


# Otherization and Identity Distortion in Dangarembga's Writing

Inas Laheg

Ph. D. Candidate, Department of Literature of Foreign Countries  
Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3048-5213>

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## Abstract

*In spite of the fact that most African novelists, penning stories in English language by the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, were graduates of the British colonial missionaries and universities, they had yet been able to escape the suppressive ideology of colonization and become genuine mouthpieces for their native communities' struggles and adversity. Amongst whom, the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga rose to the fore as representative of her fellow countrywomen during the British colonization. Henceforth, concomitant with the rise of postcolonial criticism in the literary arena, this paper aims to address the European colonial mechanism of otherization and its impact on the identity construction of the otherized subject in Dangarembga's novels, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. Dangarembga foreshadows the main thematic realm of her semi-autobiographical trilogy, through her first novel's title which is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's preface in the book of *The Wretched of the Earth*. To unravel the intricate complexities of the colonizer/colonized contact, this study pinpoints the psychological confusion of the protagonist, Tambudzai, as an exemplar of the colonized Black individual's distress. To fathom the depth of Tambu's psyche during those encounters, this paper relies on Elke Boehmer's attribution of otherization as a Western self-projecting process that seeks to produce self-soothing and "dark mirror-images" of the other. In addition, Du Bois's analysis of double consciousness seems to account for the protagonist's identity crisis and self alienation. In conclusion, Dangarembga does not seem as an opponent of cultural exchanges in general or hybridity in particular, but she simply advocates cautious adaption that does not decentre and disregard one's native-ness and cultural origins.*

**Keywords:** Alienation, Double Consciousness, Hybridity, Identity Crisis, Nativeness, Otherization, Postcolonial Criticism

## Introduction

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-colonial, political and armed resistance had infiltrated African, Asian and South American countries. Hence, postcolonial aftermath and problems have ever since prevailed political, social and literary discussions. Moore-Gilbert et al., locate postcolonial studies in between former Marxist and existentialist movements, as postcolonial critics are mostly engrossed in espousing and merging "political radicalism with a fundamental re-conception of the self" (Moore-Gilbert et al. 3). Postcolonial studies, as Ania Loomba clarifies are not simply subsequent to colonialism or symbolises its end, but rather indicates a non-rigid counter-discourse to colonial oppression and its oppressive working mechanisms (Moore-Gilbert et al. 12). Postcolonialism as a theoretical framework voices the silenced and suppressed narratives of third world countries. It disturbs the hegemony of modern ideologies. As Homi Bhabha clarifies in his book *The Location of Culture*, it explores "social pathologies", "loss of meaning" and "conditions of anomie" beyond the traditional stratification and conflicts of social classes (Moore-Gilbert et al. 171, 173 qtd. in Lazarus 3).

Since then writers, African in particular, have flung themselves into narrating and reviving colonial experiences from a postcolonial perspective, in attempts to guard their people from “postcolonial amnesia”, as Gandhi explains. Indeed, concomitant with the creation of the newly independent nations is the formerly colonized people’s ‘will-to-forget’ and the pre-dominance of current political ends over historical context and realities. Whilst the postcolonial nation has evoked the premises and slogans of new beginning and the eradication of colonial subjugation and control, writers rather urged that the suppression and intentional negligence of colonial traumatic memories are not synonymous with the liberation and genuine healing from the damage they have ever since brewed (Gandhi 4). In fact, postcolonial critics and writers are rather absorbed in re-writing historical events and happenings where the native community’s subjectivity and side of the story are regarded and foregrounded, unlike the imperial Eurocentric narratives which otherized and objectified them. Postcolonial authors are writing to offer their people an agency.

To revoke colonial dynamics, critics such as Boehmer, have devoted long passages in demystifying and tracing the root causes of otherization. In her book, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Boehmer links the colonial European otherization and negative representation of native people elsewhere to the former’s latent fears and terror that dominated their imagination and perception whilst stepping into Africa’s foreign, dark and wild environment. The Western novels and narratives that pictured native people as bestial, barbaric and animal-like are mere reflections and projections of the explorers innermost fright and dreadful anticipations (Boehmer 79, 90). Otherization and dehumanization of the natives provided the European aggressors with solid grounds of righteousness that served as sedatives relieving and soothing their sense of guilt.

A densely tackled issue within postcolonial writing is the identity and cultural crisis, native communities have endured and grappled with. The newly independent societies are confused and torn in between aversion towards the colonizer and disappointment with the national governments that

promised political independence yet are completely surrounded and compliant with their imperial masters. The ambitions of rebuilding independent and affluent countries were abjured with the dominance of corrupt politicians, spread of famine and poverty. The postcolonial generations who were aspiring to reinforce and consolidate their inherited legacy of independence, were confronted with systematic norms that prioritized the colonizer’s language and culture. Native languages and dialects which served for years as safe and solid repositories preserving their ancestors’ cultural heritage, traditions and social habits are cracked and fractured with the dominance of European languages, newly incoming religious practices and foreign political hierarchies. Indigenous tongues were degraded and deemed obsolete (Olaniyan 275-276).

Amidst the adverse circumstances and endless struggles, female African writers did not fail in shedding light on Black women’s agony, where issues of alienation and otherization are doubled and tripled. Indigenous women are pictured as preys of colonial and nationalist agendas as well. Independence might have freed women from the direct effects of Eurocentric patriarchal systems, but it has absolutely prisoned them within a new national formulas. Native women were almost always represented by someone else. National patriarchal politicians claimed that women wanted to preserve traditions and dedicate themselves to the private sphere.

At the same time, Eurocentric feminist discourses totalized and reduced them within a monotonous single group labelled as oppressed. Accordingly, third world women’s challenges and troubles were for a long time speculated and tackled whilst prioritizing and centralizing another dominant group’s agenda over their genuine urgencies. Henceforth, it became postcolonial authors and critics’ duty to bestow such marginalized groups a platform and a voice to directly represent themselves. By 1990, it became clear that the agents of either claims, nationalists and European feminists, were no more than yet other suppressive ideologies that hoodwinked the truth and exploited the native women’s cause for their own gains and concerns (Young 107).

This research profoundly investigates and dissects the mechanisms of otherization and de-individualization exerted by the European colonizer against the colonized native, through zooming on Tambuzdai's journey starting from her enrolment in the missionary school, in *Nervous Conditions*, to her onerous educational experience at Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, in *The Book of Not*. Herein, the critical interchange and intersection between Elleke Boehmer's framework of otherization, in her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, and the explanations of the American Pan-Africanist William E. B. Du Bois about the sense of double consciousness are contextualized and foregrounded as the theoretical bedrock of this analysis. By this end, this critical study revisits and highlights Dangarembga's implicit emphasis on the formative role of power politics in misshaping and simultaneously reshaping the identity of the overpowered and colonized subjects.

### **Tsitsi Dangarembga's Writing**

Tsitsi Dangarembga leads the literary arena as the first Zimbabwean woman novelist writing in English. Dangarembga was born in Rhodesia yet she had spent her early life in UK. Upon her return back to Rhodesia by the age of six, she became a student at the British missionary schools. After finishing her high school education, Dangarembga once again headed back to UK in hopes to obtain her medical diploma at Cambridge university. Yet she was forced after three years to go back to her motherland with no diploma due to the unbearably racist treatment and White fascist environment. However, this final destination towards her native land marked the start of her literary journey and political involvement into her country's affair (McLeod 210).

Dangarembga's novels embody and encrypt the cultural, social and emotional confrontations she grappled with during her journey in-between motherland and UK. Prominently her sequel of three novels, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body*, is implicitly indicative of the tension between the British colonizer and Shona people in Rhodesia, that is the pre-colonial name of Zimbabwe. *Nervous Conditions* follows Tambuzdai's strenuous educational path as a Black

female from a poor native Shona family. Along the narrative course, light is shed on her cousin's Nyasha, who spent her early years in the UK. Her debut novel long passages were dedicated to describing the Shona society's cultural traditions and familial systems. Much attention has been paid to her uncle's relationship with her family and the role of tribe elders in shaping their grandchildren's life. *The Book of Not* traces Tambuzdai's life after she has enrolled at a mostly-White-students high school. In parallel with such events and the racism inflicted, the book depicts the Guerrilla war of freedom fighters against the colonial European settlers.

### **Demonic Other**

The colonial encounter accentuated the prevalence of Eurocentric norms in a sense that it has boldly delineated and solidified the existence of binary oppositions everywhere. The West, as evocative of dominance, Whiteness and masterminding, became a direct counterpart of the indigene which symbolises submission, blackness and slavery. Such an intentional disparity is marked in Dangarembga's first novel, *Nervous Conditions*. Tambuzdai's description of the houses sheltering missionary school teachers mirrors the dissimilarities between that of British descent and Shona teachers, "Houses had to be built to shelter the new crop of educated Africans ... these houses that accommodated the returning teachers remained dark and ruddy" (Dangarembga: *Nervous* 63).

Babamukuru, as Tambu proudly notes, was "the only African" residing in an externally white-painted household (Dangarembga: *Nervous* 63). Through the lines, the reason for such an exception is illustrated and attributed to his moving to the UK and pursuing a diploma from a Western university. In the other hand, Tambu who studied in Rhodesia has already become conscious to the fact that "in spite of a degree, I was only marginally better paid than the beggars, who, fulfilling the prophecies of the whites ..." (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 198). Such narratives demonstrate that education in itself was not the standard against which the colonized people's merit was measured. In fact, pertinence to White race and obtaining acknowledgement from its systematic institutions are pinned as the sole

criteria and dividing line for the African natives to prove their worthiness and humanity. All that is white is superior and worthy of consideration, else is inferior and demonic.

Boehmer repeatedly confirms that the ‘other’ is a mere European creation produced to assert their being as an opposite to it. Europeans draw the African as barbaric to base themselves as civilized and even devoted much of their quasi-scientific and critical writing in evidencing that Africans were “responsible for their own degradation”, in attempts to elevate the nudging guilt of their unethical deeds, such as slavery. Unconsciously, the west has always hunted for a messy ‘rest’ to protrude itself as its tidy counterpart. The European, as Boehmer concludes, needed that “his existence be acknowledged by an entity whose full humanity he refused to accept” (Boehmer 77-80).

In “The Sartrean Account of the Look as a Theory of Dialogue”, Steve Martinot analyzes Jean Paul Sartre’s writing about otherization and the gaze. Herein, a particular account is dedicated to his major book *Being and Nothingness*. Leaning on the latter’s philosophy Martinot explicates the way “one is given a nature, an “outside;” the self (the “I”) finds its foundation beyond itself”. Such an explanation brings about the situation of otherized Africans, where their agency and subjectivity are robbed. Tambu perceives herself through the eyes of White colonizers who have through repeated confirmations of otherization persuaded her that she is a descent of barbarians and “terrorists”. Tambu, as Martinot terms it, was “transformed from person to personage” (Martinot).

### **Identity Distortion**

The traces evidencing Tambu’s identity crisis in Dangarembga’s semi-autobiographies are prevalent and diverse. Tambuzdai’s psychic malaise is apparent in the constant stances of her self-hate and feeling of gratefulness towards a racist and abusing colonizer. However, a comprehensive reading of William E. B. Du Bois’s and Frantz Fanon’s critical analysis of the African men psychology reveals the root causes of such a crisis. In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, the American sociologist further builds on Fanon’s studies and gives an account of the way Black people

view themselves through the spectrum of the White race. Du Bois attributes the men of colour identity crisis to a ceaselessly accompanying sense of double consciousness (Sommer 165).

Such a feeling is engendered through ontological mechanisms such as the veil and twoness. The veil, in Du Bois’s words, stands for a symbolic curtain that prisons each person within the confines of his/her own race and partially blinds them to people of other colours and races. Conspicuously, the person’s position pertaining to this veil is of paramount importance. The veil working mechanisms are reinforced and encoded in line with power dynamics, in a way that the dominant and controlling White does not perceive or misperceives the dominated and controlled men of colour. Thus, the latter becomes entangled and entirely preoccupied in proving oneself and clearing the vogue, only to no avail (Itzigsohn and Brown 235). Such traits are apparent in Tambu’s desperate and relentless efforts in proving her worth to her teachers and White classmates through unquestionably embracing the Western other’ teachings and obligations.

Tambu’s White classmates were unable to see her and her Black friends. They were seeing their presumption and stereotypes of the Black men in general. Such a fact was manifest in many stances of their slips of tongue and conversations, as Tracy states, whilst describing Tambu’s friend, Ntombi, ‘The eyes too. Just like a cow’s!’ (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 44). Tambu who speaks loudly and desperately to her blind and deaf White classmates to make herself recognized by them as an equal human, unconsciously was internalizing their stereotypes of her into the construction of her identity and self-image. Such an internal grapple is noted in the instances of hesitancy and bafflement towards formerly axiomatic truths, “I could not make up my mind what in this case constituted a proper sort of personhood” (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 43).

Concernedly, Tambuzdai confessions and repeated frustrations such as “could fall into the habit of believing I deserved as much as they had” (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 44), “how fearful I was that I deserved it” (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 157) and “I deserved whatever happened” (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 192), display the way her confusion was developing into low self-

esteem and yet to a self-loathing propensity. In spite of Tambu's reflective and thoughtful disposition, her growing compliance towards the dynamics that are impeding her existence and deservingness, became a clear indication of the shrinking of her individuality and personhood.

Her description of the White girls' avoidance of touch and closeness with Black students, stating that "there was agony in not knowing whether she [the White student] would move from your presence or not, ..." (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 50), mirrors Tambuzdai's absorption in calculating White people's reactions and perception of her. Her ontological values, self-worth and cultural standards are not the centre of her identity making anymore, but the depraved imperatives and inharmonious norms of someone else's, who negates her very being and existential worth, are ruling her thinking.

Tambuzdai inner conscience and value judgement are disfigured to the extent of questioning the simplest and most vital principles she was raised with. She was reconstructing them in accordance with the White men's perspective, notwithstanding her awareness and repeated confessions of the immorality and unethical propensity of the White colonizers. The gradual vagueness and uncertainty that dominated her perception of her deeply rooted Shona principle of "Unhu", which is translated into English as "personhood" (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 249), which had always been as intelligible and clear as daylight before her enrolment in the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, reflects the depth of the existential damage that deluged Tambuzdai.

European materialistic and individualistic principles unconsciously seeped into her mind and were systematically subversive of her sense of identity and her former loyalties to the native definition of unhu, personhood, which priorities the communal harmony and foregrounds the mantra of "I am well if you are too" (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 102). Tambu's prolonged soliloquy, reflects the damage inflicted,

Was it the unhu [personhood] you possessed that earned you your possessions, or did you acquire unhu once you possessed them? ... The white girls had fatter manila envelopes than we did residing in

Miss Plato's cash box. The whole world wanted to reciprocate with them, so surely they possessed more unhu! ... it became apparent one path to unhu was the way of material preponderance. (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 145)

The Western hegemony and impositions, that is cast over Black students as a minority in a mostly White school, left Tambu wrestling with a perpetual questioning of the ethical grounds of her tribal and communal cultural mores. At the same time, not a single reservation or resentment was addressed towards the moral decay and bearings of Western commands, such as "your skin and theirs should not come in contact" (Dangarembga: *The Book of Not* 50). Tambu was strangled in a consuming and destructive cycle that had already left deep psychological bruises on the making of her identity.

### Conclusion

This paper has followed the politics of otherization, in particular the rendering of the indigene as 'Other' by Western colonization and the formative effects such a dynamic casts on the native community and its people's identity construction. Analyzing Tsitsi Dangarembga's widely acclaimed novels, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* as exemplars, the protagonist, Tambuzdai, is prefigured as a psychologically harmed and disfigured character. Tambu's educational path and everyday interactions with the Western colonizer, discloses the latter's inclination in dividing the world into binary opposites, where the rest is a sheer demonic mirror image of its presumably angelic, rational and civilized self. Du Bois's theorization of the Black person's sense of double consciousness explains Tambu's psychic malaises and struggles. Tambu's identity crisis is fuelled and intensified by the accompanying sense of being perceived as a problem and her prioritization of White people's perception of her. The European stereotypes she attempted to erode, have by means of power politics owned her mind and distorted her self-image.

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## Author Details

**Inas Laheg**, Ph. D. Candidate, Department of Literature of Foreign Countries, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan, **Email ID:** [inas.laheg@adu.edu.az](mailto:inas.laheg@adu.edu.az)