

ALIENATION IN DANGAREMBGA'S SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract. This study traces aspects of alienation in Tsitsi Dangarembga's semi-autobiographies. Accordingly, the concept of Black European is foregrounded. Herein, Frantz Fanon's phases of nationalism are revised in sync with the protagonist's cultural estrangement. As a result, Tambu's journey of cultural assimilation, rather unveils the ideologically subversive dynamics of European colonization.

Keywords: Alienation, assimilation, Black European, cultural estrangement, ideology, semi-autobiographies.

DANGAREMBGA'NIN YARIAVTOBİO- QRAFİYALARINDA ÖZGƏLƏŞDİRMƏ

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Xülasə. Məqalədə Tsitsi Dangarembqa'nın yarı avtobiografiyalarında özgələşdirmə aspektləri təhlil edilir. Bununla əlaqədar olaraq "Qara Avropalı" anlayışı ön plana çəkilir. Bu halda Frants Fanonun millətçilik mərhələləri baş qəhrəmanın mədəni özgələşdirilməsi ilə sinkronlaşdırılaraq yenidən nəzərdən keçirilir. Nəticədə, Tambunun mədəni assimilyasiyası yolu, əksinə, Avropa müstəmləkəçiliyinin ideoloji cəhətdən təxribatçı dinamikasını aşkara çıxarır.

Açar sözlər: Özgələşdirmə, assimilyasiya, qara avropalı, mədəni özgələşdirmə, ideologiya, yarıavtobiografiyalar.

ОТЧУЖДЕНИЕ В ПОЛУАВТОБИОГРА- ФИЯХ ДАНГАРЕМБГИ

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Резюме. В данном исследовании прослеживаются аспекты отчуждения в полу-автобиографических произведениях Цици Дангарембги. И в связи с этим, на первый план выходит понятие «черный европеец». В данном случае, фазы национализма Франца Фанона пересматриваются синхронно с культурным отчуждением главного героя. В результате этого, путь культурной ассимиляции Тамбу раскрывает идеологически подрывную динамику европейской колонизации.

Ключевые слова: Отчуждение, ассимиляция, чернокожий европеец, культурное отчуждение, идеология, полу-автобиографическое произведение.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial criticism is emblematic of a literary movement that coincides with the twentieth century revolutions of independence in African, Asian and Latin American countries. Remarkably, it seeks to unveil colonial atrocities and to decolonize and nourish native people's cultures that were buried by the imperial hegemonic ideologies. Such a literary mode has been, to great extent, the offspring of the theoretical intersection of critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Gayatri Spivak. Seminal works such as *Orientalism*, *The Location of Culture*, *Black Skin, White Masks* and "Can the Subaltern Speak?" reassessed the teachings of European classics and revolutionized the contemporary frame of thought.

Particularly, they called for an interdisciplinary approach that integrated insights from feminist, psychoanalyst, deconstructionist and Marxist studies. Henceforth, by the 1990s, postcolonial literature further expanded to embody a generatively liberating space, beyond the limiting dichotomy of the colonized and colonizer. Narratives voicing the struggles of individuals suppressed by means of gender, race, social class and religion were incorporated into the field as well. Within this rubric, discourse of “doubly or triply marginalized” people, such as women, indigenous communities and diasporic subjects were accentuated [11, p.214, p.216]. Accordingly, aspects of displacement, otherization and alienation were brought into the fore.

Postcolonial literature, being a product of spaces of in-betweenness and hybridity, is characteristic of diversity, interlanguage and cross cultural discourses. Postcolonial texts usually incorporate literary techniques that import indicators from other languages and ensure the presence of native cultures markers such as glossing, which stands for a parenthetical translation for transliterated words from the writer’s native language. In addition they have become sites of untranslated words which communicate cross cultural interchanges. Such techniques re-live and ensoul the indigenous culture, language and heritage. At the same time, they throw shades of estrangement, paradox and distance between the language used and the culture portrayed [2, p.60, p.63].

2. (Semi)Autobiography as a Postcolonial Mode of Narrative

As much as literature has served as a mirror to the author’s environment, it has as well functioned as a self-reflective capsule, transmitting authors inwards into the depths of their psyche and long abandoned (un/sub)conscious. Heading inwards usually brings about one literary mode, that is embodied in form of the genre of autobiographies. The latter takes myriad styles, inclusive of personal diaries, memoirs and (non)fictional autobiographies [5, p.115]. Such dissimilar styles are bound with one common criterion, necessitating the writers’ retrospective narration of their own experiences and lives. The genre’s loose and nonrigid disposition caters for authors an unlimited scope to venture into underrepresented subjectivities freely.

Circa the 1930s up till the 1990s, countless renowned autobiographies were penned by founding fathers and distinguished nationalists. Philip Holden clarifies, in his research paper “Postcolonial auto/biography”, that the function of autobiographies evolved as decolonization was in ferment throughout the tri-continents. However, such a surge has been a target of vehement criticism from both movements, postcolonialism and postmodernism. Studies similar to that of Georges Gusdorf, attacked the adoption of the autobiographical model, for being a ‘constraining template’. Gusdorf adds that it is no more than yet another form of intellectual colonization, since autobiography by epistemological means is a Western genre [9, p.114, p.110].

Nevertheless, the genre has been deployed and exploited most by postcolonial authors, due to its responsiveness to “structures of power and privilege” and its ability in challenging and recomposing such structures. Autobiography allows the postcolonial writer to flexibly and unrestrictedly straddle in between both realms, the public and private, evoking the incorporation of unprecedented subjectivities with each person’s act of reading. Within this realm, authors cater their readers with a first-hand account about their indigenous and native culture, whilst smoothly punctuating the aftermaths of the subversive practices of colonial regimes. Autobiographical manuscripts engender discursive and textual forms that are beyond the typical “formalist terms”. It liberates the writer from issues of “referentiality” [9, p.107, p.117].

3. Dangarembga’s Semi-autobiographies

One of the pioneering African novelists is Tsitsi Dangarembga. Her semi-autobiographies parallel and mirror her life story which fluctuated in between Zimbabwe and England. Although she was born in Zimbabwe, which was known as Rhodesia back then, she had spent her early years in the UK. As soon as her parents education ended in there, Dangarembga returned to Zimbabwe with her family by the age of six. However, the nexus between her and the European colonizer was prolonged due to her educational path. Dangarembga’s educational journey started at a British school and ended unfinished at British university. However, in between the two ends, she was enrolled at a missionary school and then at an American convent school in Zimbabwe. Dangarembga’s pursuing of a medical degree at Cambridge university did not last due to the racism, alienation and isolation she had faced as a Black African student.

Her debut novel centres around Tambu, a determined girl striving to gain proper education like her brother. Being a female and the second child of a very poor family, her older brother was favoured as the family’s prospect and hence worthy of an educational opportunity. However, as she moved to live with her uncle and was registered at the missionary school due to her brother’s death, her relationship with her cousin Nayasha is brought to the centre. Nayasha, similar to Dangarembga’s own life, was born in Zimbabwe then moved to England with her parents, who were pursuing a higher degree and came home back after years. Such a journey and dislocation estranged their children from their cultural and linguistic roots.

As a continuation, *The Book of Not* is rather a sequel of the first semi-autobiography. It opens with Tambu’s succeeding in winning a seat at Young Ladies’ College of the Sacred Heart, a very prestigious educational institute where Black students were a minority within White majority. This book further extends to portray the war of independence and its effects on Tambu’s life. Whilst her sister lost her leg to an explosion, her uncle, Babamukuru, was threatened for allowing his niece, Tambu, to study in White school. At this stage, her contact with the Western other became more notable and consistent. Such a contact, nonetheless, was concomitant with the rise of her double consciousness of her Blackness and inferiority. Her

sense of unfitting and un-belonging intensified. Tambu who was unaccepted by her White classmates grew up to question her use of English and negligence of her native culture and language.

4. The Alienated Black European

A protruding aspect in Dangarembga's novels, has long been conceptualized by Babalola as the emergence of "black European" or "black Whiteman" [4, p.146], who lives in conformity with the colonizer's life style and unconsciously mistakes him/herself as one of them. To such a phenomenon Frantz Fanon, the Caribbean psychiatrist and prominent postcolonial political philosopher in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, adds that Black children studying in schools of White people are repeatedly exposed to implicitly programming expressions such as "our ancestors, the Gauls". They gradually and unconsciously attribute themselves to "the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages" [8, p.114]. Accordingly, throughout such formative years, they appropriate White people's demeanour, culture and manners.

They grew up to side with the White hero and simultaneously be antagonistic with the anti-hero, who is the uneducated Black men. Excerpts that foreground stories of savages, narrated in the school from White people's perspective, bring into their mind images of uncivilized Black African in the forest, who refuses to embrace Whiteness and its enlightenment. The deposition of such a perception leads to the "crystallization" of Whiteness and its fundamental principals as a constructing block of their identity. Once they depart to Europe or, in the case of Tambu, to a White majority inhabitation, the truth will be unveiled. They shockingly will discover that "Negro" describes them, in spite of their education, as much as it does with the uneducated Black men, who is living in the savages. "Negro" simply defines and encompasses all that is Black. They are particularly no exception to the rule, even though they embrace Whiteness and its teachings [8, p.114].

Remarkably, Fanon addresses the crossroads of betweenness, the educated Black men stands in during such a realization. They become obliged to choose between the European world, that is emblematic of civilization or their cultural origins, which are reduced to a backward and bestial entity. Whilst the former entails their denial of parts of their identity and hence being thrown into an inescapable neurosis of self hate, the latter leads into a de-colonial awakening and an arduous homeward journey [8, p.115]. In line with Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*, it is observed that Tambuzdai has rerouted towards a de-colonial pursuit. To such a trajectory Chidi Amuta in his critical paper, "Fanon, Cabral and Ngugi On National Liberation", brings about Frantz Fanon distinction between three stages, arranged as "the assimilationist phase", "the cultural nationalist phase" and "the nationalist phase" [1, p.158].

5. The Assimilationist Phase

In one of his most acclaimed books, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon delineates the first stage as the period that manifests the native's assimilation, absorption and appropriation of the colonizer's conduct and customs [1, p.158]. Herein native people view themselves as if in a challenge of proving one's self worth. They, simply, work to show that they, too, are potent and capable of embarrassing the so-called civilization. To reach such an aimed version of self-image, they exert themselves into adopting the colonizers traditions. In a parallel pace, they shed as much of their nativity and Blackness as possible. In other words, their Blackness and origins become gradually stained and whitened by alienating and estranging practices.

Akin to such a phase of assimilation, Dangarembga's novels navigate into the aspect of mimicry. The postcolonial term simply refers to "an opportunistic pattern of behavior"; one imitates the dominant group's behaviour to escape the dominated role [10]. The colonized subjects, allured by the power of the colonizers, fell prey into adopting their cultural mores, values and traditions in hopes to acquire power, authority and domination equal to theirs. Such a stage is traced in Tambu's eagerness when she had first moved into her uncle's house that was nearby the missionary school and which was in the neighbourhood of White people. Tambu immersed her mind and body in learning their etiquettes, values and everyday habits.

Since her registration in the missionary, Tambu's happiness was linked to White bound customs whilst her disfavour and expressions of contempt were directed to the traditional style of her previous life. She worked to speak English in an eloquent and poise manner that is similar to the native themselves, as the novel narrates memorization and initiation became Tambu's habits, "remembering every word from the teacher's mouth" [7, p.25]. Sadza, the traditional Rhodesian food, she once liked, no longer pleased her, whilst eating with a fork and a knife like the Whites brought joy to her heart. Further stances of alienation and assimilation are seen in her renewed representation of her body image. Her clothes and hair are now styled differently, "straightening my hair and putting ribbons in it at weekends; filing my nails and sometimes painting them bright purple" [6, p.94].

6. The Cultural Nationalist Phase

Fanon moves with his description to the second stage, that is the cultural nationalist, where the colonized individual throughout his/her hastening journey of assimilation is encountered with the overarching truth of the futility of his/her attempts. They, hence, reach a point of reconsideration that forces them to reassess their pursuit and value their nativism [1, p.159]. In other words, as Homi Bhabha clarifies, the mimic man does not simply become a replica of the colonizer. He/she becomes "almost the same, but not quite" [3, p.155].

The double vision and the gap deviating the possibility of sameness will always disorient his/her perception of the self and other. In Tambu's case, the realization of the gap hindering her sameness with her White classmates was widened in the college of in Young Ladies Sacred Heart. Their racist and degrading attitude towards her, as a native African,

unveiled the hidden truth of the impossibility of her belonging to the White men's world. One of such scenes is noted in Tracy's remarks on Tambu and her Black roommate, Ntombi, stating that "The eyes too. Just like a cow's!" [7, p.44]. Fanon portrays such a scene of encounter, stating, "the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness" [8, p.116].

She was suddenly exiled and delimited as an outsider. At the same time due to her native culture loss, she was thrown in an "no one's land" state. Such a gap grew up to become a constructively critical space of questioning and re-reassessment of her ideological affiliations. Glimpses of such phase started with Tambu's sense of confusion due to Nayasha's remarks about colonialism and the fact that the Whites are not as generous and innocent as Tambu believes. Fanon further explains that: "owing to his own cultural alienation, the native intellectual's attempts at cultural reaffirmation stop at romanticizations of bygone days corrected by philosophical and aesthetic conventions borrowed from the world of the colonizer" [1, p.159].

7. The Nationalist Phase

If the first phase embodies a pursuit for the assimilation of Western culture, and a withdrawal from nativism, this stage draws the opposite. If the second phase marks conscious awareness and initiations of native culture revaluation, the third phase is a period of determination and de-colonial activation. This is a mobilizing phase. Herein, the Black Whiteman who has converted back to his/her nativism "after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people". As Fanon punctuates, they will seek to uncover colonial oppression and its working mechanism to their people and incite them to rebel [1, p.159].

At this stage, the cultural nativist reaffirmation and assertiveness initiated in the second phase are further reinforced. Remarkably, traditionalism, ancestor glorification and pre-colonial history replaying are accentuated and encouraged. This act of resorting to the revival of bygone epoch of pure nativism is in fact "a defence mechanism by native intellectuals 'to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped' [1, p.159]. Tambu's realization of the third phase of nationalism is marked by the end of *The Book of Not* as she takes actions against the colonial oppression and steps forward towards her native culture.

Conclusion. This research paper aimed to address postcolonial literary criticism and its implications on Tsitsi Dangarembga's Semi-autobiographies, *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not*. By this fact, aspect of cultural alienation has been tackled and closely examined. Dangarembga's autobiographical novels present cultural estrangement in a form that is reminiscent of Babalola's term 'Black Whiteman' or 'Black European', whose embracement of the Western culture and values hoodwinks him/her into believing that they have become one of them. This article traces Tambu's alienation and reconciliation with her nativism through

drawing on Frantz Fanon's scheme of three phase of nationalism. Through the lines, Tambu is prefigured as a retrospective and self-reflective character and hence is cured from the estrangement of the Western imperialistic culture.

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