



Psychological afflictions as expressed in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*

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Abstract

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*This article refutes the glib generalization about the lack of psychological sensitivity so often attributed to Africans by examining female suffering manifesting itself in nervous afflictions as a result of colonialism and patriarchy as portrayed in these two novels. It is argued that the overriding theme of *A Question of Power* (1973) is the struggle of a displaced, marginalised woman for what she perceives as her rights in a hostile world. In similar vein, Dangarembga reveals in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) how patriarchy coupled with colonialism, causes different kinds of psychological afflictions in her female protagonists. In this article the thematically interpretive discourse-analytical method is employed to focus on the autobiographical mode used in the novels under discussion, while special attention is paid to characterization and stylistic aspects. The investigation exposes both similarities and dissimilarities in the writers' handling of this universal problem. Moreover, Head and Dangarembga are hailed for breaking new ground in moving beyond the confines of their own literary conventions, while simultaneously destroying the social silencing and political disenfranchisement traditionally experienced by women of colour.*

1. Contextualization

A Question of Power (1973) and *Nervous Conditions* (1988)¹ both refute the glib generalization about the lack of psychological sensitivity so often attributed to Africans as articulated by the white male psychiatrist in *Nervous Conditions* (1988): "Africans do not suffer in the way we had described. She [Nyasha] was making a scene" (p. 201).² These novels clearly illuminate female suffering as a result of colonialism and patriarchy. Supriya Nair (1995:131), for instance, comments on the unfortunate position of colonised females:

What I will argue in this historical context of undifferentiated gender is that colonial melancholy, by which I mean the condition as associated with the specific history of colonialism, became the ambivalently privileged condition associated with the male subject. The neuroses of female subjects are not just devalued but unrecognized, either because pathological behaviors are seen as a natural condition of their unstable psyches, or because they are refused the agency and critical consciousness necessary to react to their psycho-social environment.

Although "Africa has long been stereotyped in the West into images of illness, madness, devastation, and hysteria madness in some parts of colonial Africa was seen as a largely male phenomenon, the women apparently lacking the self-consciousness necessary to turn mad" (Nair, 1995:132). Moreover, while female madness – and related nervous conditions – constitutes a fairly common theme in Western literature³, it has not received sufficient attention in African literature, by both male and female authors.⁴

By using the thematically interpretive discourse-analytical method, I therefore want to comment on the devastating psychological effects of

1 *A Question of Power* also referred to as AQOP, and *Nervous Conditions* as NC.

2 For further examples of this lack of concern for the devastating psychological effects of especially colonisation on Africans in general, see also Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Mask*, P. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Leonard Doob's "The Psychological Pressures Upon Modern Africans" in McEdward Sutcliffe's *Modern Africa*.

3 Well known examples are Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Dostoyevsky's *Anna Karenina*.

4 In African literature Achebe and Soyinka can be cited as examples of male writers who portray madness in men – but not in women! See, for instance, Azejuku, the High Priest in *Arrow of God*, and the Professor in *The Road*.

gender oppression as well as colonial and postcolonial domination on female characters in the two novels under discussion.

2. Comparison of *A Question of Power* and *Nervous Conditions*

2.1 Theme and characterization

2.1.1 Thematic concerns

Examination of the respective titles of these two novels suggests that their themes are similar. *A Question of Power* implicitly reveals as the overriding theme of the novel a displaced, marginalised woman struggling for what she perceives as her rights in a hostile world. The title *Nervous Conditions* is taken from Jean-Paul Sartre's Preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963): "The condition of the native is a nervous condition". Dangarembga thus portrays how "patriarchy, heightened by the contradictions of colonial experience, creates the nervous state or psychological condition which afflicts the female characters in varying degrees of intensity" (Uwakweh, 1995:76). Janice Hill's (1995:79) observation about the thematic concerns of *Nervous Conditions* can also be extended to encapsulate the overriding theme of *A Question*:

[I]llness is a preexistent, thematic condition under which the events of the novel take place. For Nyasha and Tambu [as well as for Elizabeth] the condition of native as a nervous condition comprises not only colonization but also the condition of gender and the condition of female education. Their attempts to function in a society that does not allow them socially acceptable verbal or written outlets as educated, female Africans result in their being punished for inappropriate expression of dissatisfaction and anger.

Although the basic theme of these novels may be defined as racial and gender oppression, Dangarembga and Head belong to two different generations of writers and construct their work in different ways.

2.1.2 Characterization and the autobiographical mode of narration

A Question, Head's last novel, is undeniably her most intricate and intense work. It signals a crisis in the author's personal life in that her alienation from traditional African society in Botswana induces in her an inclination towards introspection. Sarvan (1987:82), among numerous critics, calls *A Question* "a strongly autobiographical work". Much of the novel's subject matter mirrors Head's external situation: it verbalizes her feeling of otherness, of being an outcast who neither trusts nor relates to

people. She herself has commented on its personal nature by stating: "In *A Question of Power* the work-out is subtle – the whole process of breakdown and destruction is outlined there ... I'd lost, in *A Question of Power*, the certainty of my own goodness. The novel was written under pressure. I was alarmed" (Marquard, 1978:53). Head thus depicts her own struggle between the poles of sanity and insanity as a journey into psychic regions. Elizabeth's nightmarish "rollercoaster" journey (Townsend, 1993:113) encompasses a finding of herself as a coloured from South Africa, as well as an acceptance of her new country, Botswana, and its people. This wrestling with her physical and spiritual environment assumes a broadly moral nature: in the process of re-interpreting her own life story, Elizabeth is also tackling the basic question of good and evil.

Apart from centring the discourse of transformation on Elizabeth, Head depicts two opposing kinds of female figures: those who help Elizabeth to acquire a trust in mankind and those who threaten her fragile hold on sanity. Kenosi (meaning "I am alone" in Setswana) and Birgitte serve as examples of women who positively influence Elizabeth's mental growth, while Camilla constantly reminds Elizabeth of whites in South Africa who tormented and dehumanized her, such as the white principal of the mission school⁵.

Nervous Conditions is both its author's first novel and the first novel in English by a female Zimbabwean writer. Where Bessie Head has openly admitted that *A Question* is fairly substantially autobiographical, Tsitsi Dangarembga denies that her work is mere autobiography. In an interview with Flora Veit-Wild (1989:101), she refuted the interviewer's assumption that "*Nervous Conditions* is, directly or indirectly, autobiographical" by saying:

But when one comes to write a novel, and especially the kind of literature that I like to write, it uses the medium of very real individual people to make points that are beyond the individual. And that I think is the mark of good literature, that anybody who picks it up is going to find something to identify with. So for me, when I am trying to produce that kind of literature, this is a very conscious process: If I want to make this point, what kind of character can I use? And what might be happening to this character? And then, in order to make

5 Since numerous detailed studies of characterization in *The Question of Power* have been undertaken, I have refrained from revisiting well-trodden ground. See, for example Cloete (1996), *Women and transformation: a study of the perceptions of women in selected novels by Bessie Head and Ngugi wa Thiong'o*.

that real, of course I have to look into myself to see from where I can get that emotion, that representation.

Despite this denial, it may, however, be useful to regard *Nervous Conditions* as a "fictional autobiography" (Flockemann, 1992:38) where both Nyasha and Tambu reflect aspects of the writer's character and situation. There are marked similarities between the situation of Nyasha and Dangarembga in that they were both exposed to westernisation by staying with their parents in England. Moreover, Dangarembga even assigns her own name to Tsitsi as "Tsitsi" and "Nyasha" both mean "mercy" in Shona – as Bessie Head assigns her own name to Elizabeth in *A Question*. As narrator or "implied author" (Uwakweh, 1995:75) Tambu, like Dangarembga, fearlessly articulates female dissatisfaction with oppression and subjugation.

To summarize, transformation is at the core of the main discourse of both novels. While *A Question* focuses on a single female in the agonizing process of metamorphosis, the vision in *Nervous Conditions* is extended to reveal the different reactions of, first, the two younger female protagonists, the cousins Tambu and Nyasha, and second, their mothers, Maiguru and Mainini, and Aunt Lucia.

Dangarembga employs the extended metaphors of *escape* and *entrapment* through which to construct her discourse of the degrees of psychological afflictions her characters are suffering.

The reader gradually fathoms the real nature of Tambu's psychological entrapment and escape: she struggles to shake off restrictions placed on her development by elements from both white and black cultures. She must identify and evaluate elements characteristic of her life as a member of a still largely patriarchal society, while westernization has its own inherent pitfalls. She thus has to find a middle-way between the kind of blind adherence to traditional – and often insensitive – male authority, shown by her mother, and the blatantly rebellious rejection of patriarchy, shown by Nyasha. The harmful physical and psychological effects on her of the struggle to synthesize the demands of the opposing systems, reach a climax on the day of her parents' westernized wedding orchestrated by Babamakuru. Her helpless realization that she could not be angry with him although he is behind "this plot which made such a joke of my parents, my home and myself" (NC:149) affects her both psychologically and physically: on the day of the wedding she is unable to drag her body out of bed. Although she suffers physically – "I suffered a horrible crawling over my skin, my chest contracted to a breathless tension and even my bowels threatened to let me know their opinion" (NC:149) – she realizes how her uncle has stifled her psychological and

intellectual development: he "had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position" (NC:164). She accepts her punishment for disobedience with "masochistic delight" as "the price of my newly acquired identity" (NC:169) and is now able to look at her uncle more objectively. She is therefore able to revisit her feelings of excessive gratitude for his kindness bestowed upon her as the "poor female relative" (NC:116) while becoming increasingly aware of the mounting tensions in his home as well. She is, however, cautious and resolves not to ruin her chances of being educated by openly defying him, as Nyasha does.

In her entrapment and effort to escape Nyasha is subjected to devastating forms of psychological pressure. In letting Nyasha become the victim of anorexia nervosa and bulimia – disorders usually associated with white, middle class women and girls – Dangarembga tackles fairly uncommon ground in female African literature⁶. In fact, a 1987 article on eating disorders among blacks in Africa reported only two such cases of which one concerned a Zimbabwean woman from an upper-class family who attended school in England (Brumberg, 1988:280). Nair (1995:136) ascribes Nyasha's emotional turmoil to being "subsumed both by the burden of colonial history and by her father's unyielding sovereignty".

Her struggle against the forces that dictate her life is performed orally, exaggerating and sometimes distorting the daily rituals of domestic interaction as expressive metaphors. Every instance of bulimic purging comes after a verbal argument with her father, who forces her to eat in order to assert his control. Nyasha's violent purging in the privacy of the bathroom is also indicative of the indigestibility of patriarchal order and discipline, which she nevertheless internalises in her anorexic condition, the exercise of her will reduces to disciplining and punishing her body (Nair, 1995:137).

Nair (1995:137) continues by pointing out that Nyasha's fierce reaction to colonial textbooks "is also emblematic of the ideological diet of colonial history that literally sickens her". Flora Veil-Wild (1993:51, 52) even refers to Nyasha's "[s]chizophrenia arising from the confrontation of traditional and Christian beliefs" or "a profound personality split which resulted from an extreme degree of westernisation on [the] one hand and colonial oppression on the other". Sue Thomas (1992:17) in turn sees Nyasha's disorder as "the hysteric ... [which is] a product of precariously

6 Pauline Uwakweh (1995:71) also notes that "Dangarembga may perhaps be the first African (woman) writer to explore the theme of anorexia in African fiction" while she cites a number of feminist scholars, such as Sheila MacLeod, Kim Chemin and Hilda Bruch who have examined the phenomenon in European feminist literature.

repressed rage at patriarchal and colonial domination". Nyasha's revulsion at patriarchy and colonialism manifests itself in a series of incidents totally baffling to her parents. Her deviant behaviour includes culturally unheard of actions such as smoking, refusing to eat, and scorning her father's authority by chatting to a white boy late at night after a dance while wearing a mini skirt. In the confrontation following this meeting, Babamakuru accuses his daughter of being a whore who scorns his position: "I am respected at this mission. I cannot have a daughter who behaves like a whore" (NC:14). Babamakuru is beside himself with rage when she physically attacks him and the two of them have to be separated by Maiguru and Chiko. He as a result vows to kill Nyasha and hang himself:

'She has dared', he said, sweat pouring off him, his chest heaving with the grossness of the thought, 'to raise her fist against me. She has dared to challenge me. Me! Her father. I am telling you', and he began to struggle again, 'today she will not live. We cannot have two men in this house' (NC:115).

Babamakuru's lack of understanding of and concern for Nyasha's rebellion is obvious in his reaction to this hysterical outburst. He only wants to reinforce his traditional patriarchal authority. The incident elicits mixed feelings in Tambu: she blames Nyasha for tactlessness and not respecting her father, but understands the insult to Nyasha's female psyche by "making her a victim of her femaleness" (NC:115). Tambu also remarks on the universality of this lack of understanding of "femaleness". She herself

... had felt victimised at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamakuru did it. And that was the problem (NC:115-116).

Tambu's mother clearly represents the traditional rural African woman, subjected not only to male dominance, but also, a related fact, to a life of hardship, poverty and abuse. She is even subjected to her own son's "obnoxious" behaviour:

Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case, when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate (NC:12).

Tambu's mother's spirit is totally broken. She has no confidence and suffers from an inferiority complex, which in turn causes matrophobia in her daughter.

Maiguru (literally "Earth mother"/"Senior") is depicted as "a living symbol of nervousness and fear" (Moyana, 1996:31). She initially remains traditionally submissive to her domineering husband, despite being well-educated and having spent some years in England. She, for instance, allows her salary to be used by her husband, mainly to support his family, slaves during family visits to prepare meals for the extended family without any help from her sisters-in-law, and is indulgent of Nyasha's westernised behaviour. She, however, later rebels and leaves her husband. Although she immediately returns home once her husband fetches her, she becomes more content and assertive. She even contradicts her husband when he decides against financially supporting Tambu's education at the convent school:

Maiguru had been away for only five days, but the change had done her good. She smiled more often and less mechanically, fussed over us less and was more willing or able to talk about sensible things. Although she still called Babamakuru her Daddy-sweet, most of her baby-talk had disappeared (NC:175).

Aunt Lucia, the family scapegoat, suffers less severely from pathological nervous conditions because she in a sense succeeds in synthesizing the beneficial aspects of both cultures. She serves as an example of a woman who escapes the bondage of strict and sterile traditionalism by defying generally acceptable social norms. Aunt Lucia, for instance, openly scorns traditional ideas about marriage and lives according to her own standards. As such, it may be assumed that she symbolizes the beneficial aspects of acculturation because she seems to have benefited from westernization: at the end of the novel she has improved her own position in life. She has received a Western education, but has not severed her ties with traditional family life, as her participation in the wedding ceremony demonstrates. She also gets what she wants by manipulating Babamakuru.

The respective endings of the two novels are indicative of the major perceptual differences in the two authors' portrayal of nervous conditions. Although Elizabeth's agonized state may be described as "a trajectory of paranoid schizophrenia, observed from within" (Evasdaughter, 1989:74), the novel ends with her attainment of a great degree of mental wellbeing. Her well known final words signify female tenderness and reflect her acceptance of the brotherhood of mankind:

It was quite the opposite in Africa. There was no direct push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste. She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging (AQOP:206).

She also finds spiritual consolation when she realizes: "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (AQOP:206). She feels healed: "A peaceful, meditative privacy settled on her mind. Her painful, broken nerve-ends quietly knit together" (AQOP:206).

By contrast, *Nervous Conditions* seemingly ends on an ambiguous and unfulfilled note. Tambu unequivocally states her identification with Nyasha's nervous problems:

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 (NC:202).

At this stage Tambu's mother ascribes all their problems to "Englishness", and regards her daughter as a "victim" (NC:203) like her brother, Nhamo. Mainini blames Englishness for her son's unwillingness to speak his mother tongue, his separation from home as a result of having to go away to be educated and his eventual death. She thus fears that she will also lose Tambu.

The conclusion of *Nervous Conditions*, however, completes the circle of death and indecision while simultaneously being life-asserting in that Tambu consciously attempts to resist succumbing to a feeling of nihilism. Nair rightly sees Tambu as a foil – "as an optimism of the will to Nyasha's pessimism of the intellect" in that she realises: "If I forgot them, my cousin, my mother, my friends, I might as well forget myself. And that, of course, could not happen" (NC:188). Her narrative act should thus be viewed as a willed effort to resist the weakness of succumbing to the negative forces around her. In the words of Nair (1995:137): "Her attempt of narrating the story is a conscious attempt to inscribe her memory, an undramatic yet meaningful assertion of agency and struggle". The mood of quiet determination is apparent in Tambu's final words in the novel:

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

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 (NC:204).

Moreover, Tambu succeeds in growing in the course of the novel. Instead of merely being disgusted with male authority, she learns from the mistakes of the other female characters, devises her own strategy for fighting male chauvinism, and succeeds in forming her own distinct personality by responding to beneficial aspects from both African and Western cultures.

2.2 Stylistic aspects

Despite thematic similarities, the two novels differ considerably in their mode of narration. In *A Question* events are filtered through the mind of Elizabeth, a mature coloured woman living as an exile in Botswana. The setting of *Nervous Conditions* is the then Rhodesia, while Tambu, the feminine first-person narrator, recounts events influencing her life in its formative years. The novel deals with Tambu's life between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Relying on hindsight, Tambu thus employs the innocence of childhood to imaginatively portray her life, growing up in a male-dominated extended African family in war-torn Rhodesia. Dangarombga succeeds in maintaining the tone and nuances of the character Tambu. She is, for example, comparable to Toundi in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*, who, at the end of his life, relives his childhood suffering at the hands of his white master, Father Gilbert. Like Toundi, she constantly reflects the ironic tone inherent in this kind of situation. The effect of their irony is enhanced because both Tambu and Toundi speak and act with convincing naivety.

Although *A Question* focuses on Elizabeth's mental struggle, its structure is determined by the two male protagonists who dominate each of the novel's two sections and literally "turn the protagonist's mind into a battleground as they compete for the domination and possession of her personality" (Ola, 1994:19). The novel starts with a description of Sello, but the second paragraph already emphasizes his mental kinship with Elizabeth:

The man's name was Sello. A woman in the village of Motabeng paralleled his inner development. Most of what applied to Sello applied to her, because they were twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations

in a pursuit after the things of the soul. It was an insane pursuit this time (AQOP:11-12).

The same paragraph introduces Dan. Bessie Head immediately exposes the thematic concerns of the novel by referring to madness and to the fact that the "three of them shared the strange journey into hell" (AQOP:12). The novel covers the period of about three years in Elizabeth's life when she experiences two nervous breakdowns. She loses her teaching post when her control snaps in a public office, letting her scream abuse at the people around her. She is hospitalized for a short period after which she joins the Motabeng Secondary Project as a volunteer gardener. However, her fantasies and nightmares increase until she is placed in an asylum for seven months where she contemplates suicide and infanticide. The novel thus relates how in Botswana "mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth's mind" (AQOP:15). Because the male characters are usually seen through Elizabeth's distorted and turbulent mind, they are presented ambivalently.

Conversely, *Nervous Conditions* focuses on ordinary, everyday events in the life of an impoverished extended rural family in the 1960s. It can, however, be likened to *A Question*, in that Tambu's narrative may be regarded as an imaginative journey through consciousness into the past in an effort to come to terms with her own stance in a vastly changing situation, the transformation spurred on mainly by the influence of the paternal head of the extended family, Babamakuru. The latter's family themselves experience the extremely painful confusion resulting from their intimate encounter with westernization while still maintaining ties with their traditions and culture, as practised by Tambu's family.

There are, however, marked – and appropriate – stylistic differences between these two novels. Head relies heavily, and with considerable skill, on devices needed to convey her intricate thematic concerns. By contrast, a straightforward narrative without embellishment in the form of satire and a well-established symbolism are the hallmarks of Dangarembga's formal technique. While most of the stylistic devices in *A Question* combine to forcefully express the spiritual bewilderment and agony of a soul in the clutches of evil, the fairly simple and unruffled prose of *Nervous Conditions* fittingly reflects Tambu's innocence while struggling to understand her world.

As a mature writer, Head succeeds in rendering madness through a fictional postcolonial narrative discourse. In this novel all relationships between people – good or evil, natural or perverse, real or fictional, sane or insane – are mediated by narrative. Although the discourse of the

outward circumstances of apartheid and racism shapes these narratives, they are more complex than simple reflections. Head uses narratives to construct a discourse of domination, like those of Sello, Dan and the school principal's story of Elizabeth's mother's insanity, but also to establish the process of healing, which Elizabeth eventually achieves in the garden project. The concentration on narrative implies that the most important changes inflicted by apartheid and racism are fictional, because they are visions created by Elizabeth's own schizophrenic personality. By contrast, fiction plays a part in Elizabeth's healing process, because fictional narratives of oppression and distortion are counteracted in her mind by narratives of goodness and benignity, such as those expressed by the white doctor and Kenosi. Like a number of African novels, *A Question* is thus structured on an alternation of narratives and counter-narratives. In *Nervous Conditions* Tambu's childhood innocence enables Dangarembga to write a calm, unemotional tale of patriarchal and colonial domination. Tambu's rendering of her struggle to understand and accept changes caused by westernization does not extend to distinguishing between good and evil, as does Elizabeth's. Tambu's narrative is, therefore, much more simplified and objective, though she herself intervenes to explain the intricacies inherent in her situation when she directly addresses her imaginary readers:

You might think that there was no real danger. You might think that, after all, these were only rooms decorated with the sort of accessories that the local interpretations of British interior-decor magazines were describing as standard, and nothing threatening in that. But really the situation was not so simple. Although I was vague at the time and could not have described my circumstances so aptly, the real situation was this: Babamukuru was God, therefore, I had arrived in Heaven. I was in danger of becoming an angel, or at the very least a saint, and forgetting how ordinary humans existed – from minute to minute and from hand to mouth (NC:19).

Thus, Tambu's situation is the direct antithesis of Elizabeth's: the influence of Dan and Sello especially aggravates her mental torture until she fears she is in the power of the devil: "There is a line that forms the title of the book – if the things of the soul are really a question of power then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer. That is, I might in my essence then symbolize Satan" (Marquard, 1978:53). While Babamukuru's paternalistic attitude causes much suffering in the lives of so many members of the extended family, Sello reinforces Elizabeth's insecurity while Dan's destructive power lies in his ability to deceive her.

Myth, allegory and symbolism are of prime importance in the construction of Elizabeth's anguished mental state because they serve to unify

the seemingly loose threads in the novel. According to Joyce Johnson (1985:199) the novel functions on two levels: the personal and universal. In stressing Elizabeth's quest to be liberated from the suffering caused by prejudice and oppression, the writer extends her discourse to include the oppression of a whole society. Head widens Elizabeth's search for a guiding philosophy to give meaning to her own life to that of a society attempting to define its goals. She does so by employing symbolic paradigms in African, Eastern and Western mythologies, coupled with psychological, philosophical and religious concepts and symbols. Although not so overtly symbolic, *Nervous Conditions* also universalizes the problem of especially sexual oppression in a postcolonial African society.

Head masterfully uses allegorical figures, such as Medusa, to deconstruct the myth of man's fall from and return to God, in other words the myth of polarity. In this respect Sello and Medusa, together with Dan, may be viewed as allegorical figures who represent the polarities of good and evil accompanying Elizabeth on her nightmarish journey towards and out of her mental breakdown. Elizabeth, however, succeeds in her quest to liberate herself from this bondage. Linda Beard (1979:268) observes that in this novel the "fundamental absolute to be dismantled ... is the myth of polarity". Head's dismantling of the myth also rests on the use of dreams, imaginings and phantasmagoric musing in which myth and allegory merge. The lack of an extremely sophisticated frame of reference in *Nervous Conditions* reinforces the authenticity of the worldview of the teenager, Tambu. She makes use of everyday metaphors, for example, "I have seen enough to know that blame does not come in neatly packaged parcels" (NC:12).

3. Conclusion

Both novelists should be hailed for breaking new ground. It is generally accepted that *A Question* is the first novel by a female African writer in which madness is explored, while Dangarembga is most probably the first African female writer to examine the traditionally exclusively white nervous disorders of anorexia and bulimia. Both writers thus succeed in moving beyond the confines of their own literary conventions. In its portrayal of madness, sexuality and guilt, Head's work resembles that of Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer rather than that of her contemporary female African writers. Pearse (1983:81) acclaims Head's unique treatment of this theme by comparing her favourably to distinguished male African writers also handling this theme:

No work in the corpus of African literature dealing with the theme of madness, for example Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Kofi Awoonor' *This*

Earth, My Brother, or Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* capture the complexity and intensity of the insane mind as does Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.

In commenting on voice in *Nervous Conditions*, Pauline Uwakweh (1995:65) regards the employment of the "autobiographical mode" as functional in the creation of the specific kind of novel:

... the self-referential nature of the autobiographical mode adopted by Dangarembga as a literary strategy marks her attainment of voice in the Zimbabwean male-dominated literary arena. Voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic. It proclaims an individual as a conscious being capable of independent thought and action.

Moreover, *A Question* occupies a unique position in the canon of African fiction because it is perhaps the first metaphysical novel on the subject of "nation and national unity to come out of Southern Africa" (Marquard, 1978:61). Dangarembga is also engaged in nation building. Her novel clearly indicates that the wellbeing of racist and sexist Rhodesia depends on changed perceptions of women as well as on their undaunted will and ability to stand together and strive to articulate their aspirations in order to be recognised as part of the country and its culture. As Bessie Head has indicated that Elizabeth finds healing when being accepted into the brotherhood of Man, Tambu and Nyasha "symbolize the 'wholeness' and 'healing' of African womanist identity" (Aegerter, 1996:238).

A Question and *Nervous Conditions* attest to the fact that a number of Southern African female writers have recently refused to succumb to the "social silencing and political disenfranchisement" (Aegerter, 1996:231) traditionally experienced by women of colour and reinforced during colonial and neocolonial times. In this regard Aegerter (1996:231) states: "Placing women at the center of textual representation refuses their regulation to a 'matrix of marginality' that oppresses according to race, class, gender, and culture, and restores women's centrality in cultural- and self-definition". In this newly-assumed role women have shed their cloak of dependence and inactivity by fulfilling their respective roles as actors who strive to take charge of their own lives. Where Elizabeth merely succeeds in overcoming physical and mental obstacles and there is uncertainty about the outcome of Nyasha's struggle, Tambu seems to be the greatest victor: she succeeds in attaining a deeper insight into the nature of resistance because she soon acquires the wisdom to be diplomatic when dealing with problematic issues stemming from patriarchal and colonial structures of authority. She moreover strives to realise and develop her own "self". Dangarembga, especially, has thus succee-

ded in demystifying the patriarchal social structure as well as colonial cultural domination.

In addition, this article has revealed pronounced differences in the two authors' approach to characterization. Despite the fact that Head's protagonists usually develop an unusual and egalitarian trend, her characters in *A Question* exceed the boundaries of her earlier portrayals. Her creation of mythical and allegorical characters is, however, functional and in keeping with the complex nature of her last novel. By contrast, Dangarembga's characters are representative of the ordinary black Rhodesians of their time. There nevertheless are remarkable similarities between the characteristics of the two female protagonists. These similarities are situated especially in their awareness of their otherness as a result of Elizabeth's settling in a new country which she experiences as cold and hostile and in Nyasha's return to her old country where she thinks of herself as a "hybrid" (NC:78). Elizabeth and Nyasha are thus both subjected to the "nervous conditions" Fanon believes colonized subjects suffer from.

To conclude, *A Question* is a powerful novel, exhibiting the stylistic excellence of an accomplished writer. It certainly brings to a suitable close Head's career as one of the most important female African writers of the twentieth century. Although less complicated, *Nervous Conditions* promises a distinguished career for its young author. This promise is substantiated by Dangarembga's statement "that the story is not finished – it's never finished" (NC:204), allowing us to anticipate a sequel to this literary achievement, which the writer is presently working on.

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Key concepts:

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Kernwoorde:

Afrikaliteratuur
Dangarembga
eetsteurnisse
Head
senuweetoestande
vroueliteratuur