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# 'Adding wisdom to their natures': British colonial educational practices and the possibility of women's personal emancipation in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of motherhood* and Tsitsi Dangrembga's *Nervous conditions*

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‘Adding Wisdom to Their Natures’: British Victorian and Colonial Educational Practices  
and the Possibility of Women’s Personal Emancipation in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,  
Buchi Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood* and Tsitsi Dangrembga’s *Nervous Conditions*

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
The Legacy of British Education for Women.....	1
Chapter 2: The Victorian Model.....	7
Victorian Women’s Education.....	7
<i>Jane Eyre</i> and Women’s Education.....	10
Chapter 3: African Education and Colonial Domination.....	14
Pre-Colonial Education.....	14
Colonialism and Education.....	16
Aims of Colonial Education.....	16
Denial of African Cultural Heritage.....	19
Missionaries and Mission Schools.....	20
Colonial Educational Practices in Zimbabwe.....	22
Colonial Educational Practices in Nigeria.....	24
Internalization and Enculturation.....	26
African Women’s Pre-Colonial and Colonial Education.....	28
Chapter 4: African Experiences Novels.....	30
<i>Joys of Motherhood</i> .....	30
<i>Nervous Conditions</i> .....	35
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	41
Works Cited.....	46
Notes.....	49

'Adding Wisdom to Their Natures': British Victorian and Colonial Educational Practices and The Possibility Of Women's Personal Emancipation in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Tsitsi Dangrembga's *Nervous Conditions*

Megan McIntyre

Abstract

Popular opinion suggests that education is the 'silver bullet' to end poverty, famine, and all the worlds' ills. The reality of education for women, however, is not as easily classified as transformative. This paper seeks to illuminate, through historical research and literary analysis, the connections between the charity education of Victorian Britain, a system examined in *Jane Eyre*, and the missionary education which comprised the majority of the educational systems in the British colonies, including Nigeria and Zimbabwe, the settings of Emecheta and Dangarembga's works.

Beginning with Charlotte Brontë's Victorian classic, *Jane Eyre*, and moving through time, space and situation to the colonial experience novels of Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangarembga, we find instead that education, particularly British philanthropic education, from charity schools for children without means in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mission schools that comprised the basis for British colonial education in Africa, produces women who benefit only in very limited ways. For Charlotte Brontë's title protagonist, as for many of the characters in *Jane Eyre*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*, education represents a new life. Brontë, Dangarembga, and Emecheta all offer education as a possible escape for characters within their novels, but the length of and price for that escape differs based on a character's role within a colonial

set of identities, whether the character in question is part of the colonizing power or one of its colonial victims.

When taken together, *Jane Eyre* and these two African experience novels demonstrate that British education is largely ineffectual in granting female characters the kind of freedom that education is supposed to instill. The price of the hybridity necessary to survive in the colonial situation could very well be the complete loss of self, a disintegration of identity, as it is for Nyasha, who is, according to her own analysis of her situation, neither Shona nor British and therefore is no one at all.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“‘This business of womanhood is a heavy burden,’ she said. ‘How could it not be? Aren’t we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can’t just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from an early age. The earlier the better so that it is easier later on. Easy! As if it were ever easy. And these days it is worse with the poverty and blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other.’”<sup>1</sup>

### *The Legacy of British Education for Women*

On a trip to England in April of 2009, the United States of America’s first lady, Michelle Obama, told the pupils at a girls school in London that “nothing in my life’s path would have predicted that I would be standing here as the first lady of the United States of America. There was nothing in my story that would land me here. I wasn’t raised with wealth or resources of any social standing to speak of. If you want to know the reason why I’m standing here, it’s because of education” (Cadwalladr). Mrs. Obama’s declaration of the importance of education is only the latest iteration of a popular meme concerning the power of knowledge. Popular opinion suggests that education is the ‘silver bullet’ to end poverty, famine, and all the world’s ills. The reality of education for women, however, is not so easily classified as transformative.

Beginning with Charlotte Brontë’s Victorian classic, *Jane Eyre*, and moving through time, space and situation to the colonial experience novels of Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangarembga, we find instead that education, particularly British philanthropic education, from charity schools for children without means in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to

the mission schools that comprised the basis for British colonial education in Africa, produces women who benefit only in very limited ways<sup>2</sup>. For Charlotte Brontë's title protagonist, as for many of the characters in *Jane Eyre*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*, education represents a new life. Brontë, Dangarembga, and Emecheta all offer education as a possible escape for characters within their novels, but the length of and price for that escape differs based on a character's role within a colonial set of identities, whether the character in question is part of the colonizing power or one of its colonial victims.

Brontë's Jane, a woman who is part of the nation that will eventually colonize the cultures explored in Dangarembga and Emecheta's works, finds freedom and a new identity at the Lowood School. Her education provides the necessary tools to secure her immediate future as a governess and her eventual future as Mrs. Rochester. This future, however, does not extricate her from her place within the patriarchal hierarchy. Her 'happy ending' must, therefore, include marriage and motherhood. However, even this limited independence supposedly accessible through education remains theoretical for the women of Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. For Nnu Ego and her daughters, their gender means the denial of access to any kind of educational opportunity. We can glimpse, though, through the educational experiences of Nnu Ego's sons, the potential problems with the European education Nnu Ego covets. For Dangarembga's Tambu in *Nervous Conditions*, who is able to pursue the kind of education Nnu Ego wants, then, the freedom promised by education remains largely illusory and elusive. Although much of Tambu's narrative argues for the transformative power of European education, the results

of such an education for Tambu indicate that the education in question is largely ineffectual.

Gauri Viswanathan begins his exploration of the relationship between education, the English language, and British colonial rule in India by exploring the part of education, specifically concerning the English language and its literature, in the subjugation of a colonized people. In his introduction, he suggests that “the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England” was “a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways” (2). Because the British colonizers relied on schools to supplant the traditional culture and language of the group they colonized, English literature “served as the chief disseminator of value, tradition, and authority” in the colonies in much the same way it did in Britain (Viswanathan 7).

The discussion of the role of education and language in particular in the subjugation of native peoples is further complicated, however, when the discussion centers on female characters<sup>3</sup>. Michelle Vizzard, in her discussion of hysteria and womanhood in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, suggests that, when discussing a woman in a colonial context, “feminist analysis is not an additional extra to projects of anti- or post-colonization, but rather is absolutely integral to them.” Her point, which is particularly important in the discussion of education in the colonies, almost always governed by gender concerns, is that when we examine works of literature that explore women in the colonies, we are already looking at their situations through both a postcolonial and feminist lens because the two are inextricably linked.



With that in mind, then, the problem of British education for female characters in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is related both to the characters' status as colonized persons and as women in patriarchal societies. Because the forces of colonialism and patriarchy come together in the construction of their identities, a discussion of these characters' experience of womanhood would be incomplete without accounting for the ways gender influences their place within the colonial hierarchy and the way that colonialism affects their experience of womanhood. The discussion that follows will focus more closely on the problems of European education for a colonized subject, especially a colonized woman, as she attempts to navigate a colonial situation in which the only way to survive is to adopt the colonizer's language and cultural practices. Her journey is made even more difficult, then, by the fact that neither her traditional culture nor the colonizer's culture offers her a position of equality with her male counterpart. The opportunity of any education, therefore, is even more difficult for her to acquire.

For the women of *The Joys of Motherhood*, education is discussed as if it is the salvation for the protagonist, Nnu Ego's, family. Through her sons, education offers the path for her long term financial security. For these sons, however, education also offers escape and sanctuary from the turbulence of their shifting culture. Despite the problem of her sons and the results of their educational opportunities, Nnu Ego also sees education as the best hope for her daughters to find voices of their own.

For the characters in *The Joys of Motherhood*, however, it seems that education is beneficial and transformative only for those who are willing to discard their culture, for those men who can leave behind the ties that bind them to their traditions and to their

families. For the women of the novel, education it purported to be a way to circumvent the traditional patriarchal forces that subdue them, but the female characters, despite their insistence on the importance of education for their daughters, fail to pursue said education on their daughters' behalf. Because of the grand expectations for education and the limited independence that actually results from it, education remains an inscrutable force in the colonial situation represented in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Despite Nnu Ego's insistence that education could be the one thing to provide the independence she desperately wants for herself and all the daughters of Nigeria, she ultimately accepts the rules of the patriarchal system for herself and for her daughters. The power of education, then, for the women of the novel, is largely theoretical, for none of them have personally experienced its power against the forces that tie them inextricably to the lives that do not fulfill them.

In *Nervous Conditions*, then, we find what could be the fulfillment of Nnu Ego's dream for her daughters because Dangarembga's narrative offers insight into the consequences of the educational 'freedom' that Nnu Ego seeks. Dangarembga's portrayal of the mission school, and later the Lady's College, suggest that while a colonial education provides opportunities unavailable to those without such an education, its overall effect is not necessarily positive. Instead, while it is clear that Dangarembga's protagonist's knowledge of English and grasp of important colonial lessons allows her more freedom than she would otherwise have had, her ambivalence toward both her traditional cultural role and the role that her colonial education casts her in is exemplified by her cousin Nyasha's loss of self. Nyasha's violent reactions to her father's oppression are a result of the overwhelming Englishness transmitted to her by her father's obsession

with his colonizer and the colonizer's European education. Both Tambu's attitude and Nyasha's reactions point to the dangerous nature of a European education which seeks to replace a set of already established cultural values and language.

The connections between Brontë's *Jane Eyre* on the one hand and Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* on the other hand lie in the ways that these women experience British education. As women within an educational system that focuses more on moral training than intellectual stimulation, the protagonists of all three novels fail to find the kind of power that is supposed to exist in education. The fact that Jane finds some power to change her situation may be related to the fact that the education she receives reinforces her cultural traditions and language. Nnu Ego's family in *The Joys of Motherhood* and Tambu and Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*, however, are saddled with an education that denies the power of their own cultural traditions and language and supplants those traditions and that language with British values and the English language.

## **Chapter 2: The Victorian Model: Jane Eyre and the Purpose of Women's Education**

“I was sent to Lowood to get an education; and it would be of no use going away until I have attained that.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Victorian Women's Educational Practices***

The educational experiences described in *Jane Eyre*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *Nervous Conditions* all grow out of the same philosophy of charity education. The same kind of educational charity extended to women without means in Victorian England was recreated in British colonies like Nigeria and Zimbabwe. These charity schools, which date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, served as the most fundamental basis for the school system developed in the British colonies after colonization.

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, religious based philanthropy societies developed “an interest in popular education,” something which became even more “fashionable in the early nineteenth century” (McLean 5). To a certain extent this was because “the Victorians saw education as a means of both social control and individual betterment,” a sentiment which coincides with Aunt Reed's reason for sending Jane to the Lowood school in Brontë's novel (Burstyn 11). In an effort to control the growing number of lower class boys and girls, charity schools became a “favorite form of benevolence” (Jones 3). These schools were opened to address pauperism, which was, “throughout the century, the leading domestic problem” (Jones 28).

For the children enrolled at these charity schools, “the enterprise and philanthropy of others offered the only hope of educational opportunity” (McLean 5). Without these charity schools, most of the children they served would have been left without any kind of training or opportunity for social betterment. So, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, “thousands of schools were set up and hundreds of thousands of children, for whom no other means of education existed, were instructed by [their] means” (Jones 3). Much of the charity school movement was fueled by the “political and religious unrest of the seventeenth century,” which “contributed in no small degree to the desire of the upper and middle classes to establish social discipline among the poor, who in contemporary opinion were peculiarly susceptible to the poison of rebellion and infidelity” (Jones 4).

The philanthropists who funded the majority of the charity schools hoped that education “would build up a God-fearing population and, at the same time, would inoculate the children against the habits of sloth, debauchery and beggary” (Jones 4). This goal can be clearly seen in Mr. Brocklehurst, the patron of the school at which Jane receives her training to become a governess and school teacher, who characterizes the purpose of a Lowood education, which was “to render [the girls] hardy, patient, self-denying” (Brontë 114). These same philanthropists, however feared that “too much learning...would spoil the quality of their labor and encourage both unrealistic aspirations of improvement and undesirable expressions of grievance” (McLean 5) things which could only be stamped out, according to Brocklehurst, by denying “their vile bodies” to feed “their immortal souls” (Brontë Chp 7).

These schools were, by no means, however, wholly good or generous endeavors, as exemplified by the pettiness and hypocrisy of Lowood’s benefactor, Mr. Brocklehurst.

For the most part, “the company of pious and philanthropic men and women who financed and managed the charity school movement” had hardly any “conception of education except as a redemptive agency” (Jones 343). This emphasis on religious and moral training provided the basis for these institutions, for their founders “did not envisage it as a basis of common citizenship, nor as a means of developing the personality and intellectual powers of children. They were concerned with the propagation of the moral discipline” (Jones 343). In addition to the lack of real world training and economically beneficial knowledge, the schools that served the poor “were inadequate in number, their management was not lacking in corruption, nor their discipline in brutality,” all of which is evident in Brontë’s depiction of Jane’s time at Lowood (Jones 343).

To a certain extent, however, the powerful men in charge of the philanthropic schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth century ignored the issues of women working within philanthropic societies and institutions and the education of such women. As Dorice Elliot notes in her book on Victorian womanhood, *The Angel Out of the House*, “their major tactic for dealing with the issue of social work as potential paid employment for middle-class women was silence” (128). The thrust of the argument for educating women was that some parts of education would make them better suited for their roles within the home (Eliot 143). Education would also teach the women of the Victorian middle and lower classes the proper limitations of female aspirations, for “if women were to be allowed to have and act on ambitions desires and to have access to the developing space of the social sphere, it seemed crucial that they be rightly educated, both in terms of

the work they intended to accomplish and the proper limits that should be imposed on this work” (Eliot 164).

Additionally, “education was perceived by some groups in society as a mechanism for upward mobility,” as it is for Jane (Burstyn 50). These groups saw education as an important tool with which “a clever woman, from a tradesman’s family, might use the opportunity to go to university or enter a profession to make a better marriage than would otherwise have been possible for her” (Burstyn 50). Those who encouraged the education of these women, however, “did not encourage women to step beyond their own sphere in searching for jobs, nor did they encourage them to work once they were married” (Burstyn 171). Although education was available to these women and allowed them a certain amount of freedom, they were still closely constrained by propriety concerning the appropriate roles for women.

### ***Jane Eyre and Women’s Education***

In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, we are able to glimpse the powerful role that education can play and the way that education can open doors for women to a kind of limited independence. In *Jane Eyre*, the title protagonist finds her life transformed by an education that offers her an escape from her neglecting aunt and abusive cousin. After a particularly nasty encounter with her cousins Reed, Jane is sent, not wholly unwillingly, to the Lowood school for girls. The school, desolate, cold and largely underfunded and undersupplied, is inhabited by women of strength and vigor, especially the pious Helen Burns, who teaches Jane the value of restraint and courage, and the head instructor, Miss Temple, who nurtures and cares for Jane in a way that her Aunt Reed had refused to.

Jane's time at Lowood transforms her from the petulant child Jane, who is intent upon asserting herself and her rights, to the adult Jane who understands her place as governess and teacher. As was its aim, her time at Lowood teaches Jane not to reach too far beyond her place within society. Jane astutely deduces the choices before her and accepts what the education at Lowood might mean in terms of an independent future. She notes that, by attending school and training as a teacher, she "had the means of an excellent education placed within my reach; a fondness for some of my studies, and a desire" to no longer be dependent upon anyone (Brontë 124). Jane seems to find that "when compared with starving or going into domestic service," she should see "teaching at the village school in highly qualified terms as a position of relative dignity: 'it was humble—but . . . sheltered . . . [a] safe asylum; it was plodding . . . but . . . independent . . . not ignoble . . . not mentally degrading'" (Julien 123). Jane's geographical location has much to do with the viability of the education she receives. In Britain, girls of the lower and middle classes had the opportunity to be trained for occupations that provided an income large enough for them to support themselves, which would allow them some freedom of choice and self-determination, but this education was not effectual in securing Jane any real freedom.

Despite her eventual marriage and professed happiness at the end of the novel, the adult Jane has only a small measure of the autonomy that the child Jane argues so fervently for during her time with her aunt and cousins. This is because Jane's education teaches her the dangers of overreaching and the importance of longsuffering piety, as modeled by Helen Burns and Miss Temple. Jane enters the school a passionate, barely controlled young woman. After her time at Lowood, though, she has adopted a more



submissive nature, the nature exemplified by Helen Burns and Miss Temple. Her education, along with the subjugation of her more argumentative and assertive self, allows her into Mr. Rochester's world through her role as governess. Her education is, ultimately, effective in securing her future semi-independence and love, as well as her moral standing, as she is able to resist the temptation to become Rochester's mistress and secure her own financial independence with her decision to leave Rochester's home. But it stops short of offering her social equality.

For Jane, social equality lies in one's ability to survive without the necessity of male patronage, to survive by earning money on one's own. She speaks honestly to Rochester, and later St. John, about the power of money in securing freedom, and that frankness about money and salary in the novel demonstrates Jane Eyre's lack of sentimentality about work and compensation. The businesslike approach to work is connected to the value she places on economic independence as a means to a domestic life free from wage slavery (Julien 124).

Jane's candid attitude is only possible, however, because of the utilitarian education she received at Lowood, which provided the necessary skill set for the job market in which she finds herself. The bit of independence afforded her by her education at Lowood is the foundation on which her life with, and ultimate marriage to, Rochester is built. Because Lowood trains her as a teacher, and Miss Temple, the prototype of the well meaning, mildly empowering, and self-sacrificing mentor and teacher, provides the equally important moral education, Jane is able to navigate her liminal space as governess and follow the path that leads to eventual happiness: a reunion with Rochester and the production of an heir to his fortune, which is also the assurance of the continuation of the

imperialist project. She is not able to do this, however, without her inheritance, a small amount of money that offers her independence. Note, however, that this money comes from a long lost male relative. Once more, Jane's independence is dependent upon male intervention and the empire.

Ultimately, Jane's education serves to reinforce her gender role if not her class position. Her education is fortuitous because it enables an advantageous marriage match. Her relationship with Rochester is made possible because of her time at Lowood and training as governess, but this education does not empower Jane to escape the necessity of marriage or the role of wife/mother prescribed by her gender identity. Although her education allows her some measure of freedom in that she is able to resist St. John's bigamous offer, Jane's ultimate happiness is still invested in her role as mother. As both Jones and Burnstyn note in their works on Victorian charity education, the schools which serve as models for Brontë's Lowood were never envisioned as a means of social equality; rather they were established as a means of social control (343; 11).

### **Chapter 3: African Education and Colonial Domination**

“When an educational process is misconceived, the consequences are socio-economic chaos, political instability, cultural indecorum and moral indiscipline and laxity.”<sup>5</sup>

An exploration of the role of education in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Dangrembga’s *Nervous Conditions* would be incomplete without a larger understanding of the pre-colonial and colonial roles that education played in Britain’s African colonies in general and in Zimbabwe and Nigeria in particular. Although both of these educational contexts suggested and reinforced specific gender roles and encouraged women’s larger cultural participation only in a limited fashion, pre-colonial education offered all of its participants a community oriented view of existence and education and focused on the best ways in which to create an individual who conformed to the traditional cultures’ values so as to “produce an individual who [was] honest, respectable, skilled, cooperative and [conformed] to the social order of the day” (Fafunwa 20).

#### ***Pre-Colonial Education***

Generally speaking, traditional African education “combined physical training with character-building and manual activity with intellectual training” (Fafunwa 16). The curriculum of this education created an environment in which, “without being taught, the African child developed his/her physical self through imitation, intuition and curiosity” but “traditional education also encouraged intellectual training” (Bassey 19). One African described the situation this way: “Before the coming of Europeans to our country, no aspect of our life, no boy or girl was ever neglected by our educational system because it

was constantly being innovated to make it relevant to the needs of all students. Every person had an opportunity for education” (Mungazi and Walker 30).

The primary goal of such an education was to develop individuals capable of sustaining the community: “In traditional Africa, an educated person was one who was capable of finding practical solutions to problems” (Bassey 23). It was important for the survival of the community that the training of new leaders included teaching them how to “judg[e] rightly on matters relating to behavior” and “show sound common sense in all practical matters” (Bassey 23). The emphasis on common sense and judgment encouraged students to find their own niche within their particular cultural context because “this form of education instilled in the learner a purpose that was essential to the sustenance of diverse components of society and individuality” (Bassey 30). Because these components of society and the important functions of its members were always in flux, “the educational system was being constantly reformed to make it relevant to the needs of the students and the transformation of society to ensure its development” (Mungazi and Walker 30).

The traditional African educational system was created by the community and for the community and was established in such a way as to encourage both a well-rounded individual and a well-functioning society in which all individuals are taught to work for the betterment of the community at large. In his seminal survey of education in Africa in 1964, K.A. Busia suggested that

though traditional Africa had many cultures, they all appear to have emphasized a *summum bonum*, a social sensitivity which made one lose one’s self in the group; the kinsfolk were, and lived as, members of one another. It was the goal of

education to inculcate this sense of belonging, which was the highest value of the cultural system. The young were educated in and for the community's way of life (16-17).

The interconnectivity between members of the community is one of the chief lessons of traditional education. Without the whole, the individual could not survive. According to Dominic T. Ashley, in his lecture "The Role of Education in Combating Violence in Sierra Leone," the kind of skills and knowledge on which traditional African education focused were "not just learning for the sake of learning" (29). Instead, the whole of African traditional education before the arrival of the British and their missionary education "was a deliberate effort to perpetuate and reinforce social solidarity and homogeneity" (Ashley 29). For this reason, Canaan Banana, a Zimbabwean author and scholar, concludes, "in traditional society in Africa, education was an integral part of the entire social, economic and cultural system. It was related to the individual, the human group and the environment. Each part was essential to the coherent operation and sustenance of the whole system" (Banana 73).

### ***Colonialism and Education***

Mission schooling supported imperialism. We should remember not what they gave us but what they took away from us. Educating children is, in principle, fine and worthwhile. But there is a question to be asked: what were they being educated for? They were being educated for subservience, they were being educated to turn their backs on their own past and their own peoples.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Aims of Colonial Education**

One of the most important parts of the colonial project was the indoctrination or enculturation of the youngest generation in order to keep the colonized group docile in

the face of their oppression<sup>7</sup>. Education, “whether defined as schooling, socialization, or acculturation,” was an integral part of this process (Summers 3). In order to entice the natives to make use of the available schools and educational opportunities, the colonial authorities and the missionaries who ran the schools “emphasize[d] the universality of the educational mechanisms by which the economically or politically dominant groups of the colonizing society generalize their power onto the colonial scene” (Okeke 124). The colonial and religious authorities extolled the virtues of a European education and made sure that the kind of knowledge available in the mission schools, which comprised a majority of the available schools in both Zimbabwe and Nigeria, included the kinds of tools necessary for upward mobility within the colonial framework<sup>8</sup>.

This is one of the reasons that these schools placed such emphasis on learning the English language and discarding the native tongue<sup>9</sup>. These schools, which taught European history without regard to African history and the English language without regard to the native dialect, reflected a mindset that “tend[ed] to perpetuate existing patterns of domination” while “at the same time... minimize[ing] the significance of the role played by the cultural traditions of colonial peoples in their experiences attached to colonial educational systems” (Okeke 124). By disregarding and denying the native experience, the colonial power is able to effectively dehumanize the native and shape the native as the colonial power sees fit<sup>10</sup>.

This enforced adoption of the oppressor’s language and cultural practice is almost exclusively politically motivated. According to Lord William Hailey, one of the chief voices in the British debate about the so-called African problem<sup>11</sup>, the

conceptions as to what is best in education are apt...to be coloured by political objectives: indeed...what at times has been put forward by administrations as policy of education has in truth been only the expression of a political determination or an effort to implement the view held of the place which the African should occupy in the social economy (Hailey 90).

Hailey's insistence that the educational goals of Britain's African administrators were politically not benevolently motivated lends credence to Okeke's assertion that the classroom was little more than another tool of colonial subjugation.

Like Lord Hailey, Ernest Emenyonu, a Nigerian writer and thinker, suggests that "the values which the colonial system was meant to entrench in our society" were "for the welfare and benefit of the colonizers" (Emenyonu 37). According to Emenyonu, the educational practices of the colonial administrators and missionary societies performed a specific function in that they were designed "for themselves and their country" not as an instrument of social equality or betterment for the students <sup>12</sup>(Emenyonu 37). If a colonial school did choose to teach any form of the native language, it was so that the natives could better understand the lessons of their inferiority (Emenyonu 37). The colonizer designed an educational system that was meant "to produce individuals enlightened enough to understand the values of the world outside their home environment, but not equipped to think inwards for the betterment and salvation of their own immediate society" and were therefore only capable of improving the lives of the colonizers, never their own (Emenyonu 37). Whatever empowerment the pupils might have gained was directed toward the betterment of the colonizer not of the pupil's own people because

“schools in Africa [were] used to produce ideologies that support the dominant group’s authority to rule” (Bassey 3).

### **Denial of African Cultural Heritage**

The British colonial educational framework also served to oppress the native in that it began to strip its pupils of native cultural practices, traditions, and language. Because of this loss of culture, then, “the colonized experiences double alienation” (Clignet 131). First and foremost, the native culture was devalued and largely eliminated from the educational setting. The natives’ cultural practices were then supplanted by “practices, ideologies, and philosophies...alien to his framework of reference and his own tradition,” (Clignet 131). These philosophies sought to acculturate students, to usurp the power of the native culture and language and replace them with European values and the English language. In contrast to Victorian educational practices within England, “the schools in Africa deculturized their students”<sup>13</sup> (Bassey 45).

The replacement of the native tradition is nowhere so obvious as in the subject of language, for many “colonial schools neglected the teaching of indigenous languages” and chose instead to teach English exclusively (Bassey 45). When these schools did teach about the native culture, “the indigenous history taught devalued indigenous culture by emphasizing civil wars, tribal conflicts, famines and barbarism” (Bassey 45). Such lessons simultaneously stripped pupils of language by retelling the history of the native culture in English instead of the native language and devalued the native cultural heritage by presenting the natives’ cultural history as the practice of barbaric men. One native Nigerian reflected on the experience of colonial education this way: “They were being



educated for subservience, they were being educated to turn their backs in their own past and their own peoples,”<sup>14</sup> and this alienation was possible only because of the British’s systematic devaluation of native culture and language (as qtd. In Mackenzie 40).

### **Missionaries and Mission Schools: Christianity Enabling Imperialist Oppression**

The educational work of the mission schools in Africa began with “a group of influential Victorian Englishmen known as the Clapham Sect,” who were “responsible for the formation of one of the first Protestant missionary societies to venture into Africa”<sup>15</sup> (Bassey 28). Although this group was one of the first to make the transition from Victorian philanthropic schools in the British Isles, it was by no means the only group that did so. In fact, “from the early years of colonial rule onwards there was a rapid expansion of mission schools” (Kuster 87). The influence of these mission schools on nearly every facet of African life can hardly be overestimated, for “where a mission has worked long enough to have established roots in the life of the people, its influence can be seen in many branches of economic and social life” (Westermann 154). For native Africans in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, this meant that, although many of the missionaries may have disagreed with some or all of the philosophy of British imperialism, “missions became the first promoters of African education” (Westerman 151). For native Africans in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, this meant that the missions’ original goals were supplanted by the colonizer’s need for control, a plan which the mission school became an important part of.

Originally, the missionaries goals were largely evangelical because the missionaries who populated the schools saw children as the best hope for spreading the

gospel; students were eager to attend these schools to learn the tools necessary to navigate the colonial situation, and while teaching them these tools, the missionaries were able to create an entire generation of young Christian Africans (Westermann 151). This is not to say that the mission schools were not interested in teaching, for “the provision of formal education for Africans was one of the first concerns of almost all missions” (Kuster 48). However, “the Church bodies’ prime goal was the conversion of Africans to the Christian faith” (Kuster 48). With conversion as a primary goal then, education was “essentially a means to an end rather than an end in itself” (Challiss 26). This evangelical imperative fit nicely with the ‘civilizing’ project of the colonial administration in such a way that a “dialectical relationship... existed between Christianity and Colonialism” (Mbuende 30).

This relationship between colonialism and the mission schools does not, however, negate the good work done by the missionaries there. In fact, “the missions offered food, shelter and land to those Africans who had been detrimentally affected by the upheavals and the forced removals of thousands of Africans following the wars of resistance in the 1890s” (Kuster 88). The English lessons provided by the mission schools, whatever their philosophical implications, were “a strategic tool which potentially facilitated the communication with government officials and thus assisted Africans in winning more amenable places from themselves in a colonial context” (Kuster 88). Additionally, these mission schools provided “assistance in times of political turmoil and ecological and economic crisis,” gave young Africans a chance to earn “extra money by working for the missionaries,” and facilitated “the escape of young men and women from rural restrictions and patriarchal control” (Kuster 328).

It would be naïve, however, to dismiss the role that mission schools played in the colonial transformation and domination of traditional African culture. The mission schools helped convince students that “European technological achievement” was associated with “Western education,” and many African families “were willing to pay the price to learn the secrets of white power” (Bassey 39). While this philosophy may not have been part of a conscious effort to enculturate students, “the establishment of a school in the Western mould, staffed by teachers trained in Western pedagogies and implicitly committed to the value system of an alien culture, could not hope to leave intact the indigenous character of those destined to receive its education” (Mackenzie 49).

Many of the African elites educated in these mission schools certainly saw it this way. One such man reminded Tanzanian listeners, as part of his radio show on Radio Moscho in 1986, that “mission schooling supported imperialism. We should remember not what they gave us but what they took away from us<sup>16</sup>” (Mackenzie 47). In fact, a Tanzanian thinker, Karim Hirji, has suggested that “it was missionary education which facilitated the separation of the African from his traditional society for absorption into the socio-economic system” (3). Additionally, Jerome Kiwia, a Tanzanian journalist, argued that “the principal role of the missionaries was to prepare Africans spiritually and mentally for physical domination” (4). In essence, then “missionaries were collaborators who, through the kind of education they offered to Africans, helped in promoting the stability of colonial regimes” even when this was not their original intention (Bassey 43).

### **Colonial Educational Practices in Zimbabwe**

The history of Zimbabwe's (formerly Southern Rhodesia) colonial educational framework begins in the same way that it did in many of Britain's African colonies: "The London Missionary Society (LMS) established the first mission station at Inyati, in the south-west of Zimbabwe in 1859" (Kuster 37). Because the founding of these mission schools was part of a larger Victorian inclination toward philanthropy, "nineteenth century social theories and beliefs, combined with the Christian work ethic, had an impact on the formulation of educational policies for Africans in colonial Zimbabwe"<sup>17</sup>(Kuster 54). These Victorian beliefs, reflected in mission and philanthropic schools throughout Britain and eventually mirrored in the mission schools established in the colonies, resulted in institutions that emphasized staying within one's own social sphere and learning trades to make one useful to one's community, which, in the case of the colonies, meant making oneself useful to the colonial authorities

The missions continued to control the majority of the educational opportunities for Zimbabwe's youth, and therefore, "tensions and struggles over schools in Southern Rhodesia were closely tied to missionization because missions provided most of the country's schools" (Summers 39). The leaders of each of the smaller communities within Zimbabwe were forced to compete for attention so that "chiefs, communities, members of different denominations, [and] students all struggled over limited resources and mission patronage" (Summers 39). These tensions only increased the demand, however.

The schools in Zimbabwe were also strongly influenced by Zimbabwe's colonial leader, Cecil Rhodes, who "emphasized that Africans should be given only the type of education that would enable them to become laborers and assistants" (Bassey 32). Rhodes was so influential that colonial administrators continually demanded that any

educational policy for the colony be “consistent with Rhodes’s philosophy” (Mungazi 36). In fact, “Earl Grey (1851-1917), who served as administrator of colonial Zimbabwe from April 12, 1896 to December 4, 1898, argued in 1898 when he introduced an education bill that the purpose of education for Africans was to train them as laborers,” language which directly reflect Rhodes’ writing on the subject of African education (Munagzi 36). There can be no question, then, “that the colonial government in Zimbabwe designed [its educational policy] to reduce the education of [the] African to a level where it helped serve the labor needs of the colonial society,” and that this desire to subjugate through education “was synonymous with its desire to have education prepare Africans to serve [the colonial authority’s] own political, social, and economic purposes” (Mungazi 36).

Because of the colonial government’s insistence that Africans could be trained only to serve their oppressors, the educational system encouraged the belief among whites and introduced the idea to native Africans “that traditional education was uncivilized because it was different” (Mungazi 36). Eventually, “this attitude became a basic operative principle of their action,” and “colonial officials were not likely to see the positive attributes of the African culture” and were therefore able to dehumanize those who were being educated (Mungazi 36). Ultimately, the African pupils’ acceptance of their inferiority would become a problem for the nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s, which “identified the underdeveloped African educational system as a settler state device to perpetuate white rule and African socio-economic and political subjugation” (Bassey 203). Generations of students who had been taught to devalue their own culture and history were among the greatest obstacles to a stable and independent Zimbabwe.

## **Colonial Educational Practices in Nigeria**

Like Zimbabwe, the history of a European education system in Nigeria began with mission schools: “The real history of school education in Nigeria began with the missionaries in 1842. At first, the kind of education brought by the missions aimed primarily at religious education, and Nigerian education in its early stages was interwoven with Christian evangelism” (Okeke 5). The missions throughout Nigeria varied in terms of denominational affiliation, but the mission schools’ main objective is best articulated by one of the Catholic bishops in eastern Nigeria: “According to Bishop Shanahan, one of the pioneer Catholic missionaries in eastern Nigeria, ‘Those who hold the school, hold the country, hold its religion, hold its future’” (Bassey 11-12). These missions schools comprised the basis of the more complete colonial education to come.

In essence, the mission schools laid a foundation on which the colonial government built the larger educational framework. It is important to note, as P. Uduaroh Okeke does, that “the educational policy of the British Government in Nigeria cannot be divorced from the total policy of colonial administration” because “education is an instrument of national policy” (4). With this in mind, we may see the British educational policy in Nigeria as informed by two important considerations. The first, “namely, the British philosophy and practice of education in general,” mirrors the Victorian philanthropic schools that taught trades the lower classes (Okeke 11). The second would be “the British government’s attitude toward the education of colonial peoples in particular,” which “is influenced by the theory of imperialism which proposed that colonies exist primarily for the benefit of the mother country; hence colonial education policy becomes an instrument of the national policy of the ruling power” (Okeke 11). Just

as the first mission schools did, the government funded schools in Nigeria sought to educate the natives only in an effort to support the imperialist's agenda.

Although Ernest Emenyonu claims that, even in Nigeria “education is a powerful agency for social reconstruction,” it is important to remember that the colonial policy and racism that served as the basis of both mission and government run schools was not for the benefit of the native students or their families (34). In fact, schools were more often than not a way to establish “political authority over them, by ‘civilizing’ them, by providing some services such as schools... and by exposing the colonials to the culture of ruling power” (Okeke 2). This civilizing process along with the exploitative rationale for providing educational opportunities led to “an educational process,” which was “misconceived,” and whose “consequences are socio-economic chaos, political instability, cultural indecorum and moral indiscipline and laxity” (Emenyonu 34).

If, as Emenyonu claims, “the culture of a people is expressed, taught and disseminated largely through the educational system,” then “the philosophy of education of a people reflects and anticipates the enshrinement of the best of the values in that culture” (Emenyonu 37). In the educational system established by the British in Nigeria, and in all of its colonies in Africa and elsewhere, the values that were enshrined were greed, exploitation, and destruction of native cultural practices and traditions. These values served as both an impetus for and an obstacle to later campaigns for independence and produced, as we see in Buchi Emecheta's narrative about educational opportunity in Africa, a certain ambivalence about the transformative power of education.

### **Internalization, Enculturation, and Learning to Work within the System**

The overwhelming nature of the colonial educational system led to a choice for each of its pupils: resist the European values taught by the mission schools, accept these values, or do neither, but find a way to work within the system created by the colonial administration. In the end, more often than not, pupils and their families chose one of the latter options. For this reason, “educated African men were central to the shape and sustainability of colonialism throughout Africa, and in Southern Rhodesia” (Summers xix). It is important to realize that we should not understand “colonialism...simply as a monolith that Africans sought to undermine;” instead, colonialism and its educational system created “a space of cultural and social identities and institutions that at least some Africans learned to live within, use, and value,” which was, of course, one of the colonizer’s aims (Summers xx).

The colonial framework established a hierarchy that rewarded those who accepted or seemed to accept the values and rules that governed colonial practice. The colonial administration argued that “in order to realize his racial ideal, [the native] needs education and training from the white man” (Westermann 27). Of course, “the material of his education will be largely European; and nothing of the best and greatest of our own culture that he can assimilate should be withheld from him” (Westermann 27). Because of this attitude, and “the detrimental effect of overall political and economic developments,” or the lack thereof, on the traditional economies of the colonies “a growing number of Africans perceive[d] education as a means of enhancing employment opportunities and thus improving their socio-economic position” (Kuster 328).

As the colonial administration began to shift the kinds and locations of crop production, “to secure their means of subsistence, vastly increasing numbers of Africans



had to enter wage employment” (Kuster 202). To a certain extent, then, “African demands for more and better standards of instruction were based on the pragmatic realization that the access to higher wages and avenues of social mobility necessitated a certain level of skills and educational qualifications” (Kuster 202). Without an appropriate education, they realized, they had no hope of finding a place within the colonial framework, for English was necessary to deal in any meaningful way with British authorities in Nigeria or Zimbabwe (Kuster 73).

Some native Africans, however, accepted the system without this kind of economic coercion. Because of “the rapid economic development, the establishment of 'Native' Courts and Councils, Posts and Telegraphs, the introduction of the bicycle and commercial lorries, construction of motor roads and the ‘iron horse,’” many Africans enjoyed the possible benefits of the introduction of European culture (Mackenzie 47). These new technologies “introduced a new wealth, opened up countless opportunities, excited immeasurable hopes and created fresh values” (Mackenzie 47). Those who desired the benefits of these European luxuries had no choice but to attend school for, “to the masses, education was the only key that could unlock the mysteries and prosperity of the new world being created” (Mackenzie 47). In addition to the opportunity for advancement within the colonial system, the schools offered the students an important lesson in surviving the European occupation, as “the most important lessons emerged not from the syllable charts of the beginning reader, but from the struggle with the teacher to be allowed access to book” (Summers 45). These experiences of struggling to gain the tools to survive within the system imparted lessons about “how to make demands effectively within the European-dominated world” and “taught important lessons in

alliance building, the development of effective rhetoric, and the possibilities and limits of direct action such as stay-aways, calculated gestures of disrespect and disobedience, and strikes” (Summers 45). These tools of nonviolent disobedience would turn out to be some of the most important in the struggles for independence.

### ***African Women’s Pre-Colonial and Colonial Education***

In African culture, this process of acculturation can be clearly seen as some women transitioned from home schooling conducted by female family and tribe members into the classrooms of mission schools. As part of the traditional African educational framework, “above all, girls were drilled in their future roles as housewives and brides” (Bassey 21). This familial indoctrination and definition of appropriate gender roles was later reinforced in the colonial schools as “in addition to the limited number of options open to girls within the educational system, teachers and schools emphasized subjects leading to traditional gender roles for girls, that is, literature for girls and the sciences for boys” (Bassey 98). Although women were permitted the opportunity for education, the transformative power usually associated with education was muted by the exclusion of pre-colonial African culture, language, and values and by the gender specific curriculum which denied girls the opportunity for the kind of knowledge that would empower social mobility.

## Chapter 4: African Experience Novels & the Prospect of Educational Emancipation

“Education promises the possibility of escape from poverty and entrance into an unfamiliar and intriguing world of texts and learning. Yet, it also entails inevitable separation from family and a measure of complicity with the imperial power that controls the education system; frequently this fractures the individual’s sense of self.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Joys of Motherhood: Can Education Serve as the Way Out?*

In her examination of African women writers, Emecheta in particular, Elizabeth Morgan highlights the “two potentially demeaning traditions, that of colonialism and that of patriarchy, present in traditional culture and deeply encoded in the superimposed colonial culture” that Emecheta is forced to struggle against in her work (104). “She, once the mistress of the oral tale and thriving on the female small talk (palaver) of the marketplace, now finds herself writing within a historically male, Europeanized form” (Morgan 104). The novel form itself presents a conundrum for Emecheta and her characters. Morgan goes so far as to suggest that the colonial education, something at the center of the discussion of gender in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, should be seen as part of the colonial subjugation of the African culture: “Furthermore, she may find that her education makes the language of the colonials more accessible than her mother tongue. How, then, can she say what is distinctively hers in a way that the world can hear?” (Morgan 104).

This problem of educational colonization and subjugation is part and parcel of the problem of emancipating womanhood at the center of Emecheta’s novel. Emecheta’s

protagonist, Nnu Ego, is mother to boys and girls, all of whom have a stake in the educational decisions that the family is forced to make. Education is an important tool, perhaps the only tool as Nnu Ego sees it, that seems to guarantee an escape from the colonial oppression. Such opportunity is revered by the community at large, something evidenced by Adaku's reaction when Oshia is about to leave for the university. When Adaku celebrates Oshia's imminent departure, Nnu Ego responds with wonder: "Why you would have thought the boy was getting crowned and not just going to college." Adaku tells her sister-wife that "it is like getting crowned in a way" (Emecheta 189). Education is a gift, an honor, and a precious commodity in short supply for Nnu Ego's family.

Both boys and girls are sent to school, but the aims of the schools they attend and the importance placed upon education are different for the girls than they are for the boys. The boys' schooling focuses on Western education and encourages the boys to work toward the possibility for further education at universities abroad. The girls' education is more limited; they attend a convent school, and, as the reader learns near the close of Nnu Ego's narrative, their education is easily sacrificed to allow the boys to continue their education. This sacrifice that the girls are forced to make is most clearly seen in the exchange between Adaku, Nnu Ego, and Mama Abby after the birth of Nnu Ego's second set of twins. When Mama Abby asks after Adaku's daughters, Adaku says that her girls are away at convent school. Mama Abby replies that perhaps "those girls of yours may end up going to college too" (Emecheta 189). The discussion stems, in part from, Nnu Ego's earlier discussion of Oshia as he leaves for university, during which Nnu Ego makes it clear that the university, and Oshia's education in general, is her family's

greatest hope to raise itself from poverty. During this exchange concerning Adaku's girls, Nnu Ego makes an interesting correlation between her son and Adaku's daughters: "She wants them to and they will make it. I am beginning to think that there may be a future for educated women. I saw many young women teaching in schools. It would be really something for a woman to be able to earn some money monthly like a man" (Emecheta 189). Throughout the novel, Nnu Ego has bemoaned the financial dependence of her sex and made it clear that a woman's dependence on her husband or sons places her at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to assert her independence and personhood. She says earlier in this same section that the world values women less than men; society, both her tribal culture and the European culture of the colonizer, makes women weak and men strong, and she places much of the blame for the state patriarchal oppression on women because "women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build" (Emecheta 187). Nnu Ego's assessment empowers women in a way that she has not been empowered, yet we see, from her mother, that the dream of empowerment is not new: "Please don't mourn for me long," Nnu Ego's mother says to Nnu Ego's father, "and see that however much you love our daughter Nnu Ego, you must allow her to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman" (Emecheta 28). Nnu Ego's mother sought for her the kind of freedom she seems to want for her daughters, but unlike her mother, Nnu Ego sees a concrete path for her daughters, and all the daughters of Nigeria, one paved by education and the independence that education can provide.

Despite what the text seems to indicate is an understanding of the need for women to assert themselves, a task Nnu Ego seems to think possible through education, Nnu Ego

does not pursue this goal on behalf of her daughters. After the discussion about Adaku's daughters and Nnu Ego's assertion that education could be a path to freedom for women, Adaku asks about Nnu Ego's daughters' education. Her girls, at one point, had also been attending a missionary school. Nnu Ego replies that her daughters are no longer in school, but that they can read a little, and anyway "they will be married in a few years. The most important thing is for them to get good husbands" (Emecheta 189). Despite her stated understanding of education as an important tool of emancipation for her daughters, when faced with the reality of the situation, the reader finds that Nnu Ego reverts to the patriarchal demands that she bemoans earlier in the text. Despite her assertion that it would have to be the women who challenged patriarchal dominance, the women who demanded their own freedom, she fails to encourage her daughters in this vein. Instead, she encourages them in the traditional gender roles that have made Nnu Ego so unhappy in her life.

Stephanie Robolin explains the problem this way in her article on interpreting the postcolonial situation in *The Joys of Motherhood*:

If Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* demonstrates anything, it is the extent to which the deeply rooted power hierarchy between men and women plays out in society and, in particular, how the privileges conferred upon men are founded upon the limitation or privation of women's power...including education (84).

Nnu Ego finds it natural to sacrifice the girls education to make sure the boys have what they need, and makes it clear that that while the girls' education is a good thing, the most important thing is that they "get good husbands," and fulfill their expected gender rules (Emecheta 189). The authority vested in patriarchal forces, in both the indigenous tribal

cultures and the colonial culture, demands the sacrifice of the women who participate in those cultures. According to Robolin's understanding of the postcolonial situation in which Nnu Ego finds herself, Nnu Ego's assessment that only the women are able to change the gender situation seems to be an important observation. Not only does the patriarchal system find a great deal of its power in the power and opportunity denied to the women who participate in it, it does so with their acceptance. Nnu Ego views education as a way out of the system that has robbed her life of joy, but she fails to secure the necessary education for her daughters. Instead, she allows their education to be sublimated to their brothers' education, which reinforces the notion that the boys' future, which is directly tied to their educational opportunities throughout the novel, is more important than the girls' future

According to Nnu Ego, education is the silver bullet, the one avenue that could open the world of independence to women as well as men. Education has the potential to give her daughters and Adaku's daughters the chance to choose for themselves who they want to be, where they want to live, and what they want to do with their lives. Education could save her daughters from her fate as the overworked and then forgotten mother to ungrateful sons and daughters. Nnu Ego also recognizes, however, that education has the power to destroy a family and strip a child of his or her culture. As she discusses his education with her oldest son, she warns him not to become like the rich boys he goes to school with; he dismisses her concerns and assures her that he will not be changed by his education or the wealthy boys that surround him. Despite her best efforts and her warnings, however, Oshia's education does change him in that it strips away parts of his cultural identity, namely the importance of providing for his family. While he encourages

his younger brother to pursue education, Oshia does nothing to aid his family financially. Perhaps the way that Nnu Ego's family unit breaks down is a comment on the problem of the intersecting cultures caused by the introduction of the colonial culture into the traditional tribal culture, but it is also a comment on the perils of the colonial education, an education which demeans the traditional culture and encourages a kind of loathing for the pupils' traditional understanding of the world and privileges the colonizers world view as the only valid one.

### ***Nervous Conditions: Education as False Hope of Emancipation***

The narrator of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu, begins her story by telling her readers that her "story is not after all about death"; instead, the story is about "[her] escape and Lucia's; about [her] mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion—Nyasha, farminded and isolated, [her] uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful" (1). According to the narrative, the escape she speaks of here is inextricably tied to Tambu's pursuit of education and the problems of native identity as it relates to her patriarchal and colonial oppression, for Tambu notes that her situations, first at the mission school and later at the Ladies College, are opportunities for "mental and eventually material emancipation" enabled by education (Dangarembga 89). At the end of the first chapter, Tambu reinforces the ways in which her lack of educational opportunity is tied not only to the British colonial occupation of her country but also to the patriarchal oppression inherent to both the native and colonial framework. She tells her reader that "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate" (12). Tambu's



story is not only about her life but “is concerned with the emotional and psychological effects of patriarchal (as much as colonial) power upon individual women” (Searle 59).

From the beginning of her narrative, the narrating Tambu realizes how important her gender is in terms of the role she will be expected to play and lets the reader know that Tambu’s oppression is tied directly to her gender. As Carolyn Martin Shaw, in her article “‘You had a daughter, but I am becoming a woman’: Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps*” notes, Tambu “realizes that femaleness and not poverty, education, or tradition is responsible for women’s position in society” (Shaw 14). Her gender is the reason that her education is less important than the education of her brother, a fact that is reinforced by her interaction with her brother after she decides to plant maize to fund her education. When Tambu asks Nhamo why it does not matter how hard she tries to get to school, he responds that “it’s the same everywhere. Because you are a girl” and therefore, less worthy of the education she so desperately wants (Dangarembga 64).

This section of text also gives the reader a clue that the education that Tambu is so intent upon may not be able to offer her the kind of total freedom she seeks. Tambu says that she “expected this era [at the mission school] to be significantly profound and broadening in terms of adding wisdom to my nature, clarity to my vision, glamour to my person” (Dangarembga 94). Despite Tambu’s tireless pursuit of education, however, she begins to realize, mainly from her interactions with her cousin Nyasha, that the British education available to her in the mission schools breeds ‘Englishness’ while simultaneously destroying parts of the student’s native culture. Although the natives’ position within the educational apparatus that perpetuates their colonial domination

generally causes a crisis of cultural identity, whether the participant is male or female, “Dangarembga makes clear, it is the intersection of the educational opportunities provided by the mission with the patriarchal elements of Shona culture that make [Nyasha’s] suffering so acute” (Searle 58).

The destruction of the individual’s link to his or her native culture is particularly important when it manifests in the form of the loss of native language, as it does for Nyasha. During a particularly serious conversation between the girls, Tambu notes that their “conversation was laboured and clumsy because when Nyasha spoke seriously her thoughts came in English” (Dangarembga 78). Nyasha’s British education and her adoption of English prevent her from fully connecting to her family and her people. Her time abroad and her immersion in the colonizer’s culture and language have lead her to forget “what home was like” and effectively transformed her inner life, for even her thoughts are in English (Dangarembga 79). Such cultural confusion also becomes a part of Tambu’s life as she embarks upon her educational journey. She notes that, at times, she would end up “mixing the two languages [Shona and English] because [she] was not sure which was most appropriate” (Dangarembga 81). It is important to note, however, that despite the emphasis on the mission school and that fact that “the mission,” which historical research has shown was the first of the educational forays in the colonial situation, “plays a central role in creating this predicament for Tambudzai and her family,” the narrator “is interested in exploring the tensions and issues this interaction engenders in terms predominantly cultural and political rather than religious” (Searle 56).

Eventually, Tambu begins to doubt that a British education will be at all effectual in delivering a new and better life for her, for “when there are sacrifices to be made,” it is

the women who must make them (Dangarembga 16). When she experiences anxiety over the changes in her friends' behavior toward her, though, she deludes herself by claiming that "the self [she] expected to find on the mission would take some time to appear" and the changes she would undergo in becoming more English, would not be "so radical...that people would have to behave differently" around her (86). She holds on to illusions about the emancipatory power of education even as she arrives at the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart: "For was I—I, Tambudzai, lately of the mission and before that the homestead—was I, Tambudzai, so recently a peasant, was I not entering, as I had promised myself I would, a world where burdens lightened, soon to disappear all together?" (Dangarembga 195).

Her encounters with the nuns and the other forces of Imperialism at the college and the final breakdown of her cousin Nyasha when she declares that she is neither Shona nor European, however, lead to a moment of clarity for Tambu, who begins to suspect that she "had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the 'Englishness' of the mission; and after that the more concentrated 'Englishness' of Sacred Heart" (Dangarembga 207). Although she dismisses this notion at first, she comes to realize that her pursuit of education and her adoption of the ways and language of the colonial oppressor did not offer her the freedom she was seeking. Instead, her enculturation only alienates her from her own culture and language. She says that "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" (Dangarembga 208). Only this act of expansion and the effort of writing her story and the story of the other women

in her family is able to reveal the problems of the colonial missionary education that promises hope for a better future and only delivers alienation. Her gender combined with her racial/ethnic identity precludes her from such emancipation.

Alison Searle, in her article on the importance of missions and missionary enterprises in *Nervous Conditions*, asserts that “Dangarembga critiques both the oppressions and values enforced by the British colonial regime and the obstacles posed by Shona culture for women in their search for self-realisation and fulfillment” (55). If this is the case, then, the novel can be seen as a comment on both the colonial education and the traditional African education that preceded it because neither form of education offers a way for the female protagonist to establish her independent identity. The text should not be seen as a vindication of native educational or cultural practices. As Elizabeth Jackson notes in her article “Like Cattle for Slaughter? Reading *Nervous Conditions* Pedagogical Interventions,” “Tambu’s earlier reflection that, over the course of her mission education, she has already grown much quieter and more self-effacing than [is] usual” is “evidence that her education has already served colonial interests by shaping her into exactly the acquiescent, compliant, exemplary young lady both English and Shona patriarchies believe a daughter ought to be.”

The novel also makes the point that “Education...which might free women like Maiguru from service to...patriarchy becomes yet another token of exchange, further alienating them from the ‘home’ economy of agricultural subsistence in favor of urban wage service” (Bahri). It is only when she finds her moment of ‘revolutionary consciousness and literary awareness’ at the Young Ladies College and decides to break away from both the patriarchal and colonial demands and constraints that Tambu is able

to establish her own identity. Tambu realizes that the education she had been pursuing was part of “an educational system which [had] the potential to emancipate women and natives but function[ed], instead, to keep them in their place and even further exacerbate their ills” (Bahri).

When taken together, *Jane Eyre* and these two African experience novels demonstrate that British education is largely ineffectual in granting female characters the kind of freedom that education is supposed to bring. For Tambu, as for Jane and Nnu Ego, education provides only limited opportunities for emancipation. The price for these opportunities, however, is further enslavement the patriarchal forces inherent in their education. For Nnu Ego and Tambu, the emancipation supposedly available through education is further hindered by the Imperialist demand that these characters deny the efficacy of their own native language in order to function in a colonial situation that exists only in English. The price of the hybridity necessary to survive in this colonial situation could vary well be the complete loss of self, a disintegration of identity, as it is for Nyasha, who is neither Shona nor British and therefore is no one at all.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Education [is] the building (a) a free and democratic society; (b) a just and egalitarian society; (c) a united, strong and self-reliant nation; (d) a great and dynamic economy; and (e) a land of opportunities for all citizens...but what goes on inside the schools is not always education.”<sup>19</sup>

British colonialism, and the missionary endeavors that preceded and eventually supported it, established and retained its power in no small part through the medium of the classroom. When combined, the theories of Freire, Foucault, Fanon and Freeman begin to paint a picture of the theoretical aims and the probable results of colonial education for women. Instead of being places for social and intellectual betterment, colonial schools become places where the colonizer is able to perform the most difficult and most important task, for it is in the schools that the colonizer appropriates the minds of his youngest victims. The purpose of the colonial school was to simultaneously reinforce a patriarchal system present in both the colonizing and colonized cultures and to replace traditional cultural values and language with the culture of the colonizer, a culture which demands the subservience and reinforces the inferiority of the people it has colonized. According to Foucault, Freire, and Fanon, the school, as the knowledge transmitting institution in the colonial context, served as the site at which the colonizing power most fully insinuated itself into the minds of its subjects. Because of the power of knowledge and language, as articulated by Foucault and Fanon, the school became one of the most effective tools of colonization as it allowed the colonizing culture and opportunity to supplant the native language and cultural traditions of the natives it was

educating. Bonnie Cook Freeman also suggests that the school was a particularly powerfully weapon against women within the colonial framework as these institutions of knowledge not only enforced the new colonial cultural ideal but reinforced and perpetuated the patriarchal subjugation of female students.

Historically, we can see that Victorian missionaries, like the men of the Clapham sect, attempted to translate their educational philanthropic work from the lower and middle class children of the British Isles to the children of Africa and, in their attempts to bring British Christian education to Africa, created the perfect tool for imperialism. In African schools after colonialism, African children were taught to mistrust their cultural practices and deny their own languages. Through this usurpation of the native language, missionaries and colonial administrators sought to supersede traditional African cultural ideals in an effort to make students more compliant for their subjugation to colonial authority.

These same practices, however, created educated African elites who, by learning how to work within and around the colonial system, laid the foundation for future independence. Although English supplanted the traditional African languages, this knowledge of English was one of the ways in which colonized men and women in Zimbabwe and Nigeria, like Ernest Emenyonu, Buchi Emecheta, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, would eventually eloquently argue for their shared humanity and the necessity of independence from British authority.

The educational practices that are indicted in Emecheta and Dangarembga's works are first discussed, however, in Charlotte Brontë's Victorian governess novel, *Jane Eyre*. Through the description of the Lowood school in the middle section of the novel

and through Jane's connections between her various circumstances and the education she received at the charity school, the novel yields a critique both of charity schools and the limits of women's British education in the nineteenth century. While Jane's education provides opportunities that would almost certainly not have been available to her without that education, her time at Lowood does not provide the kind of emancipation education supposedly brings. Although her training to be a governess provides the avenue through which she achieves an eventual marriage to Rochester, her educational training is only capable of providing a gender appropriate happiness: marriage and motherhood.

In Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, then, education serves as a delineating feature of the colonial landscape; in some ways, the acceptance of the superiority of a British education separates those with a chance to escape the colonizers' oppression from those without one. The value of a proper education, a British education rooted in Christianity, can be seen in the way that Jane benefits from her time at Lowood, a Victorian philanthropic school much like those established in Britain's African colonies, in part because she is willing to accept a particular gender and class role. Though Brontë's account of Jane's time at the school serves in part as an indictment of the women's educational facilities of her time, her protagonist undoubtedly benefits from the skills she learns during her time at the school, though it can be argued that these benefits serve only to perpetuate negative gender roles and the patriarchal system that enables the imperialist project.

Likewise, education is at least somewhat beneficial for Oshia, the oldest son in Emecheta's narrative, because it facilitates his escape from the burden of Imperialistic oppression and familial ties that threaten to destroy any chance he has of bettering



himself. His rejection of his cultural and familial ties, however, illuminates the problem of a colonial education that encourages the colonized subject to distance himself from the 'less civilized' ways of his own people and adopt 'proper' European manners and assumptions. Though Oshia utilizes his education to make a better life for himself, he leaves behind a part of himself that cannot be replaced by any amount of European education.

The problem of education is more difficult for women within the colonial milieu. For Nnu Ego and her daughters, because of their double colonization, first as women within the patriarchal system reflected in both the traditional and colonial cultures, and then as natives within a colonized country, the project of independence supposedly made possible by education appears beyond their reach. They are not without hope, however, according to Adaku, Mama Abby, and Nnu Ego, who all assert the possibility of change, of a better life, perhaps through education. That road, however, is a complicated one that too often leads toward a European aesthetic that dismisses the African experience, a fact shown quite clearly by Dangarembga's narrative of education in *Nervous Conditions*.

Dangarembga's account of colonial education and false hope that such an education could bring real freedom answers Nnu Ego's assertion that education is the answer for women who are devalued and dehumanized by patriarchal cultural practice. Instead of showing colonial education as a road to emancipation, *Nervous Conditions* suggests the kind of hybridity necessary to survive such an educational system leads not to freedom but to mental breakdown, as evidenced by Nyasha, a seemingly bright girl, full of potential, who is ruined by being cut off from her native cultural practice and

language and immersed in the colonizer's cultural practice and language. She is neither British nor Shona, so she is no one.

Dangarembga's narrator begins to experience this same kind of alienation and confusion. Tambu begins to lose her own language and culture, begins to devalue her own history, and becomes alienated from her family. Once she begins to believe that her pursuit of a British education and its accompanying 'Englishness' cannot actually offer her the kind of freedom she seeks, she comes to realize that what she learned from the mission school and the Catholic college had not been the tools of emancipation but of further degradation. An education devoid of her own cultural practices, traditions, and histories only alienated her from her own culture and coerced her into believing that her culture was worth less than the European one. Neither the traditional nor the colonial system, however, valued her as a woman, and so neither culture's education could lead to emancipation from patriarchal oppression.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions*. 16.

<sup>2</sup> In order to understand the significant role of knowledge and institutions that transmit knowledge in these works, we must first understand the theoretical framework which explains such institutions in their colonial settings and women within these institutions. Michel Foucault, in various publications, addresses knowledge and discourse in terms of institutions of power, in this case, the school and suggests that the school is a tool to define and enforce what is normal. Bonnie Cook Freeman suggests that these same institutions serve to reinforce and perpetuate the patriarchal control necessary for the success of the imperialist project. Paulo Freire then suggests that these institutions are one of the most important of the colonizer's tools of oppression. Frantz Fanon confirms this by arguing that within such institutions, it is the transmission of language and the usurpation of the native language that are the most effective tools of the destruction of the natives' cultural traditions and practices.

<sup>3</sup> In her article "Female Education in Patriarchal Power Systems," Bonnie Cook Freeman discusses the problem of gender roles, which are often taught first within the family and then perpetuated by the school, and the issues and limitations women face in a male dominated educational framework. She suggests that "wittingly or unwittingly, the family has had an impact on shaping the young child to his or her appropriate sex role" (212). Freeman asserts that the gender roles introduced by the family and affirmed by the educational system are not, however, part of a naturally established order. Instead, "it is the result of human invention. Books are written, curricula developed, pedagogical theory spun, teachers trained. The sexist bias of education process is literally *built into it*" (Freeman 219). The entire of process of educating women, then, according to Freeman, is based upon the need to reinforce and continue patriarchal control. The school becomes the site of such patriarchal indoctrination because "the school is one institution that both perpetuates the myth of women's inferiority and helps to transform the myth into a reality" (Freeman 207). This process is achieved through a separate women's curriculum and through a staff of teachers who believe they have a responsibility to create women that fit a specific cultural norm of femininity. Once women began to enter the classroom, they were forced to confront the fact that "many teachers interpret their role as seeing to it that children adjust to their appropriate sex-role behaviors because that is what is considered the healthy, natural criteria for success in their future role in society" (213).

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. 95.

<sup>5</sup> Emenyonu. "Education and the Contemporary Malaise in Nigeria." In Charles E. Nnolim ed. *The Role of Education in Contemporary Africa*. 34.

<sup>6</sup> The suggestion was made on Radio Moscow, broadcast via Dar-es-Salam, monitored in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in July 1986 and is quoted in Clayton Mackenzie's "Demythologizing the missionaries: A reassessment of the functions and relationships of Christian Missionary Education Under Colonialism."

<sup>7</sup> Much of Michel Foucault's writing addresses the concept of power: how it is gained, how it is held, how it is transferred. In the course of his discussions of power and those who hold power over others, Foucault suggests that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (*Discipline and Punish* 100). Because "power and knowledge directly imply one another," Foucault argues, "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (*History of Sexuality* 27). Most importantly in terms of colonial schooling, however, Foucault insists that "there is an administration of knowledge, a politics of

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knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to transcribe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory” (“Questions on Geography” 69). In the British colonial educational framework in Africa, this administration of knowledge combined the doctrines of Christianity (because most of the schools provided for the natives were missions schools of one denomination or another) with a Victorian sense of class, whereby those of the lower class (in terms of the colonies, this would be everyone who is not part of the colonizing society) serve those who transmit the knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his seminal work on the educational realities of imperialist situations, and in *Cultural Action for Freedom*, describes education as one of the most important tools of colonization. He suggests “the interests of the oppressors lie in ‘changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation that oppresses them’; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 60). The power of colonial domination lies in the changing of a cultural consciousness in such a way that the native accepts and incorporates his or her own inferiority. Within the educational framework, this often occurs imposition of a “culture of silence” on those who cannot yet speak the language of the oppressor (*Cultural Action for Freedom* 27). This silence, then, lends itself to “marginality” and “alienation” for the native. The result is that education becomes “the exercise of domination,” which “stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by the educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 65).

<sup>9</sup> In “The Negro and Language,” Fanon argues that “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” because “to speak means to be in a position to learn a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (38, 17-18). The colonial authority demands that the native, in order to survive within the new colonial framework that governs all aspects of his or her life, enter into the institution, the school, which will simultaneously strip him or her of his or her own language, deny its efficacy, and replace that language with the colonizer’s language and with it the whole of the colonizer’s cultural practices (Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* 18). The colonized subject, then “is appraised in terms of the extent of his assimilation” (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 36).

<sup>10</sup> Fanon also insists that the colonial power creates within those they subjugate an “inferiority complex” that “has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality,” especially its language ((*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). The colonized group “finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country” and must decide between the cultural traditions of the colonizer and their own traditions (Fanon, (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). Within the colonial framework, however, “the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Fanon, (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). This choice between the language and traditions of the colonizing nation and the indigenous language and tradition creates a divide within the colonized group because the fact that some “adopt a language different from that of the group into which [they were] born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation,” which divides the native African from his culture and from parts of himself and his personal and familial identity (Fanon, (*Black Skin, White Masks* 25).

<sup>11</sup> This term refers, generally to the problem of ‘civilizing’ Africa. The discussion in which Lord Hailey is concerned involves a debate about whether or not to educate Africans under British colonial rule and what such an education might include.

<sup>12</sup> Note here how closely Emenyonu’s description of the aims of colonial education matches the goals of Victorian education: As both Jones and Burnstyn note in their works on Victorian charity education, the schools which serve as models for Brontë’s Lowood were never envisioned as a means of social equality; rather they were established as a means of social control (343; 11).

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<sup>13</sup> Although British charity schools in Africa ‘deculturized’ their students, as Bassey puts it, they also enculturated them in the same way that Victorian charity schools, like Brontë’s Lowood, did: British values (including Christianity) and the English language were superior to all other values, religions, and languages.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Clayton G. Mackenzie, “Demythologizing the Missionaries: A Reassessment of the Functions and Relationships of Christian Missionary Education Under Colonialism,” *Comparative Education* 19, no. 1 (1993), 46.

<sup>15</sup> This is the same group that, according to McClean, Jones, and Burnstyn figured prominently in the establishment of charity schools in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup> The suggestion was made on Radio Moscow, broadcast via Dar-es-Salam, monitored in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in July 1986.

<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, the same inclination that results in charity schools for the lower classes in Britain like the one in which Jane finds herself.

<sup>18</sup> Alison Searle. “The Role of Missions in *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*.” *Literature and Theology*. 21.1 (March 2007). 60.

<sup>19</sup> Kay Matthews. “Some Reflections on Education and National Development in Africa.” In Charles E. Nnolim ed. *The Role of Education in Contemporary Africa*. 78.