

Yiqi Shao

Professor Rachel Dale

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Resisting the Patriarchal Grip: Nyasha's Struggle for Identity in *Nervous Conditions*

"You think I do it to hurt you?" Nyasha asks her father during one of their explosive confrontations, her voice trembling with a mix of defiance and despair. This single question captures the essence of Nyasha's struggle in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Her story transcends simple rebellion against a domineering father, evolving into a profound exploration of identity, resistance, and the personal cost of defying oppressive systems. Nyasha's journey shows how colonialism and patriarchy work together to suppress individuality. Drawing on works by Tsitsi Dangarembga and some other citations, my essay explores Nyasha's resistance as a deeply personal yet political act of defiance, particularly focusing on the fraught father-daughter relationship and its broader implications in a postcolonial patriarchal context.

Nyasha and Babamukuru: Father-Daughter Relationships Under Patriarchal Control

At the heart of *Nervous Conditions* lies an intensive conflict between Nyasha and her father, Babamukuru. Their relationship is not just one of generational conflict but reflects how patriarchal control operates within the family to reinforce wider social

and colonial hierarchies. Babamukuru, shaped by colonial education and tradition, embodies the contradictions of postcolonial society. Just like what I said in my presentation, Babamukuru symbolizes the vivid expression of patriarchal ideas in society which reflects in the family. While his success represents a form of upward mobility, it also makes him an enforcer of colonial norms. His strict insistence on discipline—particularly when it comes to Nyasha—highlights his internalization of both patriarchal and colonial ideals.

The relationship between Nyasha and her father, Babamukuru, is key to understanding her resistance in *Nervous Conditions*. As Anne McClintock points out in *Imperial Leather*, colonial systems often relied on gender hierarchies to maintain control, turning the home into a place where women were disciplined and kept in line. Babamukuru's treatment of Nyasha reflects this idea. He expects all his family to obey without question and punishes Nyasha for stepping outside traditional gender roles. When Nyasha fights back, refusing to be the “good girl” her father wants her to be or follow his unfair rules, she does more than challenge her family—she shakes the foundations of the larger patriarchal system that Babamukuru represents.

Nyasha's rebellion also exposes the gendered double standards present in postcolonial families. While her brother Chido is praised for assimilating into Western norms, Nyasha's defiance has been seen as shameful from Babamukuru. Babamukuru's anger at her behavior—whether it's staying out late or questioning his authority—reveals how women are disproportionately burdened with upholding cultural values. As Bell

Hooks explains in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, marginalized women are often expected to maintain silence and submission to preserve the patriarchal family unit. I think Nyasha's resistance is revolutionary because it rejects his father's expectation, making her a threat to the systems that seek to define her and makes her a stranger in her family. Perhaps that's a main reason why Babamukuru thought his authority has been challenged.

Education and Knowledge: The Double-Edged Sword of Liberation

Nyasha's intellectual awakening adds another layer to her struggles and it intensifies the conflict between her and Babamukuru too. Her education, especially the years she spent in England, becomes both a blessing and a burden, so based on my understanding, her education both has advantage and disadvantage. On the one hand, it gives her the ability to recognize and challenge the colonial and patriarchal systems that shape her world. She learns to think critically, question authority, and expose the injustices around her. However, this same education leaves her feeling isolated from her family and her culture. Nyasha is trapped between two worlds—one shaped by her Western education and another grounded in her African roots. From my perspective, this conflict reflects Frantz Fanon's idea in *The Wretched of the Earth* that colonial education often creates a fractured identity, where the colonized person is torn between the colonizer's values and their own cultural heritage. That precisely reflects Nyasha's dilemma between her education and the original culture which exists in her family.

Nyasha's frustration with this tension explodes in one of the novel's most powerful scenes, when she throws her history books across the room and shouts, "Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies." Her anger comes from realizing that the colonial education she received is filled with false narratives that erase African stories and voices. Education, which was supposed to uplift and empower her, instead feels like another form of control. I think this reflects Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's argument in *Decolonizing the Mind*: colonial education alienates people from their culture while forcing them to accept Western dominance as the only truth. Nyasha's anger, then, is not just personal—it is a rejection of the entire system that tries to erase her identity.

At the same time, Nyasha's struggles stand in sharp contrast to Tambu's perspective on education. For Tambu, school represents an escape from the hardships of life at the homestead and a way to achieve independence. She sees education as a path to opportunity, success, and freedom. Early in the novel, Tambu is eager to embrace "Englishness," believing that aligning herself with colonial ideals will improve her life. But as she watches Nyasha suffer under the weight of her awareness, Tambu begins to question the system she once admired. She reflects, "I was beginning to suspect that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the 'Englishness' of the mission." This moment shows Tambu's growing understanding of the darker side of colonial education: it offers opportunities, but at the cost of erasing identity and creating divisions within families and communities.

Nyasha's struggles ultimately influence Tambu's journey. Through Nyasha's defiance, Tambu learns to see education more critically—not just as a tool for progress, but as a system that can also oppress and alienate. Nyasha's awareness of the contradictions in her education forces those around her, including Tambu, to question the values they have accepted without hesitation. Nyasha's story becomes a warning and a lesson, showing how systems of power, even when disguised as opportunities, can carry hidden costs. It could be the conflicts between family or contradiction on different ideas.

Nyasha's Body as a Site of Protest

Nyasha's rebellion extends beyond her words and intellect to her very body. There's a special plot that I want to mention is that Nyasha's eating disorder. Her eating disorder becomes a physical manifestation of her resistance, a way to reclaim control over herself when all other forms of autonomy are denied. Bell Hooks' exploration of the body in *Feminist Theory* provides insight into this phenomenon, highlighting how women's bodies often become battlegrounds where systems of oppression manifest. For Nyasha, her refusal to eat is not just about food—it is a rejection of the expectations placed upon her as a young woman. Her repeated refrain, "I'm not hungry," becomes a symbolic rejection of the roles imposed on her by her father, her culture, and colonial society. It can be seen as a resistant to her father's oppression and the fight with the patriarchy in her family.

Nyasha's physical decline shows the heavy price she pays for resisting oppressive systems. Her extreme weight loss and eventual breakdown highlight the deep emotional and psychological strain that comes with standing up to entrenched power. I want to cite Frantz Fanon's ideas in *The Wretched of the Earth* help explain this—he suggests that systemic oppression often leads to harmful, self-destructive behaviors in those who are oppressed. Nyasha's eating disorder, in this light, is not only a form of protest but also a response to the mental and emotional violence she endures.

One of the most striking moments is when Nyasha looks at herself in the mirror and says, "I'm not healthy... But I'm not a good girl anymore either." This part of the plot captures the painful contradiction in her rebellion. By rejecting the roles that others have forced on her, she asserts her independence, but it comes at a high personal cost. Her struggle shows the difficult truth about resistance: while it is often necessary, it can bring immense suffering to those who dare to fight against unjust systems.

The Broader Significance of Nyasha's Resistance

While Nyasha's struggles are personal, they also reflect bigger political and cultural issues. Through her character, Dangarembga criticizes how colonialism and patriarchy work together to control people in postcolonial societies. Nyasha's rebellion isn't just against her father—it's also against the larger systems he represents. Her actions expose how weak and fragile these systems can be when someone challenges them. This connects to Anne McClintock's argument that patriarchy relies on controlling women to keep order in colonized societies.

Nyasha's influence goes beyond her own battles. Her resistance makes Tambu—and the readers—think about the uncomfortable truths of colonial education, gender roles, and how easy it is to go along with systems of power without questioning them. Tambu's growing understanding shows how powerful Nyasha's defiance really is. Even though Nyasha suffers because of her rebellion, her actions push others to question the world around them.

At the same time, Dangarembga makes us think about whether real change is possible. Is *Nervous Conditions* a pessimistic story, or does it offer hope? Nyasha's breakdown shows how hard it is to resist systems that have so much power, but her refusal to give in also feels like a call to action. Even though it comes at a great personal cost, Nyasha's resistance proves how important it is to stand up to injustice. Through her story, Dangarembga encourages readers to look at their own lives, question unfair systems, and imagine ways to bring about change.

Conclusion: The Cost and Power of Defiance

Nyasha's journey in *Nervous Conditions* is a powerful exploration of resistance, identity, and the cost of defying oppression. Her conflict with Babamukuru reveals how patriarchal and colonial systems operate within families to maintain control, while her intellectual awakening and eating disorder expose the personal toll of challenging these forces. Drawing on insights from Frantz Fanon, Bell Hooks, Anne McClintock, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nyasha's story becomes a profound meditation on the complexities of rebellion.

Although Nyasha's defiance brings her significant suffering, it sends a strong and lasting message to the people who are reading this novel. Her rebellion forces others, especially Tambu and the readers, to reflect on how they might unknowingly support systems of oppression and realize the importance of questioning and seeking change. Dangarembga's novel doesn't provide simple solutions but instead asks readers to face the challenges of resistance—how necessary it is, how difficult it can be, and how it can inspire transformation. Nyasha's story is tragic, but it reminds us of the enduring strength of standing up to injustice. Her legacy pushes us to question the world around us, resist unfair systems, and strive for a more just and equal society.

Annotated Bibliography

1. Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*
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4. McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial*
5. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind*