

SOCIAL ALIENATION IN THE MODERN AFRICAN NOVEL

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Abstract: Social alienation, a pervasive phenomenon in the modern world, induces a trauma which becomes most dramatic in its individual components, attempting the dissolution of the self and the restructuring of the psychologically altered "pieces" in an adaptive pattern which would provide the understanding of contexts otherwise incomprehensible. The analysis of the post-colonial identity provides a rich corpus of social constructs which tend to point to a deeply felt sense of alienation. In the postmodernist perspective, identity becomes a multidimensional and individualized construct, more so in the context of traumatic experiences as the civil wars of the African continent, and one of the factors which explain the destructive behavior exhibited by this type of aggression is social alienation. The umbrella concept of alienation includes powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, cultural estrangement and self-estrangement (Seeman's system of classification). These variables are to be found embedded in the literary production of a certain period. The paper will attempt to identify patterns of perceiving the new African society in the post-colonial era, as reflected in some of the most representative novels of the period, with a special attention for the literary expressions of the social alienation. The premise of the content analysis applied to the three African authors approached in this research (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Helen Oyeyemi) is that the new social context created by the collapse of the traditional functioning of the groups and the emergence of new patterns of behavior and reaction to such patterns triggered a socially adaptive process which could be analyzed within the literary corpus of modern Africa.

Keywords: *social identity, social alienation, African self, anomie, post-colonial society .*

Within the social psychology, the self is considered inherently interpersonal "because relating to others is part of what the self is *for*."¹ The self is seen as a construct which would be engaged, altered, and preserved as a means of connecting the individual to the group. A self without the referential of the Other will remain incomplete, and therefore, an alien entity for the social level. Identity, construed of multiple actors on the social scene, exhibits contradictory tendencies, the compensation of which includes a continuous adjustment to the audience surrounding the scene on which identity plays. But what happens when this "multiple" self loses its referentiality, its meaning and its strategies of belonging? It is the case of the African space, within which Western society, with its emphasis on the individual self, is opposed by the preeminence of the collective African self, for which a basic assumption is that of the "pervasive connectedness of people."²

A cross-cultural endowment of human beings is that they possess/inherit the capacity to introjection and projection, so we tend to oscillate, as Ferenczi maintains³, within a process of negotiating the unbalanced relation between the inner and the outer self, oscillating among the numerous and individualistic definitions pertaining to the forces ruling our environment.

A strong case for this interplay of recognition, denial and adjustment is advanced by the journey in "her self" of Helen Oyeyemi's *Icarus Girl*. Jess inhabits three worlds,

¹ Roy F. Baumeister and Jean M. Twenge, *The Social Self*, in Theodore Millon, Melvin J. Lerner, *Personality and Social Psychology*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003, p. 327.

² *Ibidem*, p. 344.

³ Sandor Ferenczi, cited in Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism and Politics*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, p. 140.

disjunctive to the point of becoming pathologic. The world of birth, from which her *abiku*⁴ is coming, the Western world of her education, and the inner world, the space of contradictions and wars, lost and pursued again. In England, Jess lives at the border of a world that reclaims her participation through re-definition; “Jessamy never comes to the playground”⁵, and “she’s got no mates,”⁶ and as such, without landmarks in structuring a way of perceiving, assuming and engaging the everyday interactions. She doesn’t belong to any of the social groups for which the concept of belonging is the crucial ruling in developing the sanity of existence. Jess inherits a horizon within which she evolves or devolves as a hybrid, an exercise in the results of a cultural clash. An alien speaking the same language of the “natives,” Jess struggles to recuperate an identity signalized by extreme aggressive behavior, her prodigious “fits” elapsing in a prolonged scream of powerlessness. These extremes leave in between as a sole solution the aggression, because “this group not liking her” mustn’t be allowed to cut into Jess’s conscience, and the fit creates a border between the social Jess and the inner Jess. “It took all the nerve she had not to let herself fall backwards off the bench and carry on screaming long after she’d hit the ground.”⁷

The Nigerian journey is a search for the roots, and for one won identity. One of the most relevant signifiers of the self in African culture is the name, the representation of the self within the social group. Oyeyemi translates this name from a world to another, and the signifier switches between the British Jessamy and the Nigerian Wuraola, leaving an empty space and inhabiting a too full space. She is the recipient of her mother’s genes, also an identity conundrum, because “who is this woman who has a Nigerian maiden name in a British passport, who stands here wearing denim shorts and a strappy yellow top, with a white man and a half-and-half child?”⁸.

In Nigeria, the father ceased to be considered a threat in order to become an alien, an unknown species which doesn’t belong to its borrowed space.

*“Her father was standing near the carousel... [...] she hadn’t expected him to seem so... well, out of place. [...] The people milling around him all glanced pointedly at him as they passed; their glances were slightly longer than usual, but not outright stares – more the kind of look that Jess herself gave when passing a statue or a painting. The acknowledgement of an oddity.”*⁹

The identity concept starts from the presumption of a closeness, in which absence, the network of relations and the linguistic concepts bonding them becomes a strange collection of sounds, like the thrilling scream of Jess’s fit. Oyeyemi translates the distance in terms of cultural estrangement, the faraway West being engaged as a means of self-alteration. The African world functions on proximities and the denial of this spatial communion becomes a

⁴ Abiku is a Yoruba word, literally meaning “born to die”, and, “in the context of a high rate of infant mortality, of successive pregnancies and deliveries,” derives its sources from the repetition of the incarnation of the same child in the womb of the same woman; F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination. Literature in Africa and The Black Diaspora*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 186.

⁵ Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl*, Anchor Books. A Division of Random House, Inc., New York: 2006, p. 62.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁹ *Idem*.

recurring form of social estrangement, giving birth to a social hybrid, *oyinbo*, “somebody who has come from so far away that they are a stranger!”¹⁰

The African world, signified by her grandfather’s family, exposes Jess as a new development of something interior to the African world. Jess is part of his grandfather’s being, but a “crumbled” one, something which maybe deserves being repaired as it still preserves some deeply obscured but genuine qualities. The scene in the parlour plays also on the same mutation, the original and the result of the hybridization.

*As Jess sat in the parlour, keeping very still so that she wouldn’t take up much space on the brown-and-white sofa, she allowed herself to stare openly and seriously at her grandfather, and he did the same. She felt as if she were a little piece of him that had crumbled off maybe, which he was examining for flaws and broken bits before deciding whether it was worth taking it to be reattached, it was impossible to tell what he thought of her.*¹¹

The fragment reflects a social anxiety that pervades the approaching act with the fear of denunciation, as if Jess’s fragmentation is a fault of her own choice. The same reproach is felt in the words of Jess’s grandfather censoring the academic choice of her daughter.

*I sent her to learn medicine in England,” her grandfather told her, his voice a mix of amusement and irritation. “[...] She hadn’t even been there six months when she writes me a letter, telling me that she is now studying English. English literature! What job do you find in Nigeria that requires the knowledge of all these useless words? Different words for hot, for cold! Words describing white people, white things, every single story spun out in some palace where WE don’t exist! It has no value; in my eyes, it is to confuse...”*¹²

The dissonance process emerging at the level of inner acknowledgement is evident in the refusal of the parent to positively elaborate on the achievements of her daughter. Jess’s mother doesn’t deserve appraisal because she has chosen to close the linguistic gap between the African and the Western culture, and this would serve exclusively to the Western party. We underline here the social paradigm of usefulness, which in African schemata is a very relevant variant. In Africa there are no jobs for “these useless words”, “words describing white people, white things...,” white places from where the Africans are excluded. The only liaison that Jess seems to have with her African inheritance remains nature, the animistic perception of the human being as closely related and determined by the manifestations of the universe. Jess remembers not the dialogues, not the strange encounterings with her African roots, but “the previous night when she sat there alone, knees pulled up to her chin, seeing, properly seeing the stars for the first time, open-mouthed with wonder.”¹³

Between the Western world and the African one Oyeyemi depicts the surreal realm of possibilities, those African desires which would never succumb, those desires which ultimately constitute the deliverance of the African mind, the acknowledgement of a pervading feeling of powerlessness. But does such a deliverance come with the smoothness of the concord between the selves? Oyeyemi answers decisively: if Western means white, and

¹⁰ Helen Oyeyemi, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹³ Helen Oyeyemi, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

African means black, the most dangerous zone for the social identity is the mythical one, within which Jess finds no landmarks, no “passports,” no resemblance, only the fall, the disintegration of the self into nothingness. Once again, the hybridization of the name comes as a marker of the self-dissolution.

*Hello Jessy. Jessy? The second time. This was the second time that someone had called her something that she had never been called by anyone before., first Wuraola, now Jessy. She'd always been Jess or Jessamy, never a halfway thing like Jessy. Who was there, hiding in the Boys' Quarters, who called her halfway Jessamy?*¹⁴

Jess's shadow, her malign and vengeful doppelgänger, Titiola, is one of those “false friends” that the African keeps at bay in the world of spirits, but also a true friend for Wuraola, as long as the British Jess continues to recognize herself as an African. Titiola is the only one who knows who she is and still wants to talk to her. The proximity of Tilly Tilly is puzzling, because Jess “had never been sought out this way before.”¹⁵

In England she was the possessed and relentless hybrid which is consumed by its indecision in assuming a cultural identity. “She's black or white!”¹⁶ and we should consider a question mark here, is the underground dissonance that compels her to try to draw the long-armed woman, her crayon skimming over the smooth paper, but the browns that she used were all wrong, either too light or too dark”.¹⁷

Self-estrangement induces the instability of the self, and these aggressive stimuli magnify themselves in outer expressions of ambiguous connections with her group. Returned in England, she is perceived as weird, altered in a negative way. “You are so weird! You weren't like this before you went abroad! What's happened to you?”¹⁸, asked Lidia, her white friend, because Jess's “africanization” fuelled her borderline collapsed identity.

On a second level, Titiola is invested with a heraldic role, in her defining and conjuring, at the same time, the loss of the social identity in the African space, because their “land [is] chopped in little pieces, and – ideas! These ideas! Disgusting... shame, shame, shame. It's all been lost. Ashes. Nothing, now, there is no one. You understand?’ TillyTilly's voice, changing in timbre, beginning to sound like an adult woman's now, carried on unstopably: ‘There is no homeland.’”¹⁹ And this disappearance of the homeland is indicated by Oyeyemi as yet other reason of the cultural estrangement. “Stop looking to belong, half-and-half child. Stop. There is nothing; there is only me, and I have caught you.”²⁰, says the twin *abiku*, Titiola. The need of belonging comes with self-sacrificing, as the ritualistic body abandonment claims to commune with the sacred Africanism.

The Western modern frame of thought tries to understand, and it's not an involuntary slip of Oyeyemi's creative mind that the detainer of the knowledge about social functioning is a psychiatrist.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

¹⁹ Helen Oyeyemi, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁰ *Idem*.

The Dr. McKenzie said, 'Jessamy, are you scared of your mum?'

Just like that.

Jess, now feeling wide awake, peered at Dr. McKenzie then at her mum, who was looking equally surprised.

'I don't know,' she said finally [...]. The words came out in a rush. 'Sometimes I feel like she wants me to... I don't know. She wants me to be Nigerian or something. And I don't want to be changed that way; I can't be. It might hurt.'

'Hurt?' said Dr. McKenzie.

'Yeah, like... being stretched.

*'Jess, it's not a matter of my wanting you to be Nigerian. You are, you just are!' her mother said. When Jess looked at her, she continued, 'You're English too, duh. And it's OK.'*²¹

The belonging hurts, it's an extreme stretching to the unknown depths of a soliloquy demolished in arguments, and the intricacies of changing. Jess is estranged for her Nigerian inheritance, and to admit a liaison with the mores of her mother's identity means, at a social level, to admit a partial at least dissipation of the bases on which the half-child has been constructing her personality. The cultural estrangement brought to its climax triggers a collapse of the entire wholeness of the self, an alienating feeling of non-existence, described by Jessamy's British father as a void of colours: "It was as if TillyTilly had a special sharp knife that cut people on the inside so that they collapsed into themselves and couldn't ever get back out. No colours, her father had said. No colours!"²². But maybe the strongest symbol of the African hybridization is represented by Fern's statue: "It looked too bulky and too light a brown, with some deeper brown blotches, as if it were, covered in previously dark skin that had been bleached. [...] The only beautiful thing was the hair: the intricately chiseled pattern of braids pouring down over the shoulders."²³

The early African narratives were of a "dark skin", they belonged to Tilly's realm, to those literary initiatives signified by Edward Said as the restoration of "the imprisoned community to itself."²⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o advances the idea of a dialogue between West and Africa, a discursive enterprise through which "Africa writes back to colonialist historiography". Among his writings, *Matigari* "encloses the space-time idea or construct of the postcolonial nation as both an unstable and ambivalent domain of affiliation or belonging, a relationship modulated by the slippages in the meaning of a nation."²⁵

Decolonization is, as Fanon underlined, "an arrested moment," a stillness of the social and cultural development, a temporal void within which national consciousness contemplates its own failure at redefining itself as "the all-embracing crystallization of the inner hopes of the whole people"²⁶. Decolonization brought with it the emptiness, but not the promising

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 142-143.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 157.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

²⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, 1994, p. 259, cited in James Ogude, *Ngugi's Novels and African History. Narrating the Nation*, London-Sterling: Pluto Press, 1999, p. 8.

²⁵ Obi Nwakanma, *Menonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel*, "Research in African Literatures", vol. 39, No. 2, *Nigeria's Third-Generation Novel: Preliminary Theoretical Engagements* (Summer, 2008), pp. 1-14, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20109575>>.

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1968, p. 148, cited in Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 111.

matrix as the sum of possible meanings, but the void, as the sole expression of meaningless. The “empty shell”, as Fanon has defined the result of the social aftermath of the decolonization, is impenetrable, because “I only looked into an abyss and deep inside I only saw a darkness I could not penetrate.”²⁷

In order to re-discover the sources of his own culture, in relation to which Matigari represents the new type of post-colonial “stranger,” the hero, and through him/her, the novelist, must first of all, acknowledge the estrangement “from the people he/she had chosen as the subject of his work of art.”²⁸ Pursuing his cultural quest of a new identity, Matigari initiates the abandonment of the self in order to regain the control upon this drifting away from his former identity. This self-estrangement fulfills the prerequisite for alienation alleviation: the interiorizing of the sense of loss and historical determination.

The question raised by Matigari’s identity constitutes in itself the entry in the theory of social alienation: Matigari is presented, in his allegorical writing, as a multitude of lost identities. His journey starts and ends marked by death. “A riderless horse galloped past him. It stopped, looked back at him for a while and then disappeared into the woods. It reminded him of the horses that Settler Williams and his friends had often ridden as they went to hunt foxes accompanied by packs of well-fed dogs. It felt like so long ago...”²⁹

Death, in the form of the riderless horse, marks also the collapse of the African matrix, of the past colonization, ended with “the descent of Settler Williams into hell.”³⁰ Matigari buries his weapons, the symbol of this past identity, and washes his face and hands in the past-less river. The gesture marks the birth from this baptism of a new identity, girded with “a belt of peace.” As Simon Gikandi highlights, “[Matigari’s] language is qualified by the apostrophic grammar of melancholy,”³¹ the African Ulysses being the subject of “so many traps, so many temptations, in the way [...] of this earth.” Ngugi’s “story-telling” dissimulates even from the start the three categories at the center of the social identity construct – time, subject, self. Matigari seems somehow detached from the temporal flow of the now, alienated by his timeless war in the woods from the engagement as a witness to the postcolonial experience. And this rupture in his becoming sets him aside from his own people, his own “family.” He is the utopian dweller, the hero who interrogates the social space with old Christian mores: “Why could not everybody gird themselves with a belt of peace so that all wars and conflicts on earth would end?”³²

“Where have you been living, old man? Have you been living on the moon or in space perhaps?’ [...] Matigari held his chin, sadly contemplating what had taken place. Age crept on his face; the wrinkles seemed to have increased and deepened. How everything had changed. What was this world coming to?”³³

²⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London: Heinemann, 1965, p. 210.

²⁸ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, London: James Currey, 1993, pp. 154-76.

²⁹ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Matigari* (trans. from the Gikūkū by Wangūi wa Goro), Oxford: Heinemann Publishers Ltd., 1989, p. 3.

³⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³¹ Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*, Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 230.

³² Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 7.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

Ngugi creates the premises for a significant “encounter with the true savage”, the “absolute stranger”, an encounter with something which the social representations cannot explain, as Michel-Louis Rouquette defines as “[...] ceva pe care nu l-ar putea (sau pe care nu-l mai pot) evita. Ce statut i se atribuie atunci “străinului”, indiferent că această etichetă se aplică unor persoane, unor situații, unor idei sau unor lucruri? Ce origine sau ce natură diferită se bănuiește că are acesta?”³⁴ Ngugi’s perspective in answering this question is that. Until the interiorization of the alien valences, the “stranger” is perceived as mad, a “lunatic”, before of which “the crowd parted”³⁵ in order to restrict their association with him. “The question he asked shows that he is mentally deranged.”³⁶

The same reaction to this “anomaly” could be seen in the relation between Matigari’s “disciples” and himself. As in the case of Christ, with whom Matigari is approximated in his surreal qualities and in his perception by others, veneration is deeply interwoven with fear, better said maybe awe, but the consequence is the same framing of the leader on the border between sanity and insanity.

*Gũthera and Mũriũki had already stopped behind a cluster of bushes, and they watched from a safe distance to see what was going to happen. They were each asking themselves the same question: Is this man sane? Were these not the houses which had once belonged to the colonialist settlers but now belonged to the very rich, the foreign and the local people of all colours – black, brown, white? Yet Matigari seemed to have no qualms or any inhibitions.*³⁷

The rupture in the fabric of time and Matigari’s self-determined anchoring in the past amplify the feeling of strangeness which circumvents his social perception. An alien language is employed in explaining the inexplicable, a language very much similar to the language of the Holy Bible, simple, yet so estranged for the mature reader, that “now it seemed as if it was Matigari who was explaining complex things to a child, in a language which only a child would understand.”³⁸ Matigari sees himself as a foreigner in an alien space, one which he had used to know, but now it is so altered that it has lost its meaning. And this meaninglessness has reflected backwards upon the representations that Matigari seemed to hold about his country.

‘Where have truth and justice gone to in this country? Matigari said as he remembered Ngarũro wa Kĩrĩro and how he had helped him to his feet earlier in the day. ‘I will unravel that riddle for you,’ the man accused of theft told him. ‘Don’t think that I am slighting or insulting you. But if you continue asking questions of that kind, you will find yourself in a mental hospital or in a pit of everlasting darkness.’

The Seeker of the Truth and Justice is perceived as dangerous for the fragile equilibrium established after so many derogations, denials and abjurations, on the African soil. Africa needs a new religion, says the student. No, Africa needs all its lunatics to be freed

³⁴ Michel-Louis Rouquette, *Gândire socială și contradicție*,” în Michel-Louis Rouquette (coord.), *Gândirea socială. Perspective fundamentale și cercetări aplicate*, Iași: Polirom, 2010, p. 132.

³⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

³⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

from the mental hospital, seems to sustain the group. And, again, the old myth comes in the rescue of the new one: “Rumour has it that Matigari will return today, because it was only this morning that the Angel Gabriel, the same one who let him out of prison, let him out of the mental hospital. Here will be a lot of policemen there too.”³⁹ The author engages a contextual implication that advances a world of view drawing its foundations from the binary system of balancing alien perspective and fitting them into a socially accepting frame; the time is of the essence in Matigari’s “escape”, a diluted time, in which events happen at a strange pace, separated from the reality by an unknown causality.

And, at last, Matigari claims the returning to the woods, in the bushes, where the past will inform the future. But even an icon as Matigari needs to belong, and this belonging, though it fits not in the framework of the established acceptions, must identify itself through signs, extraordinary or not. And between Matigari’s view of the world and his disciples’ there is a void, a void which cannot be surpassed by the ordinary relating to time-space-meaning. Matigari take upon himself the re-creation of the world, and this demarche alienates him more and more from his African peers, transmuting him “on top of the highest mountains.”

‘But how do we know that you are really Matigari ma Njirũingi? How can we identify you? Where is your sign?’

‘The sign?... Matigari talked as if the man had asked him about the signs of the Second Coming. [...] I don’t need anything to prove who I am. I don’t need signs or miracles. My actions will be my trumpet and they shall speak for me. For I will remove this belt of peace and I will wear another, decorated with bullets instead of beads. Yes, I will wear a gun around my waist and carry my AK47 over my shoulder; and I shall stand on top of the highest mountain and tell it to all the people: Open your eyes and see what I have seen... Open your ears and hear what I have heard... [...] Our kingdom come as once decreed by the Iregi revolutionaries: The land belongs to the tiller and not to parasites and foreigners!’⁴⁰

“Tomorrow belongs to me.”⁴¹ And this assertion underlines once more the distance created by the anomic system of African values in their post-colonial framing between the reality of the inner struggle in coping with the strangeness of a hybrid future, and the understanding – or lack of it – that characterize the close contact among the members of the social group. The migration of Matigari’s presence between the modest appearance of the commoner and the overwhelming stature of his godly interpretation does not justify the engagement of a socially connected hero, but that of a hybrid popular creation. If we are to transfer the acknowledgement of the post-colonial trauma in the stream of its aftermaths, we are bound to discover that the cornerstone of its interpretation resides in something called “negotiation” by Lindsay Aegerton. And this is especially true for the African literary production of the 20th century, and for the “nervous conditions” of Tsitsi Dangaremba.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

A distinctive element pertaining to the expression of the Africanism is that the voices of the African personae “are both individual and collective; they negotiate both individual biography and historical contextuality and community.”⁴²

If we are to apply Fanon’s theory of otherness, the process by which the reasoning of the powerful objectifies the victim as being unreasonable and pertaining to the otherness of an entirely separated world transforms the collision of two human universes in a space of mental struggle, of dissipation and reconstruction. Babamukuru, the overachiever of the African family, must sever himself from his family and tradition in order to socially succeed.

*Unable to obtain the necessary qualifications at home, he had no alternative but to uproot himself for a period of five years in order to retain the position that would enable him, in due course, to remove himself and both his families from the mercy of nature and charitable missionaries.*⁴³

Bhabha refers to the cultural estrangement as constructed upon the “ambivalence of psychic identification,”⁴⁴ upon the absence of the ontological question of “Who is the alienated colonial man?”⁴⁵ And Dangaremba responds: the alienated African is the darkness of the skin enslaved by the colonial rape, and the estranged woman enslaved by the traditional rape.

Dangaremba’s heroine is a double victim: victim of the post-colonial ambiguities, and a victim of her own gender. She tends to reject her victimization, but the means in fighting both the post-colonial evil, and the traditional customs of her civilization are scarce and depend entirely by the successful result of the same hybridization she finds against. With a personality distorted by the need to express her individuality in a society construed on an archaic structure, in which the free choice of a woman is considered a challenge and a danger for the stability of the entire group. Tambudzai, Dangaremba’s heroine, wants to learn, but

*He [the father] thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living. It was a difficult time for him because Mr Matimba had shown him that in terms of cash my education was an investment, but then in terms of cattle so was my conformity.*⁴⁶

Conformity is the core concept of social stability. And the breaking of these commandments singularize Tambudzai as an inadequate representative of the African society. As Michel-Louis Rouquette highlighted, this hypothetical form of inadequacy corresponds to practical solutions such as: stigmatizing and the rejection of the alien; his/her integration, more or less progressive, together with the alteration of the mentalities; the minimization of the pertinence of the difference, and the primacy afforded to the efficiency of the strategy.⁴⁷

⁴² Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter, *A Dialectic of Autonomy and Community: Tsitsi Dangaremba’s Nervous Conditions*, Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Autumn, 1996), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464133>, p. 231.

⁴³ Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions*, London: The Women’s Press, 1988, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London-New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 42.

⁴⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁴⁶ Tsitsi Dangaremba, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Michel-Louis Rouquette, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

“[The occasion of my uncle’s return] It was spoiled for me because I could not help thinking that had I been allowed, had I been able to welcome Babamukuru at the airport, I would have been there too [...] rejoicing, re-establishing the relationship that had been cut off when my cousins went away. Not going to the airport, not being able to resume my relationships with my cousins, these events coalesced formlessly in my mind to an incipient understanding of the burdens my mother had talked of. Whereas before I had believed with childish confidence that burdens were only burdens in so far as you chose to bear them, now I began to see that the disappointing events surrounding Babamukuru’s return were serious consequences of the same general laws that had almost brought my education to an abrupt, predictable end. It was frightening. I did not want my life to be predicted by such improper relations.”⁴⁸

Tambudzai tries to resume the bonding with her relatives, but the events “coalesced formlessly” in her mind trigger the installation of the anxiety. An anxiety which is justified by the penetration of a child into the realm of adulthood, without the favour of a passage rite. Her relatives’ return on the homeland challenges the stability of the social group, and instability “is frightening,” in the words of our heroine. The thoughts attempt to alter the established rules, and the very desires to overcome her handicap as a woman, and as a poor African, are “complex, dangerous thoughts”, “not the kind that you can ponder safely but the kind that become autonomous and malignant if you let them.”⁴⁹ And they have the malign potential to destroy the wholeness of the mind, and as such, they sever the desirability from the availability.

During the encounter with her relatives, Tambudzai realizes that her departed family is changed in more ways that she could understand.

‘They don’t understand Shona very well anymore,’ her mother explained. ‘They have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone.’ What Maiguru said was bewildering, bewildering and offending. I had not expected my cousins to have changed, certainly not so radically, simply because they had been away for a while. Besides, Shona was our language. What did people mean when they forgot it?’⁵⁰

The separation from the language of the birth signifies the alienation from the culture of the people. The imprint of the foreign culture becomes a stigma born with the delusion of creating another African, one adapted to the new universe he has inhabited from the alienating ways of the post-colonial excursion.

The heroine, Tambudzai, tries to reconstruct a past relationship with her cousin, Nyasha, but her companion is lost to her understanding. As a signifier of the alienating contact with the alien culture, she refuses to return to the traditional matrix, and her refusal is linguistically expressed in a loss of the signs. The vivid person who left for England returned as a shadowy survivor of an alienating process of “re-culturation”.

In the end, I felt stupid and humiliated for making such a fuss over my cousin, but it was difficult to leave her alone. I missed the bold, ebullient companion I had had who had gone to England but not returned from there. Yet each time she came I could see that she had grown a little duller and dimmer, the expression in her eyes a little more complex, as though she were

⁴⁸ Tsitsi Dangaremba, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Tsitsi Dangaremba, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

*directing more and more of her energy inwards to commune with herself about issues that she alone had seen.*⁵¹

The same cultural estrangement is obvious in the case of her brother. Physically reshaped by the “vitamins”, the hair tamed by oils and combs, the skin “several tones lighter in complexion,” he ceased to be a genuine African, becoming a hybrid. Upon his returning from England, “there was a terrible change. He had forgotten how to speak Shona.”⁵² His mother considers him to be bewitched, because she seems incapable to speak to him anymore. The oral communication represents a relevant indicative in the preservation of a social identity. The loss of the traditional language becomes as such, in Dangarembda’s premise, the symbol of a deeply felt cultural estrangement, in which the signs of non-recognition from the Other remain obscured by surface interactions. “All these signs stated very matter-of-factly that we were not of a kind. I deserved to suffer, I threatened myself, for having been too proud to see that Babamukuru could only be so charitable to our branch of the family because we were so low. He was kind because of the difference.”⁵³

Nyasha, Tambudzai’s cousin, appears to be well-adapted to the Western way of living and thinking. Alienated within the African tradition, she is at large among the advantages brought by money. Her reality becomes the reality of the books, the masked conventions of the accepted history, and she becomes more and more estranged from her culture.

*She read a lot of books that were about real people, real peoples and their sufferings: the condition in South Africa [...]; about Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She had nightmares about these things, the atrocities; but she carried on reading all the same, because, she said, you had to know the facts if you were ever going to find the solutions.*⁵⁴

Tambudzai does not cope well with new environments, in which she seems alienated, and in her words, “when the surroundings were new and unfamiliar, the awareness was painful and made me behave very strangely. [...] for practical purposes, I ceased to exist.”⁵⁵ The alienation in Dangarembda’s novel manifests itself, consuming the energies produced by the inner contradictions through aggression, as we witness the fight between Babamukuru and Nyasha. Nyasha’s reaction is also a strategy of coping with an alienation feeling, that of being outside the cultural traditions of her African home. Despite the exterior aspects, the relations among family members remain of an archaic format, and Nyasha, the cultivated modern African woman, must free herself from these bonds. And even if Tambudzai agrees that the elders must be respected, she concurs with Nyasha’s argument because “all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness.”⁵⁶ Tambudzai is the bearer of the contradictory development of a psyche trying to reconcile two perspectives which, by themselves, are immutable, because they express something beyond convention, they express the cultural identity and the historical enforcement of an African way of life. She challenges the very foundations of her culture, and by doing so, subject of

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁵³ Tsitsi Dangarembda, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 110.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

alienation and disintegrated identity, she recovers an inner self which will assist her eventually in asserting herself. “It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion,” acknowledges Dangaremba’s African feminist. But it is an answer to the anomy of the puzzle represented by the becoming of the post-colonial Africa.

We have seen that literary Africa engages a sometimes puzzling diversity of strategies for coping with its social traumas. But in this “labyrinth” of engagements resides the healing power of a deeply wounded collective psyche.

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