on social classes in society and does not include references to gender or race, Mickelsen is interested in non-traditional Bildungsromane by non-white authors. In his analysis, Mickelsen examines how writers of third-world countries use the inherited model of the Bildungsroman and merge it with indigenous forms of writing. He is interested in how “the resulting mixture” challenges European forms and “throws into relief the conflict of the traditional and the inherited” (418). For African writers such as Mongo Beti, author of Mission terminée, “the Bildungsroman typically examines the conflict of cultures in which a young évoluté struggles to achieve a balance between the ‘civilizing’ education of the colonial power and the traditional culture of his forefathers” (418). Mickelsen draws attention to complex socio-political factors that are at play in Bildungsromane of ethnic origin and shows consideration for forms that defy traditional interpretations of the genre. In fact, few Bildungsroman definitions do mention the ethnic background of the main characters or explore the deviations from the genre. This topic has initiated responses from feminist and ethnic critics.

1.2. The Female Bildungsroman

Aagje Swinnen, for example, contests the notion of a delineated definition of the Bildungsroman. In Het slot ontsluikt: De ‘vrouwelijke’ Bildungsroman in de Nederlandse literatuur, Considering that the Bildungsroman genre developed during the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, Swinnen says, the genre propagated a belief in education. She states that Goethe’s Bildungsroman has since been considered as a prototype of the Bildungsroman, but argues that only a few novels conform to this definition. According to
Swinnen, the notion of the norm has anchored the genre to such an extent that deviations from the *Bildungsroman* are disregarded as *Bildungsromane*. Swinnen calls for a more “open definition” of the *Bildungsroman* genre claiming that both normative and open definitions of the genre are focused on the development of the protagonist, which is what ultimately determines the plot of the *Bildungsroman*. Swinnen ultimately calls for a recognition of the female *Bildungsroman* as *Bildungsroman* instead of as a deviation from the *Bildungsroman*.

Feng also announces the need for an opening in the white male *Bildungsroman* canon. Initially, the *Bildungsroman* only depicted white male bourgeois protagonists who struggle in their adolescence but eventually manage to occupy a position in the higher ranks of society. “Although the central figure in the heroic tradition is ‘demoted’ to a bourgeois protagonist in the German *Bildungsroman*”, Feng explains, “the genre remains male-biased, since historically women could aspire to neither the grand epic glory nor the ‘debasing’ philistine self-realization until very recently, and not without backlash” (3). Although women were already engaged in writing female *Bildungsromane* in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, with works such as Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1802) and Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1816), a female tradition of the *Bildungsroman* was not recognized until the 1960s, with works such as Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963) and Doris Lessing’s *The Children of Violence* (1952-69). This was partly because women’s writing was formerly scarcely recognized as an equal counterpart to male writing, but also because female characters in the *Bildungsroman* were at first not given “agency” in the narrative.

Swinnen goes into more detail on this subject, pointing out that female protagonists in male *Bildungsromane* merely represented male fears and desires. In this sense, female protagonists were portrayed as objects in service of the male protagonist. When writing female *Bildungsromane*, women writers had to convert the typical “object” position of the female protagonist to a “subject” position. This change implicated a concurrence of plot
structures of the male and the female Bildungsroman. A female novelist is still affected by the dominant, male ideology regarding gender, Swinnen recognizes, but at the same time she is able to place herself out of that frame while writing a Bildungsroman. Women writers, Swinnen states, are in a contradictory position as both females and authors, and their work does not correspond with characteristics of male Bildungsromane. This is why their work was not included in the literary canon.

Lorna Ellis’s analysis of the female Bildungsromane is also worth considering here, for it contains ideas that resonate clearly with Swinnen’s analysis. In her book Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman, 1750-1850, Ellis specifies how the female Bildungsroman developed differently than the male Bildungsroman on a literary level, focusing mainly on changes regarding the representation of female protagonists in female writing. Her analysis also provides an example of how these female protagonists become empowered subjects, which ultimately distinguishes them from stationary women characters in male Bildungsromane:

[T]he female Bildungsroman’s roots are in the romance tradition. From the romance, the female Bildungsroman adapted the interest in what constitutes female power, and specifically how that relates to the power of the gaze. The female Bildungsroman generalizes how the gaze is used, so that the emphasis moves from a more literal gaze to the power involved in understanding how subjectivity is constructed by appearances. (87)

Ellis explains that the challenges female protagonists in the female Bildungsroman face differ from those appearing in the male Bildungsroman. Social forces and power relations between men and women problematize the development of the female protagonist’s coherent sense of self in the female Bildungsroman. The female protagonist discovers, as do male protagonists
in male *Bildungsromane*, that compromises must be made between who she wants to be and who others want her to be in order to succeed in society.

Ellis writes that most generally, the *Bildungsroman* heroine starts out “see[ing] herself as an autonomous agent who should have control over herself and define her own place in society” (60). But as she evolves throughout the novel, she realizes that her environment already has internalized a perception of her which is based on her gender and her rank in society. Moreover, the *Bildungsroman* heroine learns that she is perceived “primarily as an object” and that this hinders her ability to act autonomously (60). This conflict is precisely what Swinnen denotes in her analysis as the concurrence of two plot structures. Ellis asserts that the female protagonist first tries to rebel against the restriction of her self-determination, but ultimately finds a balanced solution. According to Ellis, “the only way that she can maintain some independence and control while remaining an integral part of society is to work within the expectations set up by the predominant male view” (60). Even if the female protagonist faces the disillusion of not being able to become entirely self-determining, the female *Bildungsroman* is a model that empowers women to critique the conservative society that imposes their limitations, doing so from within the same model that formerly excluded their voices.

Swinnen emphasizes that women’s literature does not suppose a resolute opposition to male literature. The idea that female writing should in fact be considered a “difference within” the traditional canon of male literature is in fact also advocated by Ellis. The text of female development, Swinnen says, is characterized by a dialogue with former texts, which makes the female *Bildungsroman* ultimately an intertextual space in which female writers can resonate deviating models of form with existing models of form.
1.3. The Black Female Bildungsroman

Feng also touches upon the differences between male and female Bildungsromane, and calls for the establishment of a distinctive female Bildungsroman tradition. However, she does not limit the discussion to the Bildungsromane of white women. Her study aims to “delineate the difficult Bildung of minority women in a society permeated by race, class and sex/gender oppression” (2). She acknowledges that women of other races write from different frames of experience than white women writers. Although her analysis focuses on African American women writers such as Toni Morrison and Asian American women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Feng does call for recognition of Bildungsromane of all ethnic women.

Feng argues that if ethnic men struggle with what W. E. B. Du Bois has called a “double consciousness,” meaning the attempt of African American men to reconcile African culture with an upbringing in European academic systems, then “ethnic women suffer from triple, even multiple, consciousness, as they stand further outside the margin of the marginal groups, being non-white and female” (16). For Black female writers, the Bildungsroman would signify a creation of place for dialogue with others, with society, as well as with aspects of otherness within the self. Feng recognizes that “[the] constant tension between (attempts at) assertiveness and psychological withdrawal is the source of ethnic women’s multiple ‘ambivalence’ of selfhood and the major problem that ethnic women writers of color need to work out in their Bildungsromane” (17).

I would like to point out, however, that the “‘ambivalence’ of selfhood” which Feng recognizes in ethnic women stands in opposition to the “coherent self”, which I previously discussed as Mickelsen’s primary condition of the Bildungsroman (Feng 17; Mickelsen 418). In contrast to former Bildungsroman models, Feng argues that instead of representing “a unified identity”, an ethnic woman “engag[es] in an endless negotiation of her contradictory multiplicity” (41). The ambiguities and uncertainties concerning ethnic female identity are
reflected in the narrative mode as well. According to Feng, “many ethnic women write about their Bildung in a fragmentary way, with repetitive emergences of repressed memories of their racial, cultural, and personal past from the wild, wild zone” (18). Ethnic women writers exorcise their past and celebrate or confess their ambivalences in their *Bildungsromane*. Feng argues that “narrative by ethnic women dives further down into the repressed memory of society and reveals the work of racism, sexism, as well as classism at every level of social institutions past and present” (19). In fact, through the *Bildungsroman*, she writes, injustices, inequalities, and hardships experienced by ethnic women resurface from a personal level to a wider, social context.

Sondra O’Neale shares the perception that the work of Black women writers transgresses boundaries from the individual to the communal experience of Black women. In her article “Race, Sex, and Self: Aspects of Bildung in Select Novels by Black American Women Novelists,” she states that the Black female *Bildungsroman* developed out of a need to portray Black female characters in a realistic way. She says of Black American women writers that “[t]heir aim has been to make the fiction more compatible with actual Black experience in this country” (26). However, Neale does not clarify why Black women writers adopted the *Bildungsroman* from the European tradition in order to communicate these experiences, instead of creating a new genre for this purpose. Geta J. LeSeur offers an answer to this question in *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*:

[Contemporary Black writers] do not seek an entrée into the mainstream of European or American writing, but wish to explore the indigenous currents of those experiences - to communicate, often to educate, interpret, and reveal the varied experiences of four hundred years of suffering. This new movement in Black writing was referred to in the 1960s and 1970s as Black aesthetics, Black arts, Black consciousness, or cultural nationalism. This ‘new’ Black
literature was distinguished from the older literary works in that it was centered around a growing conversation among Black people about heritage and culture. The *Bildungsroman* as a form has been adapted to serve part of that purpose. (2)

LeSeur’s explanation of how the form of the *Bildungsroman* is adopted by Black writers to convey their own tales of suffering and development, is similar to Ellis’s explanation of how white female writers make use of the *Bildungsroman* to include their own voices. For women writers, African American writers, and especially for African American women writers, the use of the male-centered, European model of the *Bildungsroman* is a way of commenting on that tradition and appropriating it to represent themselves.

**1.4. Ethnic Writing and the Postcolonial *Bildungsroman***

LeSeur’s analysis is centered on African American and West Indian writing, O’Neale’s analyses are focused on African American writing, while Feng writes about African American and Asian American literature. It is necessary to avoid conflating all *Bildungsroman* models that deviate from the norm. However, discussing these models in relation to each other sheds light on the framework of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*.

According to John Cullen Gruesser in *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic*, crossing the boundaries of fields of literary study enriches literary analysis. His work is centered on “identify[ing] points of correspondence and build[ing] bridges between” the fields of African American and postcolonial literature (2). Gruesser acknowledges that analyzing African American and postcolonial literature from the same angle would “overlook the very great cultural differences between literatures which are produced by a Black minority in a rich and powerful white country and those produced by the Black majority populations of an independent nation” (9). Nevertheless, he believes that establishing “conduits through which ideas and
critical approaches can pass” will help contribution to analyses in both fields of study (2). Gruesser’s analysis mainly focuses on the work *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. The publication of this work, says Gruesser, contributed to the beginnings of postcolonial studies and his analysis builds upon its ideas.

Gruesser sketches a historical-theoretical frame for African American writing and postcolonial writing in an attempt to establish a relation between the two forms of literature, adding to theories by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin. In the process of colonization, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write, the English language and culture is forced upon the colonized people by white settlers who are themselves disconnected from metropolitan culture. Although the colonized are not displaced geographically, they do experience “linguistic displacement and cultural denigration” (7). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin believe that the deportation and enslavement of Africans is a “‘consequence of colonialism’ rather than colonialization” (10). Gruesser goes a step further, pointing out that, in a sense, African people in North America were colonized as well, for they were displaced from their land, language, and culture and forced to coexist with whites.

Gruesser is interested in the way *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* looks at postcolonial writing from a socio-historical point of view. He discusses the term “hybridity” which is used to define the complexity of the situation when two cultures, one more dominant than the other, are brought into contact. Postcolonial writing, Gruesser affirms, contains the idea of hybridity which “counterbalances the negative connotations of displacement and its attendant identity crisis” (7). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin assert that postcolonial writing foregrounds the mutuality of postcolonial transactions. There is no “one-way process” in which colonized subjects are absolutely repressed by the colonizer (8). Gruesser explains that hybridity ensues directly out of the “experience of
displacement” which entails a “double vision” including insight into both metropolitan and peripheral culture (8). Postcolonial writers insert this double vision in their work, by portraying the conflict between imperial power and local culture, and by underlining a vision that differs from colonial ideology, all the while making clear that they were formed by colonial experience. African American literature is not characterized by the same sense of “double vision” in postcolonial writing (8). However, the tension between white institutions and African heritage, theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois as the term “double consciousness,” does influence African American writers, which, although not the same, can be regarded from a framework similar to that of hybridity in postcolonial writing. For this reason, Gruesser advocates a cooperation between postcolonial studies and African American literary studies.

I propose that, analyzing the model of the *Bildungsroman* from a feminist, postcolonial and ethnic perspective, touching upon analyses of African American and other ethnic *Bildungsromane* will enlighten some aspects present in Dangarembga’s novels. LeSeur’s analysis, for example, is particularly centered on the way African American and West Indian novelists adopt the *Bildungsroman* genre and thereby insert the previously ignored subjects of race and gender. She points out that African American and West Indian writers resort to their own lives as the source of inspiration for their *Bildungsromane*:

> A comparison of African-American and West Indian novels of childhood reveals that the West Indian novelist writes a bildungsroman to recall childhood roots and to discover the truth about self and home, while the African American novelist tends to use personal experience in order to make a viable protest that is almost always about race, slave history, and the White establishment. (1)

While LeSeur does not discuss *Bildungsromane* by African novelists, some of the characteristics she discusses regarding African American and West Indian *Bildungsromane*
are also present in Dangarembga’s novels. For instance, the issues of childhood roots, personal experience, race, and the white establishment are in fact also addressed by Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. This analysis will demonstrate how crossing the boundaries of various fields of literary study brings to light how the *Bildungsroman* can convey personal experiences while also addressing models of healing and change for ethnic and feminist communities.
2. Autobiography in Relation to the Bildungsroman

2.1. Autobiographical Aspects of Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not

My analysis is not concerned with establishing a divide between autobiography and fiction in Dangarembga’s novels. However, examining Dangarembga’s life and worldview could increase insight into how Dangarembga fuses, in her novels, the conventional plot structure of the Bildungsroman with an autobiographical mode of narration, in order to uncover and question more complex, social and ideological networks which influence her life.

In Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman, LeSeur writes on how the Black Bildungsroman can be autobiographical in form. LeSeur asserts that “[t]he need to look back, to reassess one’s childhood from the vantage point of maturity, is related to the writer’s wish to establish an authentic basis of experience, that is, to repossess or reinterpret a past that to the adult seems broken and fragmentary” (27). For Dangarembga, thus, looking back at her past and molding her experiences into literary form could help re-contextualize issues important to her. Moreover, the literary form of the novels, as opposed to pure autobiography, allows Dangarembga to remain behind the scenes while still transmitting “an authentic basis of experience” which could raise awareness or possibly offer guidance to young girls facing the same issues (27).

Dangarembga was born in Zimbabwe (Rhodesia at the time) in 1959, and spent her childhood in England. In 1965, Dangarembga returned to Rhodesia and attended a mission school before continuing her studies at an American convent school. Dangarembga briefly studied in Cambridge for a medical degree, but faced racism and isolation there so she returned to Rhodesia. She was present during the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. Dangarembga briefly worked at an advertising agency, and studied psychology at the University of Zimbabwe. Remarkably, Dangarembga draws on her own life to represent Tambu’s and Nyasha’s lives.
In an interview by Rosemary Marangoly George and Helen Scott, Dangarembga explains that she started writing *Nervous Conditions* out of a need to “leave a very real taste of life during the times that [she] grew up” (311). Reading English classics, she felt as if there existed no Zimbabwean equivalent to novels that captured the *Zeitgeist* of the country during a particular era. Dangarembga was concerned with the lack of recorded history of Zimbabwe’s recent past, and wanted to create novels with which Zimbabwean women could identify. Therefore, she felt compelled to create a novel that would help young girls in Zimbabwe to construct their own “kind of cognitive map” while growing up (312).

Dangarembga’s personal experiences help her establish an “authentic basis of experience” described by LeSeur, because they enable her relate to Tambu’s struggles (27). She is especially aware of the complexity of the situation Tambu and Nyasha are brought into as young, female students in Rhodesia. For one thing, Dangarembga states that she does not dichotomize, nor divide up the world by gender alone, because she believes there are “other powers” at play during life itself (313). She asserts: “I think it is too simplistic really to just always look at the gender issue as if there is such a pure dimension. I think one has to be much more aware of interactions and try to actually mark out the components of these effects” (313). Dangarembga stresses the fact that there is a “very complex social network” in Tambu’s family as well, and that there are many factors other than gender that drove Tambu towards self-determination (313). Dangarembga also remarks that Tambu’s or Nyasha’s characters cannot be held completely accountable for the decisions they make, even when they seem to be self-destructive. She says: “[T]his blaming the individual is something that comes to me very strongly in the Western analyses that I’ve read, and I don’t believe it. In Zimbabwe, however, people are much more conscious of the question of Nyasha’s, well… alienation” (314). Dangarembga acknowledges that in Zimbabwean readers are responsive to the matters she deals with in her novels, and she hopes that Zimbabwean writing will soon
become more “comfortable” instead of imposed and purely academic (311). She says that this will be the case “as the material conditions of people improve … as more and more women become educated, and as people feel that they can talk about the issues that need to be talked about” (313). The issues she refers to are racism, gender, trauma, and the effects of patriarchal and colonialist ideologies on young, African individuals. The autographic Bildungsroman, then, is the form that transmits these truths without blowing them up to represent “the one and only truth,” because it defies the limits of fiction and non-fiction. In fact, by including different forms of writing in her work, Dangarembga pushes the boundaries of literary theories while emphasizing that the issues she writes about cannot be delineated or disentangled from one another.

2.2. The Autobiographical Form of Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not

Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions and its sequel The Book of Not tell the story of a young Rhodesian teen called Tambudzai, frequently called Tambu, growing up during the 1960s in postcolonial Rhodesia. Tambudzai, whose experiences are at the center of the novels, narrates what happens to the relatives around her and the way they are affected by the presence of white missionaries and civilians. The narrative content of Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not is therefore not based on just one character, but also involves the dynamics of the relationships between the members of Tambudzai’s family as well as the political dynamics regarding whites and blacks in postcolonial Rhodesia.

Contrary to the usual third-person mode of narration in the Bildungsroman, Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not are both first-person narratives. The use of the first-person narrative mode is not conventional in the classic Bildungsroman, but is in fact widely used in the autobiographical genre. For Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not, examining these fields of study together can, however, facilitate an insight into the form, narrative mode and the way focalization is used in the novels.
Besides the similarities between Dangarembga’s life experiences and those of her female characters in her novels, the use of narrative mode also reflects Dangarembga’s engagement in her story. In fact, her primary concern was for her and for others of her generation to be able to “write about [them]selves in [their] own voices which other people can pick up to read” (312). The literary content in Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not is fundamentally autobiographic, and likewise the form of the novels resembles the form of personal memoirs. However, for a writer such as Dangarembga, “reposs[ing] or reinterpret[ing] a past”, as LeSeur puts it, is a challenging endeavor (27). Looking back at personal experiences, the author is confronted with the question of what perspective to adopt while writing. Either the author can imagine the reconstruction of his or her childhood perspective, or the author can look back on past events from his or her current position. In both cases, the author approaches the perspective of his or her younger self, but is unable to fully re-inhabit this position. Self-reflection is indeed always retrospective. Nevertheless, through writing, the author can experience certain revelations or come to a better understanding of past events. LeSeur writes:

When an adult writes, in retrospect, it is difficult to be objective about specific events that remain vivid and inescapable. By re-inventing or re-creating situations, the novelist can reveal in a person what in life may be hidden and latent. The inventions of the form indicate, in fact, a general principle of the novel, which is that our existence is based on the experiences of life, which in turn are based on particular and identifiable origins of character and incident.

(11)

Dangarambga conveys her own experiences into her novels through the first-person narrator Tambu, who’s voice is not meant to be conflated with Dangarembga’s, but serves the purpose
of enlightening readers on “hidden and latent” topics such as the profound influences of patriarchal and postcolonial societies on young, African women (11).

Although fictional, Tambu’s perspective is narratively complex in order to convey the interplay of interiorized and exteriorized voices within autobiographical texts. The narratives of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* are in fact transmitted by means of a double focalization which includes the perspective of the older Tambu who revisits her past, as well as the perspective of the young Tambu, who is directly experiencing the sequence of events. Throughout the novel, the older Tambu self-consciously reflects on the motivations, thoughts, feelings, and actions of her younger self, who is at the center of the novels.

The story of the younger Tambu is set in the past tense, presented chronologically and narrated without flashbacks. However, as the older Tambu conveys her narrative, the focalization shifts between her point of view as a mature woman, and the point of view of her younger self. When Tambu describes how she felt when first seeing Babamukuru’s house, for example, the reader is given a remarkably detailed and perceptive insight into the mind of the younger Tambu during that exact moment:

> It all became very depressing and confusing. At first I had been disappointed because I thought the garage was Babamukuru’s house. Now I was worried because it wasn’t … Hadn’t I known, I asked myself, that Babamukuru was a big-hearted man? That didn’t make me anything special. Or even deserving. I didn’t have anything to do with my uncle’s kindness. He would have taken in any poor, needy relative, and to prove it I was only here because my brother had died. (65)

This example illustrates how Dangarembga uses the fixed internal focalization to convey young Tambu’s train of thought. In effect, this embedded stream of consciousness where she
questions her relation to Babamukuru gives the reader an impression of the anxiety Tambu experiences as she arrives at the mission.

However, at certain points throughout the narrative, the older Tambu’s point of view is put forth instead. Looking back at incidents, the older Tambu sometimes reevaluates her younger perspective in order to convey a more reasonable mindset on the matter. For instance, when she intends to describe Babamukuru’s house, she realizes her perception has changed over the years:

All the same, had I been writing these things at the time that they happened, there would have been many references to ‘palace’ and ‘mansion’ and ‘castle’ in this section. Their absence is not to say that I have forgotten what it was like. That first impression of grandeur was too exotic ever to fade, but I have learnt, in the years that have passed since then, to curb excesses and flights of fancy. The point has been made: I can now refer to my uncle’s house as no more than that- a house. (62)

Due to the shifts in focalization between Tambu as a mature narrator and Tambu as a young girl, the narratives of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* are caught between two different frames of time. The main period of time is the progression of young Tambu’s character throughout her life story, while the fixed period of time is the mature Tambu as a narrator. By means of the variegated narrative form, Dangarembga harmoniously binds the young Tambu, the older Tambu, and herself into a story which concerns all three subjectivities, in order to discuss serious issues of trauma, postcolonial anxieties, racism, and gender which inherently mark Tambu’s Rhodesia.
2.3. Autobiography and the Healing Power of Narrative

In *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, Dangarembga wishes to explore the story of the women who until then were hidden behind the scenes of Zimbabwean postcolonial narratives, and portray the configuration of their lives. She says that she aimed to interrogate the “idea of the happy African smiling” and investigate what lies behind the smile (Thien 4). Instead of portraying a polarity between whites and Blacks, however, she chooses to “show people what is happening to individuals within a certain system” in the hope that people will be able to become aware of these issues and, most importantly, understand (Thien 4).

Dangarembga ties her work to a larger, political sphere of experience. In an interview by Madeleine Thien, she explains how issues in Zimbabwe during the 1990s are reflected in Tambu’s life story. At the end of the 1990s, Dangarembga says, the majority of the land was owned by only a small group of people, which “brought back the issues of racism, imbalance, and inequality” (4). The unrest during that period correlates with the political instability Tambu experiences in *The Book of Not*. Dangarembga says:

> What resurfaced in the 1990s was in accordance with what [Tambu] went through. And so, at that time when the villagers were assembling and organizing themselves into battalions that were going out into farms, I felt it was appropriate to look at those issues of race and who owns what and who has the power to bequeath what to whom in a fairly innocuous story of a young girl at school. (4)

Dangarembga’s work investigates more complex issues of race and authority without directly making accusations. She acknowledges how subjects such as Tambu—young, Black, African, and desiring Western education—are immersed in a dense network of systems, such as patriarchy, race discrimination, and colonialism. The following chapters discuss how the effects and consequences of these systems on individuals are conveyed in narrative form, and
how writers use these forms of writing to heal the wounds inflicted by trauma or personal loss, or to reflect a latent sense of shame that lies at the basis of autobiographical as well as postcolonial writing.

2.3.1. Autobiography and Trauma Studies

In *Nervous Conditions*, but mostly in *The Book of Not*, Tambu is affected by several events that cause disruption in her narration. In order to have a better understanding of Tambu’s suffering, it is necessary to look at the motivations behind trauma writing and how trauma is expressed through literary form. Leigh Gilmore, Zoe Norridge, Suzette A. Henke, Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín have discussed the relation between trauma memory and the form of trauma writing.

*The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* by Gilmore focuses on the relation between trauma, self-representation, and autobiography. Gilmore particularly directs her attention to texts concerning traumatic events that border on the autobiographical. First of all, she states that bringing trauma into writing requires different conventions than those used for “truth-telling” (3). Gilmore acknowledges that exposing personal truths is a difficult process:

[T]he risk of being accused of lying … threatens the writer into continued silence. In this scenario, the autobiographical project may swerve from the form of autobiography even as it embraces the project of self-representation. These departures offer an opportunity to calibrate our attention to the range of demands made by autobiography and the silencing or shaming effects they impose. (3)

Writing an autobiography, Gilmore claims, enables the writer to embody a subject that in turn is representative of others as well. The work becomes a complex affair as public and private matters are intertwined in the narrative, which, for some critics, is an invitation to question the
truthfulness of the work. As Gilmore puts it, “[w]ithin the volatility generated by representativeness, the private becomes ambivalent as it transforms into public discourse” (4). Rather than investigating if the writing contains truth or fiction, Gilmore is interested in how trauma writing tests the “limit of representativeness” and bypasses the boundaries of autobiography (5). In autobiographical writing, Gilmore writes, the subject self transcends the domain of personal containment. She is particularly interested in the nature of the relation between personal experience and communal experience in autobiographical works. Gilmore calls attention to the way trauma is formulated and where it emerges in writing, especially in situations where these testimonies come into the public sphere. Testimonies imply sharing “private and intolerable pain”, which, once out of the writer’s private domain, become subject of misinterpretation, questioning, and judgement (7). Moreover, it is difficult to determine where exactly the autobiographical merges into the fictional and where the individual merges into the collective. Gilmore emphasizes, however, that the confrontation with the limits of the autobiography “also produce[s] engagements other than open conflicts” (15). Gilmore writes: “Placing a personal history of trauma within a collective history compels one to consider that cultural memory, like personal memory, possesses ‘recovered’ or ‘repressed’ memories, and also body (or body politic) memories of minoritized trauma like racial and sexual violence” (31-2). Gilmore indicates that the remembrance of trauma involves placing personal domains of experience into a historical context of collective domains of experience, but that this ultimately allows difficult memories to resurface and be remembered.

Trauma writing, as a nonconventional form of self-representation, disrupts the structural coherence of traditional narratives in order to convey a sense of fragmentation, restlessness, and anxiety. In *Perceiving Pain in African Literature*, Norridge writes that trauma studies emerged at the time of the deconstruction theory, from which it lent the preoccupation with “the vicissitudes of literary depiction” (5). In trauma theory, Norridge
asserts, writers are interested in the gap between the place of a certain event in time and “the aesthetic processes of remembering” that event (5). In an attempt to emphasize the gap between the traumatic incident and the memory of this incident, writers obstruct the process of language signification. The relationship between the signifier and signified is disrupted, in order to express the traumatic memory and emotional responses to that trauma. Norridge explains:

Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency. Yet, at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma. (6)

Norridge writes that while engaging in fragmentary writing, the writer him or herself embarks on a “quest for meaning” (33). The disrupted narrative, random choice of words and disturbing imagery reflect the author’s search of his or her story’s structure and meaning. Although writers allude indirectly to the intensity of their suffering, Norridge states, they use narratives methods “to foreground the presence of pain” (23). From an individualistic angle, emphasizing descriptions of the sensory render the trauma more palpable and personal. The “symbolisation of pain”, by contrast, relates individual pain to a more communal experience of pain, such as the consequences of racism or abuse (23).

Henke asserts that while trauma writing serves as an expression of pain, it can also aid in healing pain. Her analysis in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* focuses on literary testimonies concerning rape, unwanted pregnancy, childhood sexual abuse, pregnancy-loss, incest, or any illness that “threatens the integrity of the body and compromises the sense of mastery that aggregates around western notions of harmonious
selfhood” (xii). Henke suggests that by reconstructing traumatic experiences through literature, patients suffering from anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder could facilitate relief from symptoms such as numbness, uncontrollable flashbacks and anxiety. She writes: “It is through the very process of rehearsing and reenacting a drama of mental survival that the trauma narrative effects psychological catharsis” (xix).

Through autobiographical writing, Henke asserts, authors have the opportunity to reinvent their being and reconfigure the subject apart from his or her socio-historical and ideological past. “Through the artistic replication of a coherent subject-position”, Henke writes, “the life-writing project generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency” (xvi). According to Henke, the act of life-writing “serves as its own testimony” (xix). Being read, the testimony mediates the voice of the traumatized subject which can be finally heard and acknowledged by others. Once the suffering subject can bring the past out of the shadows to mend, reassembling the fragmented self and rendering it a “coherent subject”, he or she can proceed with life as a healed subject (xix).

In Trauma Narratives and Herstory, Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín are also concerned with how narration and the portrayal of trauma can help regenerate the suffering individual. Their analysis, however, is more focused on the relation between the form and content of trauma writing, and on how autobiographical content is linked to the fictional world of the characters within the narrative. Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín assert that, while the form of the narrative typically “exhibit[s] temporal dislocation, narrative rupture, compulsive retelling, and resistance to closure”, the characters of the narrative “experience a range of symptoms which mimic those of trauma sufferers including dislocation, paralysis, nightmares, and the sense of something missing” (15). For example, in trauma literature, the “trope of split personality” occurs in narratives concerning distressed
women protagonists (49). Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín write that the splitting of the personality or consciousness of the female protagonist represents the effects of patriarchal suppression, while it also establishes a “symbolic response” to “the traditional patriarchal representations of women as irrational or mad” (59). The fictional characters of the narrative are therefore agents which transmit autobiographical trauma, representing but not conflating the trauma of the writer.

According to Henke, the *Bildungsroman* genre is the space where trauma writers can blur such boundaries of fiction and nonfiction, so trauma can be reworked and conveyed in literary form. In chapter 3.1., I will discuss how Tambu’s *Bildungsroman* narrative draws on trauma writing and how her story initiates a trajectory of healing from trauma.

**2.3.2. The Form of Racial Grief and Melancholy in Ethnic Writing**

In Dangarembga’s novels, Tambu’s struggles and anxiety are closely tied to the socio-political context of Rhodesia during the 1960s. The subjects of race, racism, and postcolonialism are prominent subjects of Tambu’s story, and understanding her narrative requires a look at the works of critics Anne Anlin Cheng, Frantz Fanon and Sam Durrant who contextualize and theorize the notions of the racial Other and racial melancholy.

Cheng, for example, is concerned with grief and melancholy in texts by ethnic authors. In her book *The Melancholy of Race*, she attempts to trace underlying suffering caused by discrimination, that marks the narratives of Asian American and African American writers, although she refers to other ethnicities as well. The starting point of Cheng’s analysis is a particular psychological experiment conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark during the late 1930s. The Clarks found that children of color, when given the assignment to choose between a white doll or a Black doll, would opt for the white doll. The results of this experiment helped prove the detrimental effects of racism on Black children, and were used as proof in court during the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case, which overturned the doctrine of
“separate but equal” authorized under the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling in 1896. Psychological evidence used in Court was unusual at the time, Cheng states, and therefore she is particularly interested in the way “damage” was defined, “grief” was measured, and how “so-called scientific data” was translated into “social meaning” (4). According to Cheng, this was a step towards “naturalizing” injury where it was previously just recognized (5). Bringing private grief and suffering as a consequence of racism into juridical and social perspective, Cheng emphasizes, ultimately creates room for suffering subjects to grieve.

Cheng’s main concern is examining how the effects of racism are traced in texts by ethnic writers. According to Cheng, the complexity of racial mourning is theorized in these literary texts. Cheng does not claim to diagnose real symptoms or pinpoint truths in these texts, but means to determine how African American and Asian American literature bring to light “the complex social etiology behind the phenomenon of racial grief” (15). She first turns to the psychological aspects underlying the choice of Black children to pick white dolls instead of Black dolls:

Beneath the reductionist, threatening diagnosis of “inferiority complex” or “white preference” there runs a fraught network of ongoing psychical negotiation instigated and institutionalized by racism. The connection between subjectivity and social damage needs to be formulated in terms more complicated than either resigning colored people to the irrevocability of “self-hatred” or denying racism’s profound, lasting effects. (7)

Cheng argues that there is no one-way explanation to clarify why, as with the children of color choosing for white dolls, Black subjects in literature display signs of obsessive affection towards whites while suppressing their affiliation with other Blacks. For example, Cheng writes about the phenomenon where racialized subjects find pleasure in denigrating or attacking protagonists that look like themselves. Cheng stresses that underneath this
problematic behavior “lies a nexus of intertwining affects and libidinal dynamics - a web of self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility” (17). The racialized subject does not simply develop a sense of self-shame that drives the subject to establish a “compensatory white preference” (17). Cheng writes that the racialized subject becomes in fact involved in a process of discrimination, which includes multiple stages. “White preference” is not transmitted by society to Black women who subsequently pass it on to Black girls, but rather travels “a tortuous, melancholic path of alienation, resistance, [and] aggression” (18). Black subjects domesticate, in fact, the aggression, which engenders “love” for what initially lies at the basis of their racial struggles: the white ideal (18). Here Cheng argues that “the cultural lesson and the racial lesson coincide”, for she suggests that “the conversion of the grief of being black into the enjoyment of whiteness” is “a very cultural lesson of mastering personal displeasure as social pleasure” (18). Cheng therefore calls for a recognition of the psychological complexity of racial melancholy, and for the development of a “political vocabulary” of racial melancholy (21).

Cheng turns to Freud and psychoanalysis in order to understand the basis of racial grief. She writes about Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” (1917) which makes a distinction between two kinds of grief. The first, “mourning,” comes after loss and is considered healthy because it allows the mourning subject to let go of the lost object and eventually replace it (8). The second form of grief, “melancholia,” is pathological because it is endless and prevents the melancholic subject from finding substitution for the loss (8). The melancholic subject suffers from being caught in the psychological condition of “endless self-impoverishment” (8). Cheng considers the melancholic ego a “haunted ego” because the absence of the object is continually present within the self (9-10).

For racialized subjects, Cheng asserts, racial melancholia is both a sign of rejection and “a psychic strategy in response to that rejection” (20). Being rejected because of race, the
subject interiorizes an anticipation of rejection. Racial melancholy is thus both a direct consequence of discrimination and an interiorized expectation of melancholy. Cheng theorizes that in the case of racial melancholy, the subject experiences a weighty, double loss, for the object of his loss is “the myth of an integral, inviolable self” (175). Cheng asserts that this has a disorienting effect on the individual. She explains that “[t]he racially denigrated person has to forfeit the full security of his/her imaginary integrity … but then is forced to take in (rather than project that lack to another) and reidentify with that loss: a double loss” (175).

Cheng herself is particularly interested in the subjectivity of the melancholic object and also asks: “[W]hat implications do insights into the melancholic origins of American racial–national identity hold for the study of the racialized subjects?” (14). In America, Cheng writes, institutions have produced “a dominant, standard, white national ideal” which is upheld by excluding but also by retaining the racialized other (10). Cheng explains that “[t]he national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. Legal exclusion naturalizes the more complicated ‘loss’ of the unassimilable racial other” (10).

Moreover, Cheng compares racism to melancholia, stating that both are “hardly ever a clear rejection of the other” (12). She concedes that racism is usually seen as a renunciation of the other as a being, but asserts that racial institutions strive to keep the other “within existing structures” rather than entirely remove them (12). This statement, I argue, glosses over the many acts of racial violence and murder that mark American history, such as the Native American genocide. However, Cheng narrows the scope to discuss segregation and colonialism, which, she argues, are a matter of “place (the literalization of Freudian melancholic suspension)” rather than of repudiation (12). She states that “[s]egregation and colonialism are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear” (12). She discusses “Of Mimicry and Man:
The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” by Homi Bhabha, which theorizes the idea of “colonial mimicry” (80). Bhabha suggests that during “colonial mimicry,” the colonized will try to “assimilate to colonial standards” but is thwarted by the inability to do so because of his or her different race (80). The realization that he or she is unable to compare further heightens the subject’s awareness of being a racial Other, which causes an introversion of the subject. According to Cheng, the racialized subject is haunted by “the psychical condition of measurement and approximation” when investing in the white ideal (80-1). The whole process of idealization, comparison and rejection causes severe anxiety and withdrawal.

A text that clarifies and theorizes the effects of racial discrimination on colonized subjects and illustrates racial mourning is Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. According to Fanon, the Black man’s existence is two-dimensional, for his behavior is different depending on whether he is amongst whites or Blacks. Fanon is certain that colonialism lies at the basis of this polarity. Before his introduction to the white society, Fanon asserts, the Black man was unaware of his position, but he starts to “feel the weight of his melanin” once he feels judgment in the eye of the white man (128). The colonized subject, Fanon writes, suffers from the tension he experiences from being introduced to the white social group or the white nation, which he refers to as “the white family” (127). Once the Black subject comes into contact with the “white family”, there is no way back, for he is presented the choice between his family and European society. When attempting to be assimilated by the “white, civilized society”, the Black subject tends to push his “black, uncivilized family” to the back of his mind (127-8). Being discriminated against “turns [him] into a colonized subject” and “robs [him] of any value or originality” (78). Consequently, the Black man tries to win back his robbed agency by “mak[ing] [himself] white”, in an attempt to make the white man acknowledge that he, too, is human (78). Fanon concedes that this is an impossible feat, for inside the Black man is dependent on the white man.
As discussed by Cheng and Fanon, racial melancholy deeply haunts victims of racism and colonization. Similarly as for trauma victims, autobiographical writing, then, can also serve as a form of therapy for postcolonial, or racial suffering. Sam Durrant writes in *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* that the postcolonial narrative, by relating the past, seeks a relief from it. This method, Durrant states, is similar to that of psychoanalytic therapy. Durrant explains:

> Psychoanalysis, with its commitment to the well-being of the subject, encourages us to exorcise our ghosts, to come to terms with loss and move on. Deconstruction, with its commitment to the other, to that which ‘unhinges’ the subject, urges us to learn to live with ghosts. Postcolonial narrative, which addresses the individual reader both in his or her singularity and as a member of wider communities, is caught between these two commitments: its transformation of the past into a narrative is simultaneously an attempt to summon the dead and to lay them to rest. (9)

Durrant suggests that postcolonial narrative, as a deliberate and conscious mode of writing, “presents itself as a mode of mourning”, as a method of relooking at history in an attempt to exert it (11). Durrant emphasizes in his analysis that the representation of grief in subjects in postcolonial narratives should not be considered as individual grief, but rather a mode of “collective mourning” (11). The representation of melancholy in postcolonial works “accrue a wider political significance” which needs to be recognized as responses to communal losses and grievances in history (11). Postcolonial writing, then, represents defiance against the failed community and generates “a new form of community” (13). Durrant suggests that the postcolonial work of mourning is created to “disrupt an international amnesia”, which is the intention to keep the history of postcolonialism and its injustices in the dark, although they
still mark contemporary relations (117). Durrant stresses, however, that the postcolonial novel works to reveal “the act of forgetting” instead of merely uncovering forgotten history (117).

2.3.3. The Form of Shame in Postcolonial Literature

As discussed in the previous chapter, self-representation in narrative can serve as therapy for victims of colonization and racism suffering from disrupted psychological well-being. In postcolonial narratives, critics such as Timothy Bewes have discussed, besides trauma and racial melancholy, postcolonial shame as a motif and a form of writing. Before turning to Bewes’ theory of postcolonial shame, I would first like to discuss the implications of pure shame, in order to determine how it affects the stable, coherent sense of self.

Gunnar Karlsson and Lennart Gustaf Sjöberg’s “The Experiences of Guilt and Shame: A Phenomenological- Psychological Study” provides insight into the psychology behind shame. Shame, they write, can be defined as a “negative self-exposure in relation to the other” (336). Shame surfaces when the subject is confronted with a negative side of her- or himself, which is known to the subject but is exposed in the eyes of another. The subject is “visually objectified” by the other whose very presence lies at the source of the feeling of shame (347). The gaze itself is considered as an active component of the exposure, while the subject becomes a passive object that is perceived. Karlsson and Sjöberg point out that, during the revelation of this “undesired self”, the subject undergoes intense bodily experiences (344). The subject attempts to relinquish the awareness of being exposed in a shameful manner, by “annihilating the situation emotionally” (344). In other words, the subject might wish to vanish or disappear into thin air. Shame, Karlsson and Sjöberg argue, is in a way “the opposite of freedom” for the individual experiencing shame is caught in a situation which presents no opportunity for escape (346). In fact, the subject does not seek to be released from the moment but rather wishes the moment to disappear altogether. “In a metaphorical sense”, Karlsson and Sjöberg write, “shame can be understood as ‘the subject’s death,’ if by ‘subject’
is meant a spontaneous intentional being” (346). Karlsson and Sjöberg describe how shame can equal a negation of the living subject: “The deepest level of shame is in other words a feeling that the other one rejects one’s being (as an intentional subject). Being rejected in one’s subjectivity, brings about an objectification of one’s self, which equals psychological death, being a petrified or dead soul” (354).

Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* illustrates the process of objectification in a Black man. His response to being placed under the stare of a white man, is not only determined by a sense of shame, but is triggered by a deeper sense of racial melancholy as a result of racism and/or racial stereotyping. In the gaze of the white man, the Black man is objectified, and locked within the trap of stereotype. He is fixed as the Other, and interiorizes the objectification of himself by whites into the objectification of himself by an inner, “white” dimension of his consciousness. Fanon describes how the white gaze pushes the Black man into hostile introspection:

I approached the Other … and the Other, evasive, hostile, but not opaque, transparent and absent, vanished … I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning *Y a bon Banania*. (92)

In this excerpt, Fanon depicts how the gaze of the white man provokes a set of destructive and self-reflexive interior processes, which are a result of racism, segregation, and humiliation under colonial systems. Fanon exposes how the culmination of these processes takes its toll upon the subject’s mental well-being and sense of being. He writes: “He who is reluctant to recognize me is against me. In a fierce struggle I am willing to feel the shudder of death, the irreversible extinction, but also the possibility of impossibility” (193). In relation to Karlsson
and Sjöberg’s analysis, the Black man’s wish for death, which would annihilate his suffering, can be compared to how the deepest level of shame can equal “psychological death” (354).

When shame lies at the very basis of writing, the narrative takes on what Timothy Bewes, in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, refers to as the form of shame. Shame can be present in the narrative as rooted in the psychology of a character, or can be conveyed by an autobiographical narrator. Bewes asserts that autobiographical writing basically is a “shameful exercise”, because the writer calls for the “ontologizing gaze of the other” upon him or herself (33). The author turns his or her attention inwards, and simultaneously exposes this inner self to others, without exactly foregrounding shame as a passing event. Bewes proposes, in fact, that shame is more a “form” of writing (46). “[T]he substance of shame”, Bewes writes, “is fundamentally a gap, an absence, an impossibility” (39). Furthermore, Bewes relates the issue of shame to the form and content of postcolonial writing. He states that:

[T]he colonial system itself is shaming: by its modes of address, by the ways in which it objectifies every individual caught up in it, and by the absence of any possibility of freedom that is foreseeable from within it, any freedom that does not further deepen and consolidate the regime of identity. In the colonial situation, love, desire, patriotism, friendship, and the promise of decolonization are all profoundly affected by shame. (119)

Bewes examines the works of John Maxwell Coetzee, Joseph Conrad, Nadine Gordimer, V. S. Naipaul, Caryl Phillips, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and Zoë Wicomb, and theorizes that postcolonial literature draws upon the cognitive structures inherent in colonial ideology. Consequently, within these structures, postcolonial writing is suffused by shame. “When it comes to the question of postcolonial shame”, Bewes asserts, “the status of postcolonial writing as writing is as important as, and inseparable from, its historical situatedness in the
aftermath of the colonial project” (43). According to Bewes, shame in postcolonial writing is “the experience of a situation in which the ethical (or aesthetic) obligation to write and the aesthetic (or ethical) impossibility of writing are equally irrefutable” (43). Bewes’s aim is to demonstrate how postcolonial literature engages in the creation of aesthetic forms, and how these are defined and justified by “their representational and ethical inadequacy” (47). In chapter 3, I will discuss how Tambu’s narrative conveys the sense of shame inflicted by colonial institutions, which in turn inflicts the reader with shame. This form of writing, I argue, testifies to the consequences of colonialism.
3. Analyzing Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not as Bildungsromane

Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not have been discussed by critics such as Carolyn Martin Shaw, Gilian Gorle, and Rosanne Kennedy who recognize a relation between the novels and the Bildungsroman genre. Their perspectives on the novels give an insight to the different ways in which the Bildungsroman is conceptualized in literary criticism.

In her article “‘You had a daughter, but I am becoming a woman’: Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions and She No Longer Weeps,” Shaw categorizes Nervous Conditions as a Bildungsroman. The main criterion of her analysis is the maturing of the main character in the novel, which she perceives as characteristic of the Bildungsroman. Shaw explains that the protagonist, Tambu, undergoes an “indigenous development of feminism” as she is confronted with sexism towards her female relatives and herself (14). According to Shaw, the feminist consciousness that grows in Tambu is an indication of her evolving maturity. Shaw thus describes Tambu as a typical Bildungsroman protagonist.

Gorle, however, states that Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions departs from the Bildungsroman genre. In Gorle’s article “Fighting the Good Fight: What Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions Says about Language and Power,” she remarks that the form and the narrative mode of Nervous Conditions deviate from the Bildungsroman tradition in two ways. Instead of the usual sole protagonist in typical Bildungsromane, Dangarembga focuses on a larger core of protagonists that surround the main characters Tambu and her cousin Nyasha. Secondly, Gorle points out that “the end of the novel provides no sense of closure: although it brings the reader full circle (with the final paragraph neatly echoing the words of the opening paragraph), it resolves nothing and secures no one” (180). According to Gorle, this open ending makes Nervous Conditions a postmodernist novel, because Dangarembga “recogniz[es], perhaps reluctantly, that questions of linguistic hegemony and
alienation are fluid and therefore must defy neat resolution” (180). Although *Nervous Conditions* does end rather abruptly, I would argue that the open ending facilitates the transition from *Nervous Conditions* to its sequel, *The Book of Not*, in which the narrator Tambu continues her story.

Another critic, Rosanne Kennedy, excludes *Nervous Conditions* from her analysis and only discusses its sequel, *The Book of Not*. The article “Mortaged Futures, Trauma, Subjectivity, and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not*” focuses on the content of traumatic incidents instead of form. According to Kennedy, the *Bildungsroman* typically is defined by a heroine who “should encounter and overcome obstacles in her quest for self-identity” (89). By this criterion, she argues that Tambu’s experiences of trauma in *The Book of Not* “explode the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*” (89). Kennedy refers to *The Book of Not* as a “novel of ‘unbecoming’ – of the loss of identity, feeling, and attachments”, because Tambu fails to gain control over her life, despite her efforts to overcome the obstacles she faces (89). In effect, Kennedy concentrates on an important aspect of the *Bildungsroman*, the portrayal of a struggling adolescent character who evolves into a triumphant individual after having overthrown the difficulties in his or her way. *The Book of Not*, in her opinion, does not meet these standards.

Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* have been categorized as *Bildungsromane*, due to their subject matter, their autobiographical form and the chronological progression of the plot. However, Dangarembga’s novels show a great indebtedness to other fields of study as well, such as postcolonial studies, trauma studies, feminist studies and the autobiographical genre. Other critics have thoroughly analyzed the novels’ characters in regards to their socio-political environment. However, they have only partly discussed the interaction or relation between the issues in the novels that, in fact, are analyzed under different fields of study. Remarkably, Shaw, Gorle, and Kennedy’s analyses
ensue from readings that focus only on one of the books, rather than readings that regard both books as part of a larger story. Although these analyses have put forward significant points of view on Tambu’s character development throughout one novel, they discuss this evolution within the boundaries of one text, rather than transcend these boundaries to discuss the novels as coherent texts. In order to understand Tambu’s complex setbacks and struggles as part of a greater socio-political and psychological framework, these different frameworks of analysis should be applied on both novels in sequence. In order to comprehend Tambu’s journey, her story should be discussed as a whole.
3.1. *Nervous Conditions*

3.1.1. Tambu’s Work Ethic: A Feminist Response to Patriarchy

*Nervous Conditions* introduces the spirited, thirteen-year-old Tambu. Tambu, as mature narrator, marks the beginning of the novel with a peculiar confession: “I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling” (1). The shock value of this statement, however, is tempered with comprehension for Tambu’s character when she proceeds to contest the power relations in the Shona tradition. Tambu explains that her male relatives hold a superior and privileged status over the women in her family. As the eldest daughter of her family, she feels helpless in regard to her older brother’s privileges. Her brother, Nhamo, is encouraged to continue his studies at the mission and to live with their uncle, Babamukuru, while Tambu is not allowed to pursue any sort of schooling. The mature Tambu discloses: “[i]n those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it … Thinking about it, feeling the injustice of this, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother, my father, my mother - in fact everybody” (12).

Despite her determination to transcend the limited opportunities of Rhodesian women, Tambu shows dedication to the land she lives on. Her descriptions of the river in which she bathes, the farm, and the nearby town show a remarkable likeness to the pastoral narrative that marks the beginning of traditional *Bildungsromane*. Tambu’s attachment to the African landscape can be inferred from her ability to name and distinguish the smells of every tree or bush she encounters, and the passionate descriptions of the areas around her home.

When describing the usual Shona practices and her daily rituals, Tambu uses the personal pronoun “we,” which signals her dedication to her community and her sense of belonging. She is also aware of the hardships the people in her town are enduring. She describes, for example, how young people gather to dance in the tuck shops, seeking relief
from the weight of their struggles: “They played the new rumba that … pointed unsystematic fingers at the conditions of the times: ‘I’ll beat you up if you keep asking for your money’, ‘Father, I am jobless, give me money for roora’, ‘My love, why have you taken a second wife?’ There was swaying of hips, stamping of feet to the pulse of these social facts. There was solidarity” (4). Tambu recognizes the hardships her people are suffering at the time, and in this way her perception contrasts with naive perceptions of pastoral characters who harmonize with their environment. She emphasizes how the togetherness of her community plays a large role in the wellbeing of the people. The burdens were lighter, Tambu seems to say, because they were shared by a large group of people with similar troubles.

Tambu, however, often disagrees with her father, who expects women to cook and marry instead of study. His patriarchal values inhibit Tambu from pursuing the life she wants to create for herself. Determined to take matters into her own hands, Tambu even grows her own maize to sell, in order to raise the amount of money she needs for the admission fee of her local school. Tambu’s initiative is met with resistance and discouragement from her male family members: her father is reluctant to give her seed, Nhamo mocks her plan and steals the ripening mealies, and her father forbids her to go to town to sell her crops. Despite her struggles, Tambu perseveres with her plan. When a white woman donates ten pounds for the fees, Tambu even outsmarts her father by giving the money to the headmaster in advance, so that the money is rightfully reserved for her education. Tambu ignores her father’s and her brother’s derogatory comments and takes pride in her academic achievements. Her work ethic is, in fact, her weapon against being crushed under the weight of patriarchy, for she regards education as a path towards personal freedom and self-determination. In the beginning of Nervous Conditions, Tambu displays fierce character and perseverance. Steadfastly, she distinguishes herself from her relatives on the homestead, pointing out: “I was different. I wanted to find out the truth” (5).
3.1.2. Babamukuru and Colonial Education

In the beginning of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu reminisces about the homestead but announces that change is to come: “The river, the trees, the fruit and the fields. This was how it was in the beginning. This is how I remember my earliest memories, but it did not stay like that” (3). In fact, Tambu recalls how her perception of the homestead became muddled as she witnessed a change in Nhamo’s behavior when he returns to their home during the holidays:

Before he went to the mission, we had been able to agree that although our squalor was brutal, it was uncompromisingly ours; that the burden of dispelling it was, as a result, ours too. But then something that he saw at the mission turned his mind to thinking that our homestead no longer had any claim upon him, so that when he did come home for his vacations, it was as if he had not: he was not very sociable. (7)

Having accustomed himself to the luxurious living conditions at the mission, Nhamo has a hard time facing the squalid conditions his family is still living in. Tambu notices how her brother is embarrassed by the poverty, and this afflicts her with a feeling of self-conscious unease. The house, the source of her parents’ pride, being “the first baked-brick house in [the] area” with a corrugated-iron roof bright enough to impress the neighbors, is placed in a different light now that Nhamo no longer wants to return to it (31). Tambu resolves to defy the poverty that binds her to the homestead and imagines a future for herself.

Tambu is aware of the fact that she requires a degree if she aims to lead a more prosperous life than her parents. She is inspired by Babamukuru, who was educated by the missionaries and granted a scholarship for a degree in England. Now a wealthy headmaster of the missionary school, Babamukuru seems the perfect example of how an African of poor descent can rise to higher circles of social and economic power, through education and perseverance. Tambu has been enchanted by Babamukuru’s success since her childhood,
when her grandmother first told her his story while they worked in the field. Grandmother’s story illustrated the arrival of “wizards”, white people, who forced the native people off the land and enslaved many to work in the mines (18). With the help of the missionaries, “holy wizards”, Babamukuru was educated and given a scholarship (19). Tambu becomes fascinated with the idea that absolute persistence and hard work guarantee a successful future, and she resolves to follow in Babamukuru’s footsteps on the path towards prosperity. She reflects on how her grandmother’s story awed her continuously:

> It was truly a romantic story to my ears, a fairy-tale of reward and punishment, of cause and effect. It had a moral too, a tantalizing moral that increased your aspirations, but not beyond a manageable level … This indicated that life could be lived with a modicum of dignity in any circumstances if you worked hard enough and obeyed the rules. Yes, it was a romantic story… The suffering was not minimized but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. (19)

Tambu conflates Babamukuru’s story with a fairy tale because she believes his achievements are the example of how reward and punishment are justly distributed in life. The simplified story of Babamukuru gives Tambu hope, but it does not prepare her for injustices that will cross her path in life. Tambu idealizes Babamukuru and imagines him as a god-like figure instead of a Black man that works under whites. Her narrative places Babamukuru in the limelight: “Babamukuru was inspiring. He inspired confidence and obedience. He carried with him an aura from which emanated wisdom and foresight” (44).

In some instances, Dangarembga hints at disparities between Tambu’s perception of Babamukuru and the more problematic sides of his character. Tambu sees Babamukuru as a hard-working, respected family leader. But her fascination with him focuses on a partial portrait of his character and a glorification of his academic achievements. Babamukuru’s
situation, however, is complex, for he appears to be caught in a double bind between his African descent and his job as a headmaster of the mission school, run by whites. Profoundly concerned with his status and influence, he strains to maintain his reputation at the mission as well as on the homestead. Babamukuru attempts to reconcile Christian values with the Shona tradition, but he discovers that his relatives on the homestead are highly unaware of sin and virtue. His inability to change the ways of his impoverished relatives weighs heavily upon him.

Underneath a facade of patriarchal values, Babamukuru hides a core of insecurities. He is appointed as headmaster by whites, and is “the only African living in a white house”, which makes him an exception to both African and European communities (63). His position is a vulnerable one, therefore he struggles to maintain control over all things in his life. His daughter defies his authority and also reminds him of how hard he is trying to keep up the appearances of “a good African” (109). However, when challenged, Babamukuru exerts his control even more forcibly upon his relatives so as to defend his status.

Babamukuru is in a position of great stress, because he is immersed in white governmental systems but still wishes to be respected by his African relatives. He works late hours at the mission and provides his relatives with food when he comes to see them at the homestead. Most certainly, Babamukuru is a complex character. Tambu, as a young girl, unrealistically compares herself to him and measures her accomplishments by his. She believes she is to wipe out her African traditions in order to succeed like him, and this perturbs her ties with her close family. Babamukuru’s sense of self-preservation relies on being respected, having authority, and achieving academic success, and this is altogether different from Tambu’s parents’ principles. Inspired by Babamukuru, Tambu looks critically upon her father, Jeremiah, and her brother:
I wanted my father and Nhamo to stand up straight like Babamukuru, but they always looked as though they were cringing. That picture was frightening. I used to suppose that they saw it too and that it troubled them so much that they had to bully whoever they could to stay in the picture at all. For from my grandmother’s history lessons, I knew that my father and my brother suffered painfully under the wizard’s spells. Babamukuru, I knew, was different. He hadn’t cringed under the weight of his poverty. Boldly, Babamukuru had defied it. Through hard work and determination he had broken the evil wizard’s spell. (50)

In the last three lines of this excerpt, the interior focalization of the younger Tambu discloses her awareness of how her family’s attitude differs from Babamukuru’s and how they are weighed down by the shame of being poor. Her brother’s and her father’s passivity embarrass Tambu because she associates herself with Babamukuru rather than with her father and brother. Both Babamukuru and she herself, she stresses, are “different” (5, 50). She believes that once she is liberated from the ties of her close family, she will undergo a truly uplifting transformation.

Tambu’s opportunity comes the year Nhamo suddenly dies due to a mysterious illness, when she is allowed to take his place and resume her schooling. Tambu departs from her family as though they are of no importance: “There was no room for what I left behind. My father, affably, shallowly agreeable as ever, was insignificant. My mother, my anxious mother, was no more than another piece of surplus scenery to be maintained, of course to be maintained, but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the path of my departure” (58). Leaving her parents in the background of the land she was raised on, she says goodbye to her former self: “When I stepped into Babamukuru’s car I was a peasant … It was evident from the corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil,
the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair. This was the person I was leaving behind” (58). Tambu expresses a naive view on her future, for at this point she believes she can simply put her poverty and her family behind her. Under Babamukuru’s care, Tambu hopes to become a better version of herself. She does not realize, however, that hard work and perseverance alone cannot break “the evil wizard’s spell” (50). Babamukuru, who is richer and more educated than his relatives, is a proud man in their company, but still is cringing under the “dominant, standard, white national ideal” as discussed by Cheng (10). Babamukuru has felt, in Fanon’s terms, “the weight of his melanin”, while growing up in white schools, and although he cares not to reject his poor, “uncivilized”, Black family, he does enjoy occupying a position of power over them, in a way to compensate for a certain loss of agency under the gaze of the white man (128). Tambu, even as she is only slightly aware of social stigmas regarding race, and is not yet fully immersed in a white environment, does make the choice Fanon discusses. Her contact with Babamukuru’s family, a Black family heavily influenced by white society, drives Tambu to push her family away in an attempt to integrate into white society.

3.1.3. Tambu and Mai: Gender Melancholy

Although Tambu’s mother, Mai, is relatively more supportive of Tambu’s plans in comparison to her husband, the relationship with her daughter deteriorates as the latter idolizes Babamukuru. Whenever Mai tries to share some traditional wisdom, Tambu is skeptical: “My mother said being black was a burden because it made you poor, but Babamukuru was not poor. My mother said that being a woman was a burden because you had to bear children and look after them and the husband. But I did not think this was true” (16).

Unlike Tambu, Mai is not impressed by Babamukuru. She accuses him of showing superficial concern regarding the welfare of the family, and of casting off his Shona cultural
identity. When Babamukuru comes to the homestead bearing the news that Nhamo has died of disease, she exclaims: “Now, when it is too late, that is when you are concerned. You pretend. You are a pretender, you” (54). Mai’s remarks undermine Babamukuru’s integrity, upsetting Tambu who unconditionally respects her uncle and sees him as an example of self-determination. Depending on Babamukuru’s rags-to-riches story as a source of inspiration, Tambu puts Babamukuru on a pedestal so that she can continue believing in the possibility of constructing a future for herself. For this reason she dismisses Mai’s remarks and sides with Babamukuru instead.

Tambu’s and Mai’s different points of view on education and Babamukuru result in continual conflicts. Tambu gradually detaches herself from her mother and turns to her aunt, who “was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood” (16). Despite the disagreements, Tambu craves support and encouragement from her mother, but Mai is not supportive of her daughter’s ambition. In fact, Tambu senses that Mai expects her to fail, noting: “[Mai] began to prepare me for the disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it. To prepare me she began to discourage me” (20). For Tambu, Mai is a haunting reminder of her origins: failing to raise herself out of poverty and out from under the pressures of patriarchy equals living a life such as her mother’s on the homestead.

Examining Tambu’s struggles, I propose that Tambu’s narrative illustrates what Cheng calls “gender melancholia”, a concept she drew from Kaja Silverman’s The Acoustic Mirror, an analysis of the Oedipus drama in female subjects (86). According to Silverman, the female subjectivity ensuing from the Oedipal drama is melancholic in nature. The female subject experiences a double loss: the separation from the mother “as an originary object of desire under the threat of castration”, all the while feeling pressured to identify with her by the cultural standard (86). Cheng stresses Silverman’s point that female subjectivity is caught in a double bind between rejection of the mother and internalization of the mother. The mother
casts, Cheng emphasizes, a melancholic shadow on the daughter. Gender melancholia, Cheng suggests, can affect subjects already suffering from racial melancholia, who have lost touch with “an originary cultural identification that is simultaneously degraded by one’s current culture at large and required as the very definition for the self” (86-7).

In *Nervous Conditions*, the representation of gender melancholia is fortified by Tambu’s fear of failing to work herself out of poverty and transcending the “uncivilized” culture she was raised in. Tambu mourns her mother’s absence as she loses her support, though she simultaneously rejects Mai, calling her “superfluous”, and referring to her as “no more than another piece of surplus scenery” (58). Tambu is afraid of discovering the similarities between Mai and herself, or of turning out like Mai, and therefore, while still mourning Mai’s love, she dismisses Mai from her life.

### 3.1.4. Nyasha’s Nervous Condition

Having lived on the homestead for all of her life, Tambu believes education will raise her to a higher sphere in society. Tambu, however, is ignorant of how the contact between a dominant, Western, white culture and Shona culture problematizes self-identification and the sense of cultural belonging, in regards to assimilating subjects. Moreover, she fails to see that the structures of patriarchal domination overarches cultural boundaries, impeding equal opportunities for women.

The first of many confrontational situations that show Tambu a glimpse of the world beyond the homestead occurs when Babamukuru’s family comes to visit her home after a long stay overseas. Her cousin Nyasha appears wearing a dress that barely covers her thighs, seems to have forgotten the Shona language, and casts weird looks at Tambu as she engages in her usual household chores. During her stay in England, Nyasha seems to have changed beyond recognition. The drastic changes in behavior, clothing, and language Tambu observes in Nyasha suddenly confront her with the consequences of white education on Africans, or
even how exposure to European culture can problematize Africans’ relation to their native culture. In Nyasha’s presence Tambu feels like an outsider to a larger, complicated world view. The realization that she is ignorant regarding what lies beyond her culture and what happened to Nyasha confuses and frightens her, so she proceeds to ignore the “complex, dangerous thoughts” that follow the shock: “Sensing how unwise it was to think too deeply about these things in case I manoeuvred myself into a blind alley at the end of which I would have to confront uncomfortable issues, I busied myself with housework” (39).

At the mission, however, Tambu is completely drawn into Nyasha’s world. She is a witness to the fights between Nyasha and her father, and the tension is felt throughout the household as Nyasha excuses herself more often from the dinner table. Nyasha’s behavior begins to indicate signs of an eating disorder, which is confirmed by Tambu when she hears Nyasha vomit in the bathroom. Nyasha herself confesses to Tambu that she does it on purpose, although she is not sure why. Her bulimia is emblematic of angst in a situation in which she appears to have no control over her life and the way she is treated. Nyasha’s condition has been discussed by critics such as Sheena Patchay, Janice E. Hill, Supriya Nair and Carolyn Martin Shaw, who recognize Nyasha’s anorexia and bulimia as a sign of female resistance to her father’s patriarchal authority and the culturally complex situation Nyasha finds herself in.

Sheena Patchay discusses Nyasha’s condition in her article “Transgressing Boundaries: Marginality, Complicity and Subversion in Nervous Conditions,” referring to her symptoms as a manifestation of hysteria in “black, female, colonized subjects” (146). Patchay argues that the representation of female hysteria in Nervous Conditions should no longer be considered a “space of silence that is anterior to the symbolic order of language” but should be interpreted as “a space of refusal and revolt” instead (147). In her analysis, Patchay demonstrates that hysteria is used to revolt against issues of gender and cultural
disconnection. Patchay references Frantz Fanon and illustrates how *Nervous Conditions* is based on the notion that (male) natives, brought into contact with colonizers, suffer from nervous conditions, but she argues that Dangarembga re-writes this idea from a feminist point of view. She analyses Nyasha’s disobedience and eating disorder as a way of exerting control over her body “in an environment where all control is wrestled from her” (150). Patchay calls for a reassessment of both anorexia and bulimia because these conditions are reactions to the patriarchal system that labels, controls, and inscribes women’s bodies and determines women’s roles in society. By starving herself, Nyasha forces her father to be confronted with her suffering and visually defies the patriarchal order he struggles to uphold.

In her article “Purging a Plate Full of Colonial History: The ‘Nervous Conditions’ of Silent Girls,” Janice E. Hill also writes on the topic of Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*, but she examines the socio-political factors that lie behind the oppression of the females in Tambu’s family more closely. Referencing Michael Gelfand, Hill explains that in the Shona tradition, women are expected to be silent and obedient and that Southern Rhodesia’s colonial government reinforced this tradition by segregation. Under this system, Africans were to respect and obey whites, who enjoyed a higher status. According to Hill’s analysis, Babamukuru is thus influenced by the white system of segregation and oppression of Africans, and therefore expects Nyasha to behave under his rule as he behaves under white governmental rule. Babamukuru demands that Nyasha conduct herself properly as prescribed by Shona tradition and respect his orders, for he desires to prove that his children are obedient Africans like himself and that his patriarchal authority is uncontested. I propose that this desire is stimulated by a sense of loss: the sense of not being able to assimilate in the dominant white culture. Babamukuru compensates for the sense of racial and colonial melancholy, by overpowering Nyasha and Maiguru.
Hill writes that “In Nervous Conditions the use of spoken language, particularly English, signals power, and the lack of language signals lack of power” (79). Indeed, Babamukuru uses his voice to give commands, condemn behavior, and share his opinion. His words are powerful because he is educated. For this reason his relatives, who have not studied for a degree, always accept his opinion. Nyasha is an exception because she is a well-performing student with a critical mind, who continually questions her father’s reasoning. Nyasha challenges Babamukuru’s patriarchal beliefs simply because she wants to be heard, but Babamukuru represses her voice regardless of her cries. The situation spirals out of control as Nyasha refuses to carry herself as the silent, “good” girl her father expects her to be and ceases to obey him. Her anxiety regarding the cultural conflicts she experiences and her father’s authority is met with repression and punishment, so she finally “expresses a voiceless anger through her body and her mouth”, through her eating disorder (78).

Supriya Nair, in “Melancholic Women: The Intellectual Hysteric(s) in Nervous Conditions,” does not interpret Nyasha’s condition as a form of defiance, but rather the result of pressure due to colonial and patriarchal systems. Nair discusses how nervous conditions in colonized females have been ignored either because “pathological behaviors are seen as a natural condition of their unstable psyches” or because they are denied “the agency and critical consciousness” that would allow them to react to their environment (131). According to Nair, melancholia and nervous conditions are an inevitable manifestation of anxiety caused by colonial education. In this case, native women get caught between “a double (native and colonial) patriarchal structure”, and the tension they experience is manifested from within the body (134). In the light of this explanation, Nair suggests that Nyasha simultaneously manifests the “ills of colonialism” and the torment of her gendered identity (137). However, Nair categorizes Nyasha’s condition as a melancholic condition instead of an eating disorder: “[Nyasha’s] sharp insights into [her parents’] collective devaluation and her discursive
eloquence come at a high cost, typical of the melancholic condition” (137). For Nair, Nyasha’s case is a stereotypical representation of “the destruction of the colonial/exiled student” (138). Yet she says Tambu’s story in Nervous Conditions demonstrates that melancholia in postcolonial history is “not inevitable, tragically self-defeating” (138).

Shaw approaches Nervous Conditions from a more feminist point of view, proposing that Nyasha’s anxiety arises out of the realization that her father rejects her because she is “too identified with colonial values (exposing his dissatisfaction with himself) and [because] she is becoming a woman (and here she uneasily senses her movement away from her father)” (11). Shaw suggests that Dangarembga challenges the tradition of female self-containment in Shona society by depicting female characters such as Nyasha who strive for “self-improvement … in a society that suspects education for girls of destabilizing ‘tradition’” (11).

Although Patchay, Hill, Nair, and Shaw all recognize the importance of Nyasha’s condition and refer to it as an indication of a larger, colonial and patriarchal malaise, they have different views on how it is expressed, and why. Patchay mentions hysteria, Hill refers to a “voiceless anger”, Nair recognizes melancholy, and Shaw writes about a sense of realization that entails anxiety (78). Their analyses contribute meaningful insights to Nervous Conditions as a commentary on Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1961), a work that suggests a relation between the colonial situation and mental illness. Fanon classifies several case studies that illustrate the psychological effects of the Algerian war for independence on Algerian men in particular, but Dangarembga portrays mental distress as an effect of both the colonial and the patriarchal system on female characters. Although there is much to be said about Nyasha’s condition in the context of Fanon, I will focus on her role in Dangarembga’s Bildungsroman narrative, and how her character influences Tambu’s narrative in Nervous Conditions, which I will discuss in the next chapter.
3.1.5. Tambu and Nyasha’s Sisterhood

Patchay, Hill, Nair, and Shaw emphasize the feminist perspective in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and focus on Nyasha’s character as a symbolic martyr for feminist causes, but they do not describe Nyasha’s significance in regard to Tambu, who is after all the main character of the story. Although critics have discussed the differences between Nyasha and Tambu, comparisons between the girls lead to rather simplified representations of their characters.

Nair, for example, proposes the idea that Tambu “serves as a foil, as an optimism of the will to Nyasha’s pessimism of the intellect”, because Tambu appears to think more critically and displays a higher sense of self-awareness (137). This idea implies that Tambu’s and Nyasha’s characters serve as opposites, and that Nyasha’s character represents a destructive state of mind. Gilian Gorle also expresses this view in “Fighting the Good Fight: What Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* Says about Language and Power,” stating:

The girls’ friendship slowly bridges but never overcomes their differences, so that Tambu learns to understand but only partially to share Nyasha’s philosophical perspective. Although her contact with Nyasha (as both roommate and confidante) raises her consciousness about the politics of language, culture, gender, and colonialism in its various forms, Tambu retains her essential sense of Shona decorum. Thus the two girls’ responses to similar opportunities remain rooted in their very separate identities and codes of behavior. (184-5)

In comparison to Nair’s analysis, Gorle’s description of the relationship between Tambu and Nyasha is more nuanced. However, Gorle assumes that although the girls understand each other, neither is changed by the other. In fact, their “separate identities” remain intact, and their different natures eventually determine their development in life (185). Gorle writes of Tambu that “[h]er more practical nature, with her awareness of what can and cannot be
changed, contributes to her emotional stability” (185). She also remarks that “[h]umour (or the lack of it) is a fundamental difference between Tambu and Nyasha” and that Tambu’s sense of humour eventually saves her from sinking into a despair such as Nyasha’s (185).

I argue, however, that Tambu and Nyasha are not separated by their differences, but are intrinsically connected by them. Despite Tambu’s initial rejection of Nyasha immediately after her return from England, Tambu becomes dependent on her. Their friendship turns into an important factor in both of their lives. Gorle’s analysis of Nyasha and Tambu seems to indicate that Tambu’s contact with Nyasha could potentially be destructive, and that Tambu’s contrasting personality saves her from the same sort of fate as Nyasha’s. I argue that although Tambu and Nyasha’s friendship evolves subtly, it is in fact a determining factor in Tambu’s life story.

Although the Tambu is at first hesitant to become friends with Nyasha, she discovered she is, in fact, curious about her. She discloses: “There was something about [Nyasha] that was too intangible for me to be comfortable with, so intangible that I could not decide whether it was intangibly good or intangibly bad” (76). Tambu soon becomes intrigued by Nyasha’s intangibility, and despite her “concrete and categorical mind”, Tambu fails to repress a certain fascination for Nyasha’s mysteriousness (76). In fact, Nyasha possesses a sort of powerful feminine quality that Tambu secretly envies: “Nyasha herself was glamorous in an irreverent way that made me feel, if not exactly inadequate at least uneducated in some vital aspect of teenage womanliness” (76). Furthermore, Nyasha displays a great deal of knowledge and a high sense of awareness, which makes Tambu wonder “what [her] cousin had seen that [she] had not” (98). Tambu compares the conversations she has with Nyasha to intimate conversations lovers share, illustrating their deep commitment towards each other. “You could say that my relationship with Nyasha was my first love-affair”, Tambu tells the
reader, “the first time that I grew to be fond of someone of whom I did not wholeheartedly approve” (79).

Nair and Gorle emphasize the differences between Tambu and Nyasha; however, as Tambu and Nyasha’s friendship grows stronger, the reader is compelled to notice their similarities. Tambu recognizes tendencies of herself in Nyasha, such as the desire for autonomy. However, Tambu herself has traded the defiant Tambu she was at the homestead for a “new,” passive Tambu, because she fears she will lose her opportunity to be educated if she acts up. She confesses: “Whereas in the years since I went back to the school I had grown content to let events pass me by as long as they did not interfere too deeply with my plans, the way Nyasha responded to challenges reminded me of the intensity and determination with which I had lived my early years” (118).

Seeing Nyasha fight with her parents, especially her father, Tambu realizes that Nyasha’s energy is more intense than her own. Tambu apprehends that there are far more injustices in the world than she had thought of before, because Nyasha’s ideas seem to ensue out of a critical perspective on her environment and herself. Tambu looks on while Nyasha defies the Shona tradition and challenges the patriarchal authority of her father. Nyasha’s rebelliousness, however, is not just “bad behaviour” but is a demand to be treated justly. In fact, Nyasha wishes most of all to be respected, but the more her family rejects her demand for respect, the more she rebels and suffers.

Nyasha, like Tambu, conveys a sense of gender melancholy which undermines a reconciliation with her family or culture. She resides in a state of constant movement because she fears she will fade out of sight or be suppressed by men, like her mom, if she stops acting out. She advises Tambu to do the same: “You have to keep moving … Getting involved in this and that, finding out one thing and another. Moving, all the time. Otherwise you get trapped. Look at poor Mum. Can you imagine anything worse? If it weren’t for Chido she’d
go stark raving crazy!” (98). Tambu is shocked by these harsh words, but seems to look past the fact that she, too, neglects her own mother.

I argue, in opposition to Gorle’s analysis, that Nyasha appears more down to earth than Tambu, because she displays a greater self-awareness. Nyasha is able to think in terms of constructive solutions, while Tambu retreats into flights of fancy. Tambu recalls: “It was a centripetal time, with me at the centre, everything gravitating towards me. It was a time of sublimation with me at as the sublimate. When I tried to describe to Nyasha a little of what was happening in my world, she laughed and said I was reading too many fairy-tales. She preferred reality” (94). Nyasha is, indeed, aware of her reality, especially when she remarks: “[My parents are] stuck with hybrids for children. And they don’t like it. They don’t like it at all. It offends them. They think we do it on purpose, so it offends them. And I don’t know what to do about it, Tambu, really I don’t” (79). Nyasha’s term “hybrid” refers to her condition of being born in Rhodesia but having spent her childhood in England. As a result, Nyasha is neither fully Rhodesian nor English, and so she does not entirely fit in either cultural tradition. Her parents, though changed, do still cling to their African heritage, and they refuse to acknowledge what sort of situation they have brought their daughter in. Nyasha is aware of her condition and that of her parents, but this does not necessarily reduce her suffering because she is not understood.

Tambu is not a hybrid but is willing to merge with the white academic system. She believes that she will succeed only if she is able to leave behind her African upbringing, which she sees as an obstacle to the education she desires. When thinking about her route to prosperity, Tambu thinks in terms of fairy-tale abstractions because this is the easiest way she can picture her plan of achieving academic and professional success. The story of Babamukuru is her guideline, and she does not want to stray from this exemplary path of life. Tambu senses and feels the same things that Nyasha experiences, but she tries to push away
these feelings so that she is not distracted from her goal of excellence. When doubts and worries arise, she chooses to avoid thinking too much about the matter altogether. Tambu, as mature narrator, looks back on this, and tries to account for her reasoning at that time:

If I had been more independent in my thinking then, I would have thought the matter through to a conclusion. But in those days it was easy for me to leave tangled thoughts knotted, their loose ends hanging. I didn’t want to explore the treacherous mazes that such thoughts led into. I didn’t want to reach the end of those mazes, because there, I knew, I would find myself and I was afraid I would not recognise myself after having taken so many confusing directions. I was beginning to suspect that I was not the person I was expected to be, and I took it as evidence that somewhere I had taken a wrong turning. So to put myself back on the right path I took refuge in the image of the grateful poor female relative. That made everything a lot easier. It mapped clearly the ways I could or could not go, and by keeping within those boundaries I was able to avoid the mazes of self-confrontation. (118)

Nyasha, Tambu suggests, brave-heartedly confronts her inner doubts and tackles the questions that come to her mind. She enters the “mazes of self-confrontation” while Tambu stays out of them but observes what happens (118). Tambu leaves “tangled thoughts knotted” and hides behind “the image of the grateful poor female relative”, in order to avoid personal confrontations and conflicts (118). Although this enables her to remain more sane than Nyasha at the time, it prevents her from coming to personal insights. Her self-denial counters a truthful perception of herself and her position, to the extent that she unconsciously begins to dissociate mind from body, which I will further explain in chapter 3.2.3. Nyasha and Tambu’s friendship is, however, complex, because they are bound by fright and uncertainty regarding the same concerns such as their race, their gender, and their position as black subjects of
white education and colonialism. Nyasha externalizes internal struggles Tambu also feels but cannot express yet.

Because Nyasha finally succumbs to a nervous breakdown and is sent to a psychiatrist, critics have portrayed her as a sort of anti-Bildungsroman figure. In Feng’s words, anti-Bildungsroman characters or anti-heroines are “reprehensible examples of what the nearly omnipotent machinery against ethnic femininity will eventually accomplish” (35-6). In the light of Nair’s and Gorle’s analyses, Nyasha’s mental breakdown would be interpreted as a signal of the final defeat in her battle against patriarchy and colonialism. Nyasha’s story would be regarded as an anti-Bildungsroman, because she does not find a way to overthrow the opposition to her self-determination. Nevertheless, Feng argues in her analysis that the incorporation of anti-Bildungsroman is a “devise of innovation [that] regenerates the [Bildungsroman] genre” (41). She states that despite the deviation from the genre, the presence of the anti-Bildung heroine still is, in fact, a continuation of the Bildungsroman tradition. This alternative model would therefore include Nyasha as part of the coming-of-age plot, instead of discard her as an example of failure. I propose that Nyasha’s character is not an anti-Bildungsgroman figure in the traditional sense, but an example of an alternative worldview in regards to Tambu’s perspective. Nyasha adds an important dimension of thought and feeling to Tambu’s character, which leaves Tambu forever changed through their friendship. The focus lies not on Nyasha’s “failure” to withstand the pressures of patriarchy and colonialism, but the change she inspires in Tambu, and the strength of their love. In this sense, since her story is intertwined with that of Tambu, Nyasha is very essential to Nervous Conditions.

Dangarembga’s portrayal of Nyasha and Tambu’s friendship composes a strong feminist message, for it underlines the theme of a female community which, as Rita Felski writes in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change, is rooted in a
“long-standing tradition of female friendships” and is also widely used by contemporary social movements who seek to construct a feminist collective identity (139). According to Felski, the bonds between female protagonists in feminist literature reinforce their power to defy male domination in the public sphere. Felski writes:

The appeal to an ideal of “sisterhood” envisages the possibility that social relations between women may imitate kinship relations, forging personal bonds which may serve to challenge the instrumental rationality of social relations in a male-defined public sphere. Such models of female community do not simply function as a utopian vision projected into an unforeseeable future, but are perceived as a potential reality within the present social order, prefigured in the feminist narrative in the dominant role of women in the protagonist’s development. (140)

A community of women in feminist literature, Felski declares, is thus not an aggregation of passive women but rather a dynamic union of strong-willed women who seek the opportunity to subvert dominant male ideologies. The sisterhood contains in itself a configuration of possible change in the current society. In Nervous Conditions, Dangarembga foregrounds Nyasha and Tambu’s friendship, defying the traditional divide between a conventional Bildungsroman figure and an anti-Bildungsroman figure, in order to break the boundaries between the characters’ respective lives. Hereby the individual and the collective comes together, the friendship, as sisterhood, thus standing for a larger, feminist community.
3.2. The Book of Not

3.2.1. Tambu’s Trauma Narrative

The *The Book of Not* begins in medias res, with an alarming, frightful opening line: “Up, up, up, the leg spun” (3). Tambu, while attending a meeting held by the Elders, the heads of her Shona tribe, witnesses how her sister, Netsai, steps on a landmine. The explosion claims Netsai’s leg, and Tambu, traumatized by the sight, is paralyzed with guilt and grief. She narrates:

> Something was required of me! I was her sister, her elder sister. I was, by that position, required to perform the act that would protect. How miserable I was, for nothing lay in my power, so that both the powerlessness and the misery frustrated. And in my quiet misery my chest quaked, bones vibrated in and out as thought the strings of my heart strained and tore, and I felt as though I jumped on to the spinning limb and rode it as it rotated, moving up to somewhere out of it. (3)

Tambu is horrified by what she sees and, all the while helpless to save Netsai, feels as if she herself is injured and spiraling upwards. Earlier that evening, she saw Babamukuru being whipped and beaten by the comrades, guerrillas of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). Babamukuru, because he had allowed Tambu to attend, against Mai’s wishes, the Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart, is put on trial for not being “at one with the occupying Rhodesian forces” (6). Tambu discloses, in a voice filled with ironic bitterness and grief, the reasons behind Babamukuru’s public humiliation and torture.

> I was proof of my uncle’s dubious spirit. For why would a man select a school for his child where the education was superior to the education given to the children of other people? A school that would not, unlike other schools in areas where guerillas battled for independence, be closed? A school peopled not by
those who look like us, but by Europeans? I was to watch the decimation of my uncle in order to instill loyalty in me. (6)

Tambu’s ironic tone demonstrates a sober insight into the codes of the guerilla warriors. At sixteen, Tambu’s view on the homestead is even bleaker, influenced by Nyasha’s critical thinking. The horrors of the trial announce, in fact, the presence of political turmoil: The Patriotic Front (PF), the military and political alliance between ZAPU and ZANU, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union is at war against the white minority government in Rhodesia. Tambu is repulsed by the violence, but Mai, Tambu narrates, while watching the torture, “breath[ed] in catches of satisfaction like a woman who has not been gratified for too long, caressed upon untouched places” (14). Much to Tambu’s disgust, Mai enjoys being a spectator of Babamukuru’s punishment.

In an attempt to block the gruesome images from her mind, Tambu averts her eyes from the scene. She relates: “I tried not to look, so I would not make the mistake of saying I had seen anything when I returned to school. I tried not to hear so I would never repeat the words of war anywhere. Mai’s voice was shrill and her eyes gleamed” (12-3). Tambu makes reference to the proverb “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil,” as the people around her feign ignorance, “as no one was doing anything”, and she herself wishes to drive out all memory of what she has seen (17). Tambu, “folding [her] arms and squeezing in to make [her]self as small as possible,” and “forc[ing] [her]self into an emptiness” mimics shrinking and extinguishing her body in an attempt to annihilate the trauma itself (19).

Following her return to Sacred Heart, Tambu still feels the incident has instilled an emptiness in her, an unbridgeable void between herself and the rest of her white classmates. Haunted by what happened on the homestead, she is unable to relate to her classmates, who still talk, joke, and socialize. She relates: “School too seemed empty because now, after these holidays, it was impossible to relate to anything. Empty rooms, empty desks, empty books,
empty air between us” (20). From the class windows -“[w]indows open as eyes”- she views the mountains near the location of her sister’s accident, which compels her to think of Netsai constantly (21). She sees the image of her crippled sister “hopping, going hop-hop-hopla because she only had one leg”, continuously in her mind (28).

Tambu’s despair is not only caused by her crippled sister, but by the sense that she is related to the people that provoke such terror and bloodshed. Moreover, she is ashamed of even having witnessed what she calls “the primitive scene”, which she compares to images of cavemen she saw in the school’s library, for she fears to be associated with a culture that encourages brutal violence (28). Tambu exclaims: “Being known- Tambudzai of the village who went to a meeting! The thought of it made me shudder” (36). Tambu’s grief, however, is enormous and seems to grow larger the longer she bottles it up inside of her. She wonders: “What would Sister do if I told her? What would the other girls do if they hear? They all had their little boxes tight in their chests for their memories of war. There was too much grief in here for a room of girls” (32).

Tambu describes her psychological damage in terms of bodily injuries: “It was as if a vital part had been exploded away and in the absence that was left I was cracked and defective, as though indispensable parts leaked, and I would not gather energy” (28). The moment Tambu’s classmate, Ntombi, shares a similar story of trauma, recounting how the Elders killed her baby cousin, the two girls finally find a moment to cry about their losses. Tambu comes back to this moment, asserting: “We needed to grasp each other’s hand and let the tears fall without knowing whose fingers were wetted by whose grief. I believe we were too young and not sufficiently pained for this; there is a curve, you come to the summit and then climb down it. Ntombi and I were still climbing” (172). Tambu and Ntombi, the mature Tambu points out, though pained, have not yet found a way to effectively let go, or replace, the loss. The mature narrator notes that they “needed to grasp each other’s hand and let the
tears fall without knowing whose fingers were wetted by whose grief”, indicating that the girls would find relief through the projection of their individual losses on a collectively shared, and collectively grieved, loss (172). In other words, Tambu and Ntombi are still too lost within their own trauma, to reach out to one another and form a bond which would help ease their pain. Consequently, Tambu’s body still reacts to her personal, suppressed sorrow. She asserts that she “frequently exhibited strange behavior” and suffers from “unfamiliar seizures” (174). When trying to study, for example, she is unable to concentrate and “succumb[s] to fits of weeping” (174).

Tambu’s fragmentary, disturbed discourse “foregrounds”, in Norridge’s words, “the presence of pain” (23). Tambu’s narrative is unchronological, repetitive, and centered on the expression of her inner, shattered core. Little is conveyed about her surroundings, studies, or classmates. Disturbing imagery of her crippled sister repetitively suspends the chronology of Tambu’s narrative, and forms a contrast to the safe, calm setting of Sacred Heart where Tambu is residing. She feels as an intruder amongst her unknowing classmates who have not been stained by bloody images of war. Her white classmate Tracey refers to the war as “a security problem”, which underlines the fact that the white residents of Sacred Heart have not yet acknowledged how the political conflict has taken its toll (45).

As a mature narrator, however, Tambu returns to these dark episodes of her life, molding her trauma into a narrative structure which reflects her burdens. The passages that represent her traumas are conveyed through the younger Tambu’s perspective, in such a way that the narrator can relive these moments, come to terms with her trauma and regenerate a new perspective on this period of her lifetime. While reenacting these incidents, she is able to place them in a larger context, realizing that she was only one of many women who suffered during the Zimbabwean National Liberation War between 1965 and 1980. At the moment of Zimbabwe’s independence, Tambu notes how, during the celebrations, no moment is spared
to acknowledge the many losses that led up to “Independence” (196). She refers to the women that must have shared the same sense of conflicted feeling: “[W]e never remembered and grieved together as women sorrow in groups many years after a birth, ‘Is there a pain like that! And so much blood! It is like the blood of slaughter, my sister, isn’t it, that blood of childbirth!’” (196). Tambu uses the imagery of pain and blood that comes with a birth as a metaphor for the war and bloodshed that led to the birth of a new nation, Zimbabwe. While the nation arises out of violence and terror, it is the women who remember the losses, Tambu suggests. She narrates her story, so that these episodes of trauma and suffering may be publicly grieved and remembered.

3.2.2. Racial Melancholy and Remembrance

In Nervous Conditions, Tambu yearned to attend the best possible school in the country. Nonetheless, when she is admitted to Sacred Heart, she discovers the boarding school has a racial quota, and she is part of this “five percent” (37). In The Book of Not, Tambu realizes she is treated differently on the basis of her color: the school has a system of segregation, and Tambu is to share a cramped room, referred to as the “African dormitory,” with six other girls (51). Miss Plato, their stern, ruthless matron, wakes them early each morning, ambushes them with sudden room inspections, and takes great pleasure in humiliating them. Their headmistress, Sister Emmanuel, also subjects her Black students to humiliation and discrimination.

On one occasion, for example, Sister Emmanuel calls out an assembly to announce that the college’s sewerage system is clogged up because the girls of the African dormitory dispose their used feminine hygiene pads into the toilet. In order to make sure that the message sinks in, she adds: “I am aware the girls in the African dormitory may not be cognizant of the reasons why such articles should not be deposited in toilet bowls, but this is one of the reasons you are brought here” (63). The announcement causes Tambu and her
roommates a great deal of embarrassment. Tambu recalls the humiliation, stating: “[We] all drooped and contracted and cringed. I saw myself as though from far above, in a place where there were no toilet drains to clog, as one of those, that Tambudzai. There wasn’t any question … my having the energy to own myself” (63). The girls express bodily reactions to the shame they feel, and Tambu even imagines leaving her body. The mental pain of humiliation takes its toll and causes Tambu to avert herself from the causes of the sense of shame, which she believes to be her roommates’ behavior instead Sister Emmanuel’s racist disposition towards Black students. She wishes to distance herself from the other Black girls, whose behavior, she believes, confirms racist stereotypes. Admitting that Sister Emmanuel is wrong, would undermine her trust in Sacred Heart, and consequently wipe out the hope that she could follow in Babamukuru’s footsteps. The following excerpt is an example of how Tambu uses interior focalization to express her point of view at that particular moment:

Idiotic women! The fools who couldn’t use a decent sewerage system! If they’d only shown they were conversant with those contrivances, I was sure there wouldn’t have been any bans- not on anyone from any bathrooms! Had these people I was forced to identify with been more able, those bathrooms would have been open to all. No one would have been standing here in this humiliation. (71)

Ironically, by directing her anger and frustrations towards her roommates, Tambu instills a sense of shame and loathing towards her own race, a phenomenon defined by Cheng as racial melancholy. Conditioned by constant humiliation and segregation, Tambu engages, in Cheng’s words, in a very complex “conversion of the grief of being black into the enjoyment of whiteness” (18). Tambu loses her sense of coherent self, for in the eyes of her white classmates and teachers, she is a racial Other, and although she tries to distinguish herself from her roommates, she is unable to assimilate into the white, colonial community. In the
African dormitory, Tambu frequently brawls with her roommates, which is the reason why she is an outsider to their group as well. David Aberbach writes in “Enlightenment and Cultural Confusion: Mendele’s The Mare and Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions” that Tambu is caught in a “social and cultural limbo” for she is unable to be assimilated by the white society nor is able to fully resign herself to her native culture (226).

Another episode that illustrates the tension between Black and white students at Sacred Heart, is when Bougainvillea, sitting directly across from Tambu and Ntombi, refers to them not by name but in the third person, commenting on their physical traits. Bougainvillea exclaims: “They’ve both such fine hands. Look at those amazing fingers … It’s not just those two! Have you noticed? It’s all of them!” (37). The situation is uncomfortable, but Ntombi, tries to annihilate the racist comments by treating them as compliments, cheerily responding: “Thanks, Bo!” and then asking her if she could have some of her chocolate powder (38). Tambu, uncomfortable by the situation, disapproves of Ntombi’s conduct. Pressured by Bougainvillea’s white gaze, she identifies with the perspective of the white girls, rather than coming up for Ntombi. The interior mode of focalization in the narrative discloses how Tambu has internalized this white gaze: “Here the question for Bougainvillea, and all the other white girls there was, after Ntombizethu had touched it, would the chocolate still be edible?” (40). As Bougainvillea scoops the chocolate powder into Ntombi’s cup, Tambu praises Bougainvillea for “deal[ing] with her dilemma in a masterly fashion”, despite the fact that Bougainvillea proceeds to make derogatory comment about Africans shortly thereafter. “Isn’t it funny”, Bougainvillea remarks, “the way they just sit there … My mum does that all the time with the guys on the farm! They stand around while you dish out their rations!” (42). Mortified, Tambu condemns Ntombi’s behavior for she fears it reflects on all of the Black students. She exclaims: “[W]hy on earth did she have to go and embarrass everyone else by begging!” (43).
The chocolate powder is an ironic reference to *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which the narrator deplores the racial stereotype of the grinning, Black man, seen on an advertisement for chocolate powder. In Dangarembga’s narrative, the chocolate powder is the focus of the conflict, in a symbolical and literal sense. Chocolate powder is, in fact, made from cocoa beans which were discovered in the colonies, but the product, processed in Europe, is too expensive for the native people of Africa. Ntombi, for example, cannot afford chocolate powder but the while girls do have their own tin. They do not seem to realize, however, that their luxury products are made on the backs of the colonized. Dangarembga hints at the hypocrisy of this situation, on a symbolical level. Moreover, Dangarembga reworks Fanon’s reference to the grinning, Black man on the box of “Banania”. The stereotypical depiction of the grinning, Black man seems to suggest that he is happy to serve white society. Dangarembga’s aim, however, is to interrogate the “idea of the happy African smiling” and investigate what is hidden behind the smile (Thien 4). Her narrative suggests that the answer lies in the nexus of racial melancholy, which she illustrates by the complex dynamics of interaction between Tambu and her white classmates. At a certain moment, when Tambu meets Tracey’s gaze, Tambu discloses: “[Tracey’s] examination was such that she observed something about me that repulsed. As I realised this, I felt a great need to encourage her to like me, and to help her understand I had acted as I did to wish her well, so I smiled” (75). In this excerpt, Tambu’s smile is a token of racial melancholy. Tracey’s white gaze casts her in the position of the Other, but Tambu is desperate to be recognized for her good intentions. She smiles in an attempt to get her classmate to acknowledge her as a human being. It is a desperate request to relinquish the power of the white gaze, and to be regarded as equal.

At Sacred Heart, however, various forms of institutionalized racism guarantee that Tambu and her roommates forever feel unequally treated. Sister Emmanuel, for example, likes to discuss the school quotas, intimidating them by saying: “[W]hatever memoranda they
send us, we aren’t going to chop anyone in half, nor in any other portion. That is what I called you here to inform you” (73). Tambu feels anger welling up inside of her. She narrates: “But how angry I was with Sister, talking to us like that, making jokes about our flesh and how some people thought it was divisible. Or else it was all lumped as one: your flesh fractioned or piled together! To make matters worse, she did not ask for our view on the subject” (74). Nevertheless, she knows she cannot speak up, for her voice will not be heard in the white, colonial system of education. She asks: “But what could be said to bring one’s voice into the room, which at the same time did not annoy anyone? It was so impossible, I crumbled” (74).

The Book of Not particularly deals with Tambu’s question of being heard, and being remembered. While the young Tambu loses track of her own sense of direction and values, the mature Tambu is able to determine how her perspective at the time was influenced by the colonial, white context, and consequently question the institutions that damaged her. For example, when Tambu engages herself as a volunteer to knit for the Rhodesian Security Forces while at Sacred Heart, Ntombi accuses her of putting all of them in danger. If the Elders would find out, Ntombi says, they would all be severely punished, or put to death. Tambu comes to the shocking realization that she has indeed forgotten about Babamukuru’s trial, and is jeopardizing the safety of her roommates and herself. Tambu, as narrator, notes: “For of course these things cannot remain, lest they claim, by the act of being remembered, to have had existence” (138). Through this line, Dangarembga implies that the act of remembering is not subjective, but socio-political. The trauma exists, insofar as it is acknowledged in collective memory. Tambu’s “forgetting” illustrates how much she has alienated from her origins due to an internalization of white, colonial norms, but also symbolizes an international amnesia in regards to the nervous conditions that affected the natives of a colonial Rhodesia, and what happened in the years leading up to the independence of Rhodesia. The young Tambu, in the midst of a war, is not able to discuss
these matters considering she is caught in a double bind between the two sides of the conflict. The older Tambu, while narrating her full story, can, in retrospect, call for the remembrance of these episodes in history, and defy the white, colonialist ideology in educational systems. In the light of Durrant’s analysis, Tambu’s mourning stands for a mode of “collective mourning” (11). Dangarembga’s postcolonial narrative is the place where events of Tambu’s Rhodesia still exist and, consequently, are remembered.

3.2.3. The Concept of Sisterhood

_The Book of Not_ contrasts from _Nervous Conditions_ in the sense that Nyasha and Tambu’s friendship is no longer at the center of the novel. The narrative is completely focused on Tambu’s struggles at Sacred Heart, and on the disintegration of Tambu’s sense of self. However, through Tambu’s experiences, her narrative reveals how white, colonial, patriarchal institutions put pressure on Black communities and cause them to implode from the inside out. Dangarembga exposes the consequences of these institutions, illustrating how the colonialist, white, patriarchal ideology works upon the bonds between Black women and problematizes their sense of coherent, cultural identification. I propose that Tambu’s narration is the place where she can rekindle the bonds with these women, forming a sisterhood of healing within the feminist _Bildungsroman_.

3.2.3.1. Tambu and the African Dormitory

As discussed in the previous chapter, Tambu’s racial melancholy causes her to reject her origins and shun the girls that share her background. Tambu’s problem, Kennedy asserts, is that she does not know “how to recover from the damage of a colonial education and be liberated from the systemic racism she has internalized” (92). I propose that the objectification of the self, caused by racial melancholy, inhibits the very means of social interaction that Tambu requires in order to decolonize her mind. In order to heal from racial melancholy and achieve a coherent self, Tambu must reconcile with her origins and
acknowledge the bond she shares with the girls of the African dormitory who have gone through similar experiences as herself.

Morris Rosenberg writes in “Self-Objectification: Relevance for the Species and Society” that self-objectification “refers to all those processes that involve the self as an object to itself … the individual can observe the self, remember the self, classify the self, evaluate the self, reason logically about the self, and use other processes involving the self as the object of its own cognition” (549). Self-objectification can only be enabled by the self during social interaction, when pressured to adopt the role of the other. In this way the subject can control his or her behavior in order to conform to behavioral rules and the social environment. In *The Book of Not*, Tambu becomes a “detached observer” of her own behavior when in company of white girls (554). Tambu intentionally monitors her behavior, because she has become compelled, through the experience of discrimination, to evaluate her actions in the light of white behavioral standards. On one occasion, for example, Tambu realizes, while experiencing a nervous crisis in the classroom, that Sister Catherine’s hand has touched hers. Tambu narrates: “I was appalled at having let my skin and this white person’s touch … This could not happen because it was taboo: this person and that one could not touch” (32). Tambu hereby has the impression that she “had soiled [her] teacher in some way” (32). This incident demonstrates how Tambu has internalized standards of racial segregation, causing her to internalize the notion that she is inherently filthy.

Tambu adopts, in fact, a system of “socially accepted norms, values, and attitudes” of the white community of her school which inherently rejects behavior that is, supposedly, “stereotypical Black behavior” (554). Tambu closely follows these white social rules, in order to avoid being conflated with the other Black girls with whom she shares a dorm. Their behavior is considered rowdy, violent, and “uncivilized,” and Tambu wishes to distinguish herself from this “stereotypical” behavior. Moreover, she is afflicted with shame in regards to
the culture on the homestead, and the awful acts of violence that the Elders are engaged in, and wishes to distance herself from them. She notes: “Pictures in the paper of the awful things the elder siblings did had that effect. They made you nod. They made you agree. They shamed you” (130). “One of the reasons for following social rules”, Rosenberg writes, “is to protect self-esteem from the effects of condemnation of the self by the self” (554). Tambu thus wishes to uphold a positive, desirable perception of herself that conforms to the behavioral standards of her white classmates.

Despite the unfair treatment at Sacred Heart, Kennedy remarks, Tambu is not aware of the fact that she is being oppressed and discriminated against, because she has been completely and irrevocably drawn into a system that does not acknowledge her actual value and has also interiorized that system. Kennedy writes: “To put Fanon’s analysis into the language of the trauma theory, it could be said that the ‘deceptive psychological structure’ of colonialism makes it difficult for the colonized to witness their own oppression” (91). This is why, when Tambu is denied an academic trophy that she unquestionably deserved, she refuses to follow Ntombi’s advice and speak out. Her belief in the system exceeds her belief in herself. Tambu, looking back at her younger self, tries to explain why she clung to her belief in Sacred Heart:

I believed in the college with a practically ferocious tenacity. I may have thought differently, but I didn’t believe it. Belief prevailed. This school that formed us was an early and important post on the road to better living. You believed the signs to this superior destination were placed along the way by those who knew and wished you a safe journey, so that all you had to do was follow. (164)

Her self-denial, she suggests, served the purpose of allowing her to continue her belief in the fairytale-like story of Babamukuru, which she wished to follow through herself. Babamukuru,
one of “those who knew”, had sent her “on the road to better living”, and so Tambu refuses to question the path she is taking (164). However, she becomes confused by the injustice at Sacred Heart. The mature Tambu confesses: “I scarcely knew anymore who or where I was, I saw I would never find the route back to the place I had aimed at, yet I could not see where I had taken a wrong turning. For surely Sacred Heart could not be wrong” (163). Tambu begins to doubt her own capabilities, because she is not ready to accept that the colonial system of education is flawed by its institutionalized racist ideology. Tambu, aware of the trust and the money Babamukuru has placed in her, finds the rejection of the trophy particularly upsetting, disclosing: “How afraid was I that in fact I was worth nothing” (157). Kennedy explains: “Unable to comprehend why she has been denied the trophy, which would mean giving up her faith in and attachment to the school as a beneficent institution, [Tambu] wraps her pain protectively around herself in self-isolation” (97). Her spirit is cracked, her lust for life diminished, and her head droops in shame, because she conceptualizes that being a Black woman is a disgrace. Tambu discloses:

The situation was this: I was in two aspects a biologically blasphemous person. 
This became increasingly clear as I walked, my head low, to the first lesson. My corporeal crime indicted me on two counts. First there were the secretions that dripped crimson into the toilet bowl, or, stopped with cotton wool, clogged the school’s waste system. Then there was the other type of gene that made me look different from the majority of pupils … How was I going to redeem myself, I wondered miserably? (64)

This excerpt illustrates a disconcerting change in Tambu’s perspective, for in Nervous Conditions Tambu disputed her mother’s declaration that being Black, and female, was a burden. In The Book of Not, Tambu fails to liberate herself from her destructive thoughts, which elongate her agony and cause her to isolate herself from the rest of society.
At Sacred Heart, the power of the white gaze sows distrust, frustration, anger, anxiety, and hostility amongst the students of the African dormitory. To avoid being associated with her roommates, Tambu spends most of her time alone, but this leads to general unrest and hostility in the dormitory. Ntombi and Tambu fight occasionally, and Ntombi is heard shouting things such as: “Oh [Tambu], just jump into a pot of hot oil! Or just water, go on, water will do it too if it’s boiling! Just jump in, usvuukue! Usvuukue! Then you will be what you want. It will make you look like them, all pink like a European!” (141).

As a mature narrator, however, Tambu is able to expose that her behavior, and that of her roommates, was symptomatic of their racial melancholy. Tambu asserts that all Black students suffered from the same anxieties as a result of the power of the white gaze, but that shame inhibited them from sharing their misery. She says: “We spent a lot of time consumed by this kind of terror [of having to continually watch our behavior and stance while in the presence of white people]. We didn’t speak of it amongst ourselves. It was all too humiliating, but the horror of it gnawed within us” (59). The first person plural pronoun “we” indicates that Tambu is now speaking for her roommates, as well, which links her experiences to theirs (59).

From a posterior perspective, Tambu is able to expose how the colonial, white system of education at Sacred Heart not only caused Tambu to become estranged from herself, but also provoked feelings of estrangement towards her roommates. This inhibited the girls from seeking comfort amongst each other and consequently caused their bond to disintegrate, while the dominant, white culture retained the upper hand. In this sense, the white, colonial system of education did not only affect Tambu on an individual level, but tore apart the community of Black, young students from the inside, as well. From a posterior perspective Tambu is able to acknowledge and mend the gaps between her own suffering and that of her roommates. Tying
these experiences together in a coming-of-age novel, creates a healing bond for victims of trauma, racism, and colonialism.

3.2.3.2. Tambu and Nyasha

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu’s friendship with Nyasha forms the core of the novel, representing the theme of feminist sisterhood as a token of change in the feminist *Bildungsroman*. In *The Book of Not*, however, Nyasha and Tambu grow apart as Tambu departs as a boarding school student at Sacred Heart. The moment the girls see each other again at the mission, Nyasha is recovering from her depression and eating disorder, but her rage and passion seem to have dissipated. The medication she takes evens out her mood swings, but also takes away her spark of energy. When Tambu wonders out loud about their future, mentioning “winning things”, “growing up”, “finding someone to love” and “having a family”, Nyasha expresses that she no longer actively aspires those things, saying: “Let’s say all those things do exist, right, how’re you going to get them if you haven’t got anything to run on? What can you do if you’ve run out of fuel? … Aren’t you afraid now, Tambu? I am! How’re we going to get all those things? I don’t see us getting there before we run out” (92-3). Nyasha, it seems, has lost the energy with which she rebelled against Babamukuru. Her nervous condition has deprived her of her fighting spirit and of her bravery and this frightens Tambu, for she admired these qualities in her friend. The older Tambu comes to an insight regarding herself and her friendship with Nyasha, disclosing:

The new calm Nyasha was frightening. When she was ill my cousin used to fume and rage. I found the young woman’s fury frightening, too - you could say I was frightened of everything. I feared the rage because it consumed everything, including a person. For how rage consumed my cousin then, in those recent months! But at the same time, Nyasha’s rage reassured me, confirming I remained whole and was not burning. Today the absence of that
bumptious and at the same time blazing belligerence of my cousin’s war was unexpectedly more disturbing than had been its presence. What I piece together now is that it was comfortable for me to have someone else being angry for me, so that I did not need to become crazy myself from outrage.

(119)

Tambu discovers that she has always remained on the sidelines while Nyasha raged and fought. While Nyasha’s energy burned out, Tambu was too afraid to confront the issues Nyasha was rebelling against. Tambu’s posterior perspective on Nyasha and herself discloses an insight on how they both developed separately following Tambu’s departure. Tambu indicates changes in Nyasha which consequently leads to revelations about herself. As a mature narrator, Tambu is able to determine the evolution of their views and the dynamic of their friendship. As in the Bildungsroman, the sequence of Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not emphasizes the characters’ interior development and their responses to their environment. Through Nyasha’s breakdown and disillusionment, however, Dangarembga challenges the traditional idea of the happy end of the Bildungsroman, to imply that such a happy end has formerly been reserved for white, male Bildungsromane, and to demonstrate that for characters such as Nyasha and Tambu injustice caused by socio-political factors still marks their lives, despite their good intentions.

3.2.3.3. Tambu and Mai

Throughout Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not, Mai haunts Tambu’s thoughts like an evil, negative spirit, giving voice to her doubts and fears, and showing up in the darkest corners of her mind. Tambu’s conflict with Mai represents the notion of gender melancholy within herself; a suffering that ensues out of the feeling her the mother is part of herself, while also wanting to reject her mother because she symbolizes her originary culture, of which she
is ashamed. By rejecting her mother, however, Tambu loses touch with a sense of cultural identity, which consequently disturbs her coherent sense of self.

For Tambu, in fact, the thought of her mother instills feelings of despair and shame. Mai speaks badly of Babamukuru, because she does not believe he is doing enough to help the rest of the family on the homestead. Mai exclaims: “[W]e, your mother and father here, we are left to the mercy of the open like that by Babamukuru as if we are forest animals. In spite of all that money of his! Don’t think people don’t see it, Tambudzai! People see it” (8). Tambu, however, believes her parents have brought their poverty upon themselves due to laziness. The mature Tambu discloses that, when young, “[her] list of lesser morals included Baba and Mai, whose better qualities were, as far as [she] could see, not more than an envious sluggishness” (82). Tambu’s narration, in fact, discloses a very negative perception of her mother:

“I could not tell her what was difficult. It was not the food. It was her. It was the awful covetous emptiness in her eyes, and then the gleaming when she paired Babamukuru’s name with the mention of a fence. It was the nothingness upon which she stood as the summit of her life, from which she clawed about for gleanings from other women’s husbands, such as Babamukuru … What could make a woman so avaricious and hollow? Oh, how to become more of a person!” (9)

Tambu’s gender melancholy intensifies after Babamukuru’s trial. She considers the mission her home rather than the homestead, because, she says, she could “not now contemplate going there again having seen the satisfaction in [her] mother’s eye during Babamukuru’s beating” (80). In class, Tambu uses her mother’s poor work ethic as negative motivation to work harder, study longer, and earn better grades. She constantly ponders: “Had I not set my sights high enough? Was I like my mother, making do with a few buckets of maize?” (110). While
trying to fall asleep, Tambu’s doubts take the form of Mai’s image which mocks her. Tambu recounts:

Miserably, as I lay in bed, I saw myself return ignominiously to the village and listened to Mai’s spiteful consolation: ‘Did you think you could, Tambduzai! Do you think others who didn’t couldn’t! So, it’s coming back, is it not! Ehe, now, with all that not succeeding of yours, that’s when you know who your father is!’ I was more petrified of failure than of anything else, so that imagining Mai’s sarcastic sympathy sanded my tongue with panic. (148).

When Tambu learns of her disappointing A-level results, her anxiety evolves into utter despair. She declares: “I had not jumped far enough around my mother. It seemed I would never move again unless I managed to go round her” (190). The moment Tambu does return to the homestead, Mai ridicules her daughter in front of everyone and asks: “Which of your ancestors learnt those books? The blood that’s in you is mine and your father’s, not Babamukuru’s!” (195). Tambu, as narrator, discloses: “I found it all so terribly revolting. ‘Get on with it, my daughter! Pull yourself together! Do something for yourself,’ was what I wanted to hear, in private, doors closed, strength flowing from mother to daughter. I was sickened by my mother’s lack of faith and expectation. How her words demoralised, confirming there was so little to me” (195).

Looking back, Tambu reveals that she ultimately yearned for her mother to show her love and support. She says she believes “[she] had nothing that Mai wanted”, and that might have been why Mai was filled with bitterness (4). Tambu, as a mature narrator, tries to understand Mai’s perspective, noting:

I believe [Mai] would have spoken differently if she had thought I was more of an ally. But Mai was probably frightened of this girl who was growing beyond her into the European world. At times like this, is it a case of muscles and
blood and contradictions and pain, a case of out of whose stomach a person came that makes one woman to another a mother or daughter? (11)

Tambu acknowledges the fact that her white, colonial education drove her apart from her family’s way of life, and that this could have instilled fear and distrust. However, she points out, during this time of war and fear, her mother had no reason to treat her in a way that discouraged and upset her. She would have rather been treated with respect, for the only bond she shared with her mother at that time was genetic. This is why, at the end of the novel, when Tambu hears that her mother is coming to visit her, she decides to leave the address where she had been staying. Mai threatens her over the phone, hissing: “‘Even if you keep on keeping quiet … do you think we can’t find you, child! As if we can’t walk! Even if we don’t have cars, our legs haven’t been taken by anyone, you should know that, my daughter!’” (226). Mai asks her if she is aware out of which stomach she came out of. Tambu, ashamed and angry, exclaims: “Was there any misfortune in the world as bad as being the daughter of this woman!” (228).

Tambu’s posterior perspective is critical of Mai, but points towards a will to understand her. Tambu’s discourse conveys, in fact, regret rather than hostility, symbolizing abiding gender melancholy. Even though Dangarembga does not end *The Book of Not* with a reconciliation of mother and daughter as would have been the case in a traditional, (feminist) *Bildungsroman*, she leaves the ending an open one. If Tambu’s story should be continued in a third novel, such a reconciliation may still be to come.
3.3. The Feminist Bildungsroman: Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not

Although Nervous Conditions and The Book of Not are thematically close to the feminist Bildungsroman, the plot structures of these novels indicate a difference in regards to those of traditional, feminist Bildungsromane. According to Felski, the plot of the Bildungsroman is teleological, and the development of the heroine is linear. She writes: “Self-understanding is portrayed as gradual and accumulative, an irreversible process of development through successive stages” (136). All elements of the text acquire meaning in relation to this development, which is similar to Moretti’s understanding of the plot under the classification principle. Felski notes that there is a perceivable sense of “ironic distance” between the narrator’s perspective and the focalization of the naïve, inexperienced protagonist in the Bildungsroman (136). This gap draws attention to the discrepancy between the protagonist’s “insufficient interpretation of events” and “the narrator’s own superior understanding” (136).

As discussed in chapter 2.2., Dangarembga’s narratives are marked by a gap in focalization. The distance between the perspective of the older Tambu and that of the younger Tambu indicates that the narrator possesses “retrospective self-knowledge”, which is, Felski states, the goal of the text (136). In Felski’s definition of the developmental plot, however, the difference between the perspectives gradually dissolves and the perspectives converge, which symbolizes the acquisition of knowledge and experience. Interestingly enough, neither of Dangarembga’s novels offer a sort of revelatory convergence of perspectives. The plot structures of the novels are not teleological, but cyclical.

3.3.1. The Cyclical Plot in Nervous Conditions

Nervous Conditions ends with Nyasha suffering from a complete breakdown as a result of an untreated, longstanding eating disorder ensuing from her anxiety of being trapped in a postcolonial and patriarchal system in which she feels she has no agency over her life choices. Having grown close to Nyasha throughout her stay at the mission, Tambu is deeply affected
by her cousin’s nervous collapse. Nyasha, whom Tambu considered privileged, intelligent, and independent, had given her an insight into larger power structures that dominate Black women, and warned her of succumbing to them. Witnessing how the psychiatrist at the hospital dismisses Nyasha’s condition, declaring that she “could not be ill” and that “Africans did not suffer in the way [Tambu and her relatives] had described”, Tambu experiences firsthand how deeply Nyasha’s problems are rooted, and how these problems remain unrecognized where the dominant, white, male ideology prevails (206).

Nyasha’s mental collapse awakens in Tambu a series of doubts that remain unresolved towards the end of the novel. As Nyasha’s future is put on hold, Tambu becomes frightened, because Nyasha signified for her a driving force towards change and prosperity for Black women, and her downfall would, in Tambu’s experience, signify an annihilation of possible resistance to the suppression of Black young women. Tambu explains, in retrospect, how she was thinking and feeling at the time:

If Nyasha who had everything could not make it, where could I expect to go? I could not bear to think about it, because at that time we were not sure whether she would survive. All I knew was that the doctor would not commit himself. Nyasha’s progress was still in the balance, and so, as a result, was mine. (206)

This excerpt demonstrates how Tambu measures her own prospects in relation to Nyasha’s. Contrary to the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the narrative is not focused on the progress of just one individual, but illustrates how the characters’ lives are deeply influenced by other lives. In *Nervous Conditions*, change is not measured by Tambu’s progress exclusively. Dangarembga blurs the boundaries of her characters’ lifelines, in an attempt to portray the interconnectedness of the women in her novels, and convey the sense that, for Nyasha and Tambu, positive change is possible once both are out of negative situations. Losing Nyasha as a source of guidance, support, and friendship, Tambu feels weak and helpless. The ending of
*Nervous Conditions* does not offer closure to Tambu’s story, but marks the beginning of what Tambu calls “a long and painful process” of “expansion” (208). Through Nyasha’s friendship, Tambu expanded in knowledge and mind, and, most importantly, in love and understanding. Narrating from a mature perspective, Tambu realizes that Nyasha profoundly influenced her, raising her awareness regarding the consequences of contact with “the Englishness” and the implications of her race in a postcolonial, white environment (207). The change in perspective that Tambu underwent in *Nervous Conditions* would, though undetected at the time, have further implications for the course of her life. In the final paragraph of *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu discloses:

> Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began. (208)

Although Tambu, as narrator, asserts she has only just begun her story, she indicates that her rosy view on education has been marred since her stay at the mission in *Nervous Conditions*. As in traditional *Bildungsromane*, her character has undergone an evolution. However, she points out that this change was not clear to her at the time. The younger Tambu’s point of view, in this sense, cannot yet be reconciled with the narrator’s perspective. The remaining gap between the perspectives, and Tambu’s announcement that her narrative is yet to “fill another volume” thus imply that the end of *Nervous Conditions* generates the beginning of a new chapter in Tambu’s life, known as *The Book of Not* (208).
Within the bounds of *Nervous Conditions*, however, the narrative cycle comes to a close, tying the end to the beginning of the novel. In the opening paragraphs, Tambu, as narrator, informs the reader that “[although] the event of [her] brother’s passing and the events of [her] story cannot be separated, [her] story is not after all about death, but about [her] escape and Lucia’s; about [her] mother’s and Maiguru’s entrapment; and about Nyasha’s rebellion … [that] in the end [may not] have been successful” (1). Here, Tambu already offered the reader an insight into her narrative, while affirming that her own story is irrevocably connected to the stories of the women she loves.

3.3.2. The Cyclical Plot in *The Book of Not*

*The Book of Not* does not start at the beginning, but in the middle of Tambu’s second story. The reader infers from the opening paragraphs, which sketch a scene of slow-motion violence and panic, that Netsai loses her leg due to a landmine explosion. As in *Nervous Conditions*, there are two modes of focalization in *The Book of Not*, the first being Tambu’s perspective as mature narrator, and the second being the perspective of Tambu embedded within the chronology of her narrative. Tambu announces that “the second year; [was] a deterioration of hope” indicating that her narrative will not end on a positive note (21).Haunted by the memory of her sister, Tambu’s years at Sacred Heart pass by slowly. After disappointing results on her A-levels, Tambu ends up working at an advertising agency, but quits her job after the senior copy writer steals her ideas for an advertising campaign and officially presents them as his own. Conscious of the fact that her mother is coming to see her, Tambu decides upon leaving the Twiss Hostel. *The Book of Not* ends with Tambu concluding that she cannot go back to Babamukuru’s family at the mission, nor return to her family on the homestead. As in *Nervous Conditions*, the ending and the beginning of the novel are brought together at the narrative’s close, for the reader had anticipated “a deterioration of hope” (21). Tambu reveals:
I had forgotten all the promises made to myself and providence while I was young concerning carrying forward with me the good and human, the unhu of my life. As it was, I had not considered unhu at all, only my own calamities, since the contested days at the convent. So this evening I walked emptily to the room I would soon vacate, wondering what future there was for me, a new Zimbabwean. (246)

In this excerpt, Tambu discloses that she failed to accomplish the goals she set for herself at the beginning of her years as a student at Sacred Heart. Her objective to acquire unhu, or personhood, she states, was unsuccessful since she was too wrapped up in her suffering. As a mature narrator-focalizer, she is able to look at her traumatized, younger self from a distance and detect how she became too conflicted to follow through a positive, personal evolution. At the time, however, she was still afflicted with (racial and gender) melancholy. In relation to Tambu’s ending remarks in Nervous Conditions, the ending passage of self-reflection in The Book of Not indicates that Tambu has matured. However, instead of closure and certainty, the ending discloses uncertainty and marks a new departure. Tambu is still restless; her journey is not yet complete.

3.3.3. The Novel of Awakening

Felski also theorizes an alternative model of the feminist Bildungsroman, which does not have a teleological plot. “[S]ome texts”, she writes, “trace a voyage inward rather than outward, in search of a hidden female self” (141-2). In these texts, which she calls “novels of awakening”, the female protagonist does not evolve gradually but abruptly comes to an understanding of an “underlying unity” within herself (141-2). At this moment of realization, she manages to subdue the sense of irony and self-consciousness with which she had marked her narrative up to that instant. Considering that the protagonist’s identity is to be retrieved rather than achieved, the focal point of the novel no longer constitutes the outcome of the narrative as in
teleological *Bildungsromane*. The text itself, rather, represents the cocooning identity of the female protagonist. This is reflected by “a literary structure”, Felski asserts, “which foregrounds the symbolic and lyrical dimension of the text rather than the chronological development of narrative” (141-2). The female protagonist does not envision to integrate in society, but strives to recover “a meaningful identity”, which she can only attain by breaking ties with her past and her former points of view (142). Her departure, whether symbolic or literal, initiates a voyage during which she reconnects with “a lost sense of self” (142). The protagonist embarks on a circular journey, which, at its end, brings her back to the point of departure. In this light, history is counteracted and the chronology of the narrative is subordinate to the symbolical. In fact, the text is constructed in function of “the evocation of a symbolic realm which echoes and affirms the subject’s inner being” (144). The socio-political dimensions of the narrative are considered less important.

Dangarembga’s novels share several characteristics of novels of awakening, such as the circularity of the narrative, and the female protagonist’s desire to break all ties with her past. The idea of a journey is also present in Dangarembga’s novels. However, Tambu does not come to an abrupt understanding of her self, nor does she, at the end of *Nervous Conditions* or *The Book of Not*, reconcile with a “lost sense of self” (142). Tambu rather emphasizes the way she has come, and the way she will continue to travel. This might be an indication that Tambu yet has to discover “a meaningful identity”, if her story should be continued in a third novel (142). I propose, however, that what is meaningful for Tambu’s narrative is not exclusively Tambu’s discovery of a coherent self, but is the whole range of encounters that determine Tambu’s search for identity. The narrative foregrounds Tambu’s relationships with her mother, her cousin, her aunt, her roommates and her other family members. Contrary to the novel of awakening, the socio-political dimension of the text is very important. Tambu’s struggles are not symbolic, but very real confrontations with patriarchy,
colonialism, racism, trauma, and racial and gender melancholy. *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, although related to the *Bildungsroman*, represent a broader dimension of interaction between the socio-political context and the literary world.
Conclusion

While the voices of ethnic, female writers were formerly excluded from the literary canon of white, male *Bildungsromane*, critics have, during the late twentieth century, opened up a space where ethnic, female writing can be fervently discussed and recognized in relation to the paradigm of the *Bildungsroman*. Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* are a prominent example of how feminist and ethnic writing draws on the conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* in order to challenge the dominant, white, male ideology. While the form and content of *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* are considered as deviant from the conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* genre, an analysis of Tambu’s narrative in relation to autobiographical writing, trauma writing, postcolonial writing, and ethnic writing reveals that these deviations foreground, in fact, socio-political concerns regarding young, Black women in Rhodesia. Moreover, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* show thematic and ideological similarities to feminist *Bildungsromane* and the novel of awakening, such as the theme of sisterhood and the cyclical structure of the plot, respectively, which foreground the idea of continuity.

As Tambu herself states at the end of *Nervous Conditions*, her narrative is not only hers but also “the story of four women whom [she] loved”, and their responses to patriarchy, racism and colonialism (204). In *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, Dangarembga means to give young, Zimbabwean, female subjects a voice where they have not yet had the occasion to testify before. She adopts an autobiographical method of writing, tying her experience with Tambu’s in an effort to make a private story resound with a much broader genre of narrative: the *Bildungsroman*. Through the configuration of Tambu as the protagonist of a female, African, Black *Bildungsroman*, she creates a timeless, collective testimony of postcolonial, Zimbabwean, Black, female subjectivity. *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* testify, in fact, for the Black women of Zimbabwe, opening a space which
challenges socio-political affairs that have caused them pain and suffering, and attests to the existence of these issues, in order to propose positive change for the girls and women in Zimbabwe.
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