




The semantics of gender, politics, and religion in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

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Zimbabwean literature produced after the attainment of independence has been predominantly engrossed with thematisation of the postcolonial subaltern subjects' existential conditions, enunciated together with gender politics, religion and socio-economic environment that frame politics of difference, and sites of suffering or resistance. These tropes remain absorbing and critical even in contemporary female-authored novels that also engage with a deeply fractured modern-day Zimbabwe. Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *This Mournable Body*, offers important site to debate the enduring concerns of gender inequalities, politics, and religion. A stylistic approach is adopted to identify the semiotic construction of the text and discuss the different styles that are deployed to foreground central tropes in the novel. The adoption of stylistics as an underlying conceptual model locates this current study in the interdisciplinary research which brings together gender, applied linguistics, poetics, politics, and religion, in order to provoke new ways of reading the dialogic and polyphonic elements of the text. The study contends that the politics of difference is an unsettling subject that profoundly impacts on gender relations and religio-political practices in a milieu where precarity is a major defining feature of the subaltern sections comprising women and the marginalised poor. Thus, the novel's title figuratively foregrounds the (un)mournable bodies of the people, who are both dehumanised and heavily burdened by surviving at the margin.

Contribution: Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *This Mournable Body* demonstrates a deep concern with the plight of the subaltern people in a gendered society and how their conditions of the Othered bodies are further amplified by both religion and politics in present-day Zimbabwe. Thus the study contributes to the mounting discourses about politics of fragmentation and binary practices, and the ensuing agony suffered by the sidelined persons. The adopted stylistic reading of the focus novel underscores the interdisciplinary urgency to literary interpretative process.

Keywords: gender; linguistics; stylistic perspective; religion; poetic discourse; semantics; semiotics; style.

Introduction

The Zimbabwean literary corpus produced since the realisation of independence has enduring focus on existential conditions of the postcolonial subjects which include gender, politics, religion, and socio-economic setting that frame politics of difference, and reconfigured sites of suffering, grieving or resistance. Yet, these issues are persistently reflected in modern-day female-fictional texts written by Zimbabwean writers such as Valerie Tagwira, Yvonne Vera, and NoViolet Bulawayo, among others. Tsitsi Dangarembga's (2018) novel, *This Mournable Body* serves as a relevant text to interrogate how the Zimbabwean postcolonial society receives literary articulation from female writers. This study adopts and applies a stylistic perspective for a close textual reading and interpretation of the selected novel. Mavengano (2020) makes a strong argument about the relevance of a stylistics conceptual model in the interpretation of literary texts particularly the novel genre. A stylistic reading of fictional texts offers intricate shades of meanings that are also discerned from the social, cultural, religious, and political context of language use (Simpson 2004). The main argument in this study is that thematisation of gender politics and the depiction of religio-political terrain in the postcolony are embedded in stylistic constructions of literary work which then should be accorded analytical treatment in an attempt to uncover the meanings signified. Most significantly, stylistic perspective is attentive to both the verbal (linguistic) and non-verbal aspects which are part of complex semiotic modes that work together in a specific context to produce meanings. The synergy of linguistics and literary theories embedded in

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stylistics is meant to bring deeper and intricate readings of the selected text whose title underscores a desolate condition that is grievable. This article seeks to address the following essential research questions:

1. What thematic aspects are conveyed through the stylistic/semiotics constructions of the selected novel?
2. How does the novel project the changing contours of female gender, as well as suggesting new trajectories of becoming?
3. How can the synergy of linguistics and literary theory be utilised to generate important hermeneutic insights for reading Dangarembga's novel, *This Mournable Body*?

Theoretical orientation: A stylistic perspective

In order to undertake the objectives of this study, it is imperative to clarify both the methodological and theoretical orientations adopted in detail. Firstly, a close reading of the text, *This Mournable Body* is done with specific attention to its striking stylistic and textual constructions, and secondly, a reflective discussion is undertaken focusing on how such non/linguistic stylisations are deployed for semantic purposes. This is in line with qualitative methods that are inherently interpretive in nature as they seek to make sense of phenomena in a specific human ecosphere. According to Simpson (2004:2), stylistics is a method of textual interpretation whose genealogy is rooted in linguistics. The primary emphasis for stylistic interpretive paradigm is assigned to language and semantic possibilities hinted at. The reason why it is vital to examine both (non) linguistic compositions of the text in the interpretive endeavour of poetic discourse is because language is a social semiotic code rooted in socio-cultural setting for meaning-making (Bakhtin 1981; Halliday 1978; Mavengano & Moyo 2023). In addition, language is laden with semantic functions of the text (Simpson 2004). Mavengano (2020) following Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) arguments about novelistic discourse states that stylistic reading provides essential sound textual evaluation and manifold entryways to literary texts that are by thematic and stylistic compositions multifaceted human discourses. Leech and Short (2007) earlier define style as linguistic habits of a particular writer deployed for meaning-making. This implies that style is interwoven with meaning. The term style which is central in stylistics frameworks is also defined by Verdonk (2013:5) as a 'motivated choice' made by the writer when using language for some defined purpose and to achieve some specific effects. It is essential to consider the interrelatedness of languaging, non-verbal semiotic resources, and the outsidership of the textual world as rightly theorised by Bakhtin (1981) and other post-structuralist language philosophers. In this regard, style is understood as a thoughtful choice made by the writer to create semantic implicatures. Although this view is contested and has some limitations especially when debating the reader-oriented theories, it remains relevant as the author's role in literary production cannot be undermined. Bakhtin (1981:13) appropriately observe that 'the task of stylistics is not to

provide a hard- and-fast technology of analysis', but it rather provides linguistic evidence to modify interpretive insights. It should be mentioned that the extra linguistic world guides on possible parameters of meaning production of the text and offers nuanced referential or denotative meanings which point at the fundamental dimensions in literary production, languaging, and interpretive process (Mavengano 2020).

This Mournable Body and Tsitsi Dangarembga's literary oeuvre

Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, titled *This Mournable Body* was published in 2018 and it came after *Nervous Conditions* and *The Book of Not* which were published in 1986 and 2006 respectively. Together, these novels speak of a formidable literary oeuvre by one of the finest and famous Zimbabwean female writers who entered the previously male populated fictional domain with an audible voice. Dangarembga's works are famous for their resistance stance to both oppressive patriarchal culture and the absurdities of socio-political injustices in (post) colonial Zimbabwe. Before the appearance of women writers such as Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera in Zimbabwe, a male writing tradition had obscured women experiences (Muchemwa 2013). Women writing tradition in Zimbabwe uncovers often-hidden sociocultural and political ills which adversely affect the lives of those who live at the fringes of the society. Dangarembga's protagonist is Tambudzai Sigauke who is a familiar fictive character whose heroic presence in *Nervous Conditions* is still fresh and memorable in the minds of Dangarembga's fans. *This Mournable Body* is set in Zimbabwe's postcolonial milieu and the plot follows Tambudzai Sigauke's 'bare life' to use Agamben's (1995) terminology. The protagonist epitomises the experiences of many of her kind. The novel is one of the literary productions in postcolonial Zimbabwe which delineate the sociocultural, religio-political, and gender polemics connected to an entangled history. This contextual backdrop is essential for increased sensibility to both the interior and exterior worlds of the novel. The text captures the socio-economic and political implosion, problematic gender frontiers in a patriarchal environment in very compelling ways. The nation space is a cul-de-sac that ensnares, interrupts, and curtails efforts made by the precariat especially gendered Zimbabwean women who become victims of both patriarchy and the suffocating nation space. The heroine in *This Mournable Body*, Tambudzai shortened Tambu, leaves her unsatisfying job and occupies a ramshackle hostel in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. She is distressed by her sense of failure and the unfolding reality of being educated but pitiable and unemployed in a country where the economy has collapsed. Even when she gets a second job as a biology teacher, she continues to languish in poverty. The fictional Tambu is struggling in the same way teachers and other educated professionals have been reduced to (un)mournable cases of penury in existent Zimbabwe today. Frustrated by her grim financial prospects, her miserable condition is aggravated by gender dichotomisation, sexism, and the noxious political situation in Zimbabwe. Her life and that of many like her resemble a:

[T]he broken fragments' which Tambu struggles to keep in place (Dangarembga 2018:10).

It is worth mentioning that the metaphor of a broken mirror at the beginning of the novel, and Tambu's fate serve as a tip of an ice bag which hints at the sad story of the postcolonial nation which is figuratively damaged. The shattered mirror symbolically suggests the hopelessness of restoration of the fractured postcolonial Zimbabwe society. What is further reflected by a shattered mirror is a distorted image of Tambu and by extension the nation body.

'There, the fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets. Its mouth gaping, cheeks dropping as though under the weight of monstrous scales' (Dangarembga 2018:9). The mirror imagery together with hyperbolic lexical items also speak about the severe existential experiences of the precariat and the subaltern whose lives have been ruined and what is left are fragments of distorted postcolonial subjects burdened by their bewilderment and nervousness. When Tambu looks into the mirror, she does not recognise the reflection of a starving fish that is even fighting to remain alive. This ambiguous image arguably serves as a metonymic representation of the wounded citizenry whose conditions of living blur the boundaries of colonial and postcolonial historical epochs. The harsh circumstances in her life drive her to a breaking point where in/sanity intermingle in a very disconcerting way.

The body as a metaphor and trope of postcolonial meleé

This section focuses on tilting as a significant stylisation that offers a pertinent subtext to create thematic innuendos of the selected text. The absorbing title of the novel etches a forbidding and poignant image of a nation in crisis as rightly stated by Nyambi (2013) and Mangena (2015). The title is a profound metaphor, and motif of anguish, precarity, and (un)grievability, which together underline a daunting spectacle of a state on the threshold of failure. The citizens are burdened by an avalanche of disappointments and interminable grief. The Zimbabwean society that is portrayed in *This Mournable Body* is Mbembe's (2001:102) archetypal postcolony. Sadly, even the educated citizens like Tambu impotently live in denigrating poverty and have lost self-esteem, which is an unnerving reflection of the postcolonial environment and its impact on citizens. The fate of the fictional characters is identifiable in present-day Zimbabwe where the difference between employed and unemployed citizens is indistinct (Mavengano 2023; Mavengano & Nkamta 2022). The adjectival metaphor 'mournable body' is laden with semantic connotations which generate hermeneutical challenges embedded in opacities related to the figurative language utilised. This is in line with Bakhtin's (1984) idea that poetics grapples with the complex and multifaceted reality which always invites numerous interpretations. At this point, it is imperative to define the often contested term, metaphor which occupies an important position in cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define

metaphors as mappings from a source domain onto a target domain. A metaphor is a cognitive device or figure of speech or stylistic feature that allows audience to comprehend a relatively abstract subject in terms of a more concrete construct. The use of figures of speech such as metaphor and idioms, among others, transcends the linguistic realm because it brings in the socio-cultural, religious, and political world into a meaning-making process. The implication here exposes the limitation of a structural linguistics tradition which disdains the cognitive, experiential, and pragmatic dimensions of languaging and interpretive endeavour. The social context works together with linguistic aspects of the text to facilitate meaning production. Bakhtin (1981) acknowledges the outsidership of language use which deserves critical attention during the reading and interpretative processes. From a cognitive linguistics perspective, which explains how figures of speech function, human perception is an active process in which linguistic information is received in a communicative act by sensory organs and transferred to the human brain area for inferential or semantic hypotheses and possible disambiguation of polysemous textual aspects. Cognitive linguistics is mindful of the fact that illocutionary force of the text is not entirely produced by the linguistic elements but also informed by the non-linguistic world of the text. Cognisant of this, the pertinent question that seeks to be addressed is: why is the body mournable? The metaphor of a mournable body serves as emotive language that conveys a pessimistic tone about the nation that is beyond redemption. What is left for the citizens is to watch helplessly and mourn their homeland as it slides into socio-economic and political doldrums. Tambu's quest for material emancipation is symbolically conveyed by her possession of a pair of Lady Di high-heeled shoes. Her pitiable material condition is further underscored by the fact that she is a middle-aged woman who survives on charity, and the matron repeatedly reminds her that:

[T]he board of trustees is complaining ... your age, she says, [t]he city council will revoke the hostel's licence if they find out women of such antiquity reside there, women who are well beyond the years allowed in the Twiss Hostel's statutes. You hate that board of bitches. (Dangarembga 2018:10)

In addition, as if being a case of charity is not enough challenge, the pair of Lady Di shoes is a gift from Nyasha who has been 'abroad to study some years ago' (Dangarembga 2018:13). Tambu has been working for an advertising company before, but has nothing valuable to wear in order to attend an interview besides a donated gift from the diaspora. The shoes are named after the late Princess Diana, a high-profile figure in Britain's royal family. Considering that Zimbabwe is a British colony, this association of the postcolonial subjects with the former colonial mistress demands critical attention. It is because of her current suffering under the leadership of the postcolonial government that makes Tambu embrace her previous colonial oppressor who seems to be a better devil because the Lady Di heels are 'real European leather shoes' (Dangarembga 2018:13). This implicitly suggests a contrast between British and Zimbabwean products where the former is associated with

originality and authenticity whereas the latter evokes feelings of artificiality and imitations. This reading is not meant to sanitise Britain and colonialism but rather meant to convey how the postcolonial leaders' troubling political deceit has affected the psyche of the postcolonial subjects to an extent that they crave for the colonial oppression that has become a better option for daily survival of the ordinary people. Recently, messages on the social media platforms in Zimbabwe made this uncanny comparison of Mugabe, Mnangagwa, and the colonial regimes. The citizens admire Mugabe's expressive capacity in the 'Queen's language' yet acknowledging that the current problems are traceable to his autocratic rule. Mnangagwa is ridiculed and condemned for both his alleged poor communicative aptitude and what citizens claim to be a clueless President running the country. It is in such context where the colonial regime is applauded for investing towards infrastructure, like roads, sewage systems, and water systems and other social amenities, although they were meant for the white minority. We are reminded of Jacob Dlamini's (2009) notion of the native nostalgia when the present agony interferes with the psyche of the previously colonised people. For instance, Nyasha had been to England to study during the colonial era but she brought expensive gifts for the family while she was not even employed. Yet, educated Zimbabweans like Tambu cannot afford to buy a decent pair of shoes and pay rentals for a respectable accommodation in the modern-day Zimbabwe. Tambu's admiration of the Lady Di shoes presents a problematic but essential ironic nostalgic memory of colonisation. Because of her depressing living conditions, she forgets that Netsai, her sister lost a leg, her babamukuru was crippled, and her aunt Lucia also lost a son during the war against British rule. Death and disability are telling evidence of festering colonial wounds - a painful memory which cannot be easily forgotten. This deliberate lapse of memory reveals Tambu's unstable physical and mental state. The tricky question here is, what exactly elicited such poverty, precarity, and abject conditions for both the (un)employed and (un)educated in imagined postcolonial Zimbabwe? Dangarembga's characters are prisms through which readers can understand how Zimbabwe's unprecedented economic and political crises particularly in the post-2000 era have impacted on lives of the citizens. The ambivalent overlap of the two historical epochs (post/colonial) is essential as it shows the semantic dissonance embedded in narratives of self-rule, freedom, and postcoloniality. Paradoxically, the 'free' subjects are weighed down by a litany of problems such as unemployment, economic implosion, and paucity, among others. Thus, it is appropriate to claim that the title of the novel talks about the tears that remain in the eyes, as the wretched postcolonial subjects continue to mourn their fate. In this regard, the term body assumes a perceptual metaphor to underline a crisis-ridden society and register collective melancholy in the postcolonial national space. The body bears evidence of impoverishment, social disparities, and prolonged pain to an extent that Tambu who epitomises the precariat body does not recognise the battered body in the mirror at the beginning of the novel. It is vital not to miss the

political aesthetics that foreground and thematise political milieu in the novel. In addition, from an onomastic perspective, charactonyms offer refreshing interpretive dimensions in Zimbabwean literature (Mangena 2015; Mavengano 2022). This implies that names in fictive writings cannot be demoted to simple tags of identity because they are central aesthetic aspects of the thematic construction of poetic texts. The main character is named Tambudzai which literally means a sufferer or one destined to grieve. The protagonist's failure and suffering in the novel *This Mournable Body* are comparable to the fiasco of the post-colonial Zimbabwe. In the following telling passages, Tambu visits the Ministry of Education offices in search of a teaching job as the media has been awash with reports about:

[P]eople with degrees like yours, obtained more and more recently, leaving the country for work in South Africa, Namibia, and even Mozambique and Zambia. You have been attracted to teaching as more than a temporary interlude, but, lowering your expectations several notches, you stumble one morning up thirteen flights of stairs at the Ministry of Education. (Dangarembga 2018:85)

The above quote conveys how the dreams of the post-colonial subjects have not been fulfilled. Tambu just like other postcolonial subjects strives to feed herself, hence she tries to convince herself to take a teaching job that has become a source of mockery. She wishes to go back to her teen age in order to 'start afresh and must be thick skinned and persevere' (Dangarembga 2018:85). It is very unsettling that:

Zimbabweans are going to other little places like Zambia. Some are even opting for Mozambique and Malawi. All of it is happening within living memory. A couple of decades after our independence. (p. 7)

Just like in *We Need New Names*, *Harare North*, *One Foreigner's Ordeal* and recently in novels, *Trapped* and *Glory*, Zimbabweans flee from the 'burning' national space where things are falling apart. Poverty, fragility squalor, soaring unemployment, economic decline, and corruption are some of the disturbing aspects of Zimbabwean society in the post-2000 era. The title of the novel sums up the deplorable and mournable conditions of citizens who are victims of the noxious political system. The adjectival term mournable reeks of woes, depression, and dehumanising conditions of the body. The educated like Tambu have been reduced to beggars for food and accommodation. In this sense, poetics is presented as a locus for the counter-discourses that pave way for the subaltern to talk back as proposed by bell hooks (1990).

Speaking from positions of obscurity and writing from the margins

The above section concentrated on titling as a stylistic device in Dangarembga's poetic text. In this section, the focus is on how *This Mournable Body* fits into the literary canon by Zimbabwean/African female authors that seek to debunk patriarchy and other forms of gender oppression that deter

and deny women emancipation, autonomy, and voice. How does the novel provide a female's versions of life in postcolonial Zimbabwe? According to Mavengano (2023), writing for African women like Chimamanda Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, Valerie Tagwira, Sembene, and Mariama Ba, just to name but a few, counters hegemonic male storytelling. Etim (2020) made a significant argument that:

It is common knowledge in feminist criticism that the art of writing began as exclusively a male preserve not only in the western world, but also in Africa. This view has been endorsed by feminist theologians such as Musawenkosi Dube, Excellent Chireshe, and Elizabeth Fiorenza among others. The reason for this is not unconnected to the fact that the patriarchal nature of society emphasised male education and, for a very long time, played down on the need for the woman to be educated. (p. 1)

The above quote is important because it suggests that there is a long tradition of male domination in both society and creative industry which needs to be corrected in contemporary times. In other words, female authors need to 'narrate her story' to avoid what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls single story telling after 'centuries of distortion meted out on the woman's story by most male writers who were the first gender privileged enough to report the imagined history of their societies' (Etim 2020:2). In other words, feminist literary tradition in which Dangarembga's writing belongs, provides locations of female resistance to oppression, platforms for female self-recovery, female solidarity, and urgency as ways of subverting what Adichie (2009) calls 'a [dangerous] single story' about women constructed by men and endorsed in male-written literary canon. The female authors mentioned earlier make a captivating appeal to confront gender myths and stereotypes that inform negation and marginalisation of women. Writing for Dangarembga and other Zimbabwean female creative authors like Vera, Tagwira, and Bulawayo, among others, has become instrumental in fighting against socio-cultural, political, and patriarchal idiosyncrasies. The analysis of *This Mournable Body* offers thought-provoking insights into the far-reaching contributions made by Zimbabwean women authors in particular and African female writers in general towards transforming the existential circumstances in African societies and a quest to re-imagine an equal and just world. Considering that Dangarembga became the first Zimbabwean female novelist when her text *Nervous Conditions* was published in 1988, her oeuvre can be described as writing from below the gender hierarchy that seeks to rewrite what a theologian Fiorenza (1983) regards as 'Her' story or self-representation against *Okonkwoan* gender ideology - a memorable trope in Chinua Achebe's (1958) *Things Fall Apart* that vilifies and dehumanises women. It is pertinent to note that the second-person narrative technique extends invitation to the male gender for co-authoring, co-staging, and co-existence. In this way, *This Mournable Body* advocates gender complementarity in contrast of radical feminism. Thus, the text stretches a hand of forgiveness to the male gender. It can also be argued that Mai Manyanga, a widow, is an empowered woman in the absence of her late

husband. This begs for another reading where the man has to die to pave way for women emancipation and autonomy. Her empowerment is also temporal as later revealed in the novel. Her sons threaten her life. It can be argued that in patriarchal society, advocacy for gender equity does not yield immediate expected results, hence the novel adopts the pronoun you as *prosopopeia* which is a Greek term for a figure of speech in which an abstract thing is personified and addressed. This rhetorical device is used to address an unidentified non/being for a possible intervention to save both the oppressed female gender and a burning nation. The novel is written in second-person narrative perspective which, according to Iliopoulou (2019), privileges shifting dynamics of referents. The pronoun 'you' achieves narrative duplicity, ambiguity/obscurity of hearer/speaker positions, singular/plural distinction or designation, as these switch positions in speech acts in a way that Bakhtin (1981, 1984) describes as a dialogic discourse. Iliopoulou (2019) further elucidates that the second-person narrative technique can be deployed to signify human indifference, social detachment, depersonification, and a call for active reading. In *This Mournable Body*, the second-person perspective is a vital stylistic dimension which leads to *mise-en-scene*, a rhetorical device that projects dialogue or face-to-face interaction. Dangarembga's another striking rhetorical *ethopoeia*, or speaking characters significantly shows an aspiration towards polyphonic and dialogic poetic space where the readers listen to the multiple voices and truths. The text thus resists monologic discourse that privileges a single story. Certainly, there are several dimensions of reality and each voice has its unique way of perceiving reality (Bakhtin 1981, Mavengano 2020).

Polyphonically constructed narratives appeal to readers to listen to the multiple voices (truths). Most significantly, the second-person narrative technique is related to autobiographical writing. The implication here is that Dangarembga adopts the second-person perspective for both stylistic and thematic purposes as the 'you' can take the generic person or indefinite other as a referent to deliberately shun gendered pronouns s/he. Thus, gender politics is thematised through a narrative style that permits inherent interchangeability of telling as a personal or collective endeavour. The second-person narrative technique embraces the angle of the Other (Clarkson, 2005); in this case, the African woman who has been denied articulation and audibility. Dangarembga's pronoun 'you' refers to the protagonist (self-awareness/self-writing), 'you' as the protagonist's fellow women, you in generic sense referring to both women and men thereby complicates gender dichotomies. Quite interestingly, the second-person perspective maintains the ambiguity of the narratee/addressee and variant personal reference throughout the novel. The reader is also invited to become active agent in the narrating of the human story in hetero-communicative platforms of the text. This entails that writing or telling the human story is shifting; it is no longer a male enterprise but rather done by humanity in its collective form. Dangarembga's female characters in *This Mournable Body*, such as Nyasha, Christine, mai Manyanga, mai Moetsebi are self-confident, outspoken, and self-assured. These are rare female qualities which are oftentimes absent in

male written literary tradition reflected in texts like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Chenjerai as Hove's *Bones*, Jinga's *One Foreigner's Ordeal*. In this sense, Dangarembga's characterisation presents women who subvert patriarchal traditions and provide multiple sites that offer powerful sensibilities to buttress women's activism and radical alterity. Dangarembga explores the female gender's downgraded status and struggles against the patriarchal structures of the present-day Zimbabwean society. The novel provides passages with stinging critique of male-domination and oppression of women. In this case, her creative writing serves as a rich avenue to explore the politics of gender differences, and becomes a strategy for women audibility, visibility and sensibility, a site to quiz gender relations and toxic national politics that further amplifies women fragility. In other words, in an attempt to assert themselves, the female gender writes from the socially and politically degraded position and speaks to power as well as against gender dichotomisation.

The semiotics and semantics of the 'body': Burden of the gendered precarity

This section explores the semiotics of the body in Dangarembga's novel and interrogates how the trope, symbol, and metaphor thematise gender politics. The trope of the body is significant in the novel *This Mournable Body* and it deserves attention in the reading and meaning-making process of the text. Gibbs (1994) contends that figuration is not merely a matter of language but provides much of the foundation for thought, reason, and imagination. For Mavengano and Hove (2019), commenting on the Zimbabwean political context and the challenge of speaking truth to power contend the fact that figurative language evokes numerous semantic possibilities that can be exploited to counter artistic reticence or muteness in tyrannical and suppressive states. This observation is critical because it suggests that poetic devices or figures of speech can provide artistic arsenal or armoury against imposed artistic policing and disciplining usually by those in power. In other words, figurative language is often deployed to expose concealed knowledge. The use of figures of speech creates opaqueness and obscurity of meanings which become important in an environment where articulation is denied. In *This Mournable Body*, the term body is foregrounded as part of the title as well as a trope, symbol, and metaphor deployed for thematisation purposes. Childs and Fowler (2006) and Simpson (2004) define foregrounding in literary studies as a stylistic strategy of calling attention to particular linguistic clues. Earlier on, Halliday (1978) from his Systemic Functional linguistics describes foregrounding as linguistic highlighting or prominence. This implies that the foregrounded linguistic aspect encodes an important message that should be communicated to the audience.

The novel begins in medias res and immediately readers are introduced to the female body as the narrator views herself in the mirror in preparation for the job interview. The opening

statement shows all is not well with the narrator who sees 'a fish in the mirror' instead of her reflection:

The fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales. You cannot look at yourself. (Dangarembga 2018:9)

One wonders why the narrator is unable to instantaneously recognise her image from the mirror. However, visual imagery, and comparison in the above quote become semantic clues. Firstly, the narrator has been dehumanised by her bare life in Agambenian terms; hence it is a fish not a human image that stares from the mirror. Secondly, the adjectival and verbal expressions 'purplish eye sockets and gaping cheeks drooping' respectively cast a repugnant image of this character who happens to be Tambu, a female protagonist of this text. More evidence to support this is given later in the text, when the narrator admits that failures haunt her:

You grow thinner, and do not know whether to be pleased about this or not. There is a dullness to your skin, like a thin membrane enveloping despair. It tells people you have collided with your limit, you do not want them to know this. (Dangarembga 2018:61)

The above passages highlight the plight of the educated who are subjected to disdain. Tambudzai misrepresents herself which explains her obsession with the Lady Di shoes and occasions of insanity when she cannot take it anymore. She is ashamed of what she has become. She sneaks to steal vegetables to eat, cooking oil and even salt have fallen off her shopping list, yet she rejects the gift of maize from her rural home. Her *Shona* name Tambudzai endorses this reading as it speaks about the miserable existence generated by the prevailing hostile economic-political environment. The name becomes synonymous with the existential conditions of the precariat and serves as both a political and gender metaphor that stokes the memory of the peak of 'Zimbabwean crisis' in 2008.

From a Christian theology, the body is condemned because it attracts destruction and damnation (Salam 2011). Even Paul's doctrine warns Christians to guard against the sinful desires of the flesh/body known in Greek as *sarka/soma* respectively. Christian theologians view the body as a snare that entraps the eternal soul preventing it from achieving salvation. A true Christian was to discipline and purge the body by subjecting it to intense moral control. The novel, *This Mournable Body* thematises problematic phallogocentric representation of women that seeks to reduce women to mere sexual objects for male pleasure. Shine who is Tambu's housemate symbolically embodies sexism and phallogocentrism. Shine:

[T]akes a different woman into his room practically every day of the week. The encounters in the room grow more strident from one night to the next, as though Shine measures the noise level from his women to set some kind of standard. (Dangarembga 2018:61)

The pervasive trope of the body attracts special attention in the process of reading and interpreting the novel *This Mournable Body*. The female body bears ugly imprints of (post)colonial

legacies and gender victimisation. Gubar (1985:293) who is a feminist scholar states that from a patriarchal outlook women 'are products of the male imagination, objects created for the use of men'. Hove (2014:11) substantiating this idea argues that sex for subordinated masculinities is an act of 'performing maleness' on women's bodies. These men indulge in sex to console themselves and to fulfil the desires of their flesh. These men who suffer from male ego valorise their phallic strength in an attempt to recover their threatened sense of manliness (Mavengano 2022). Thus, the metaphor of the body assumes a different meaning. It becomes the mournable body of a sexist and womaniser who takes pleasure in dehumanising the othered gender. As the gaze is on how language is deployed for thematic construction, it is important to mention that language is either verbal or nonverbal and much of the gendered semiotics is nonverbal (Ottoh-Agede & Essien-Eyo 2014). The body thus becomes an inscription of new gender identities. The socio-cultural and religious contexts in Zimbabwe stifle alternative female gender identification as a woman is physically and verbally abused for unsuitable dressing at Market Square in Harare:

Hands lift Gertrude from the combi's running board. They throw her onto the ground where she sags with shock. [...] Gertrude pulls the pieces of her skirt from the mud and knots it about her body. She puts on the jacket and closes it to cover her breasts. (Dangarembga 2018:25)

Such oppressive acts imposed on women are incongruent with present-day perceptions of gender relations. The acts of violence and verbal abuse perpetuated by both women and men (the crowd) are meant to inscribe tropes of invisibility and deny women's sense of autonomy (Mavengano 2020, 2022). The body of the battered women becomes a pertinent signifier of Otherness. The visual description symbolically speaks of prolonged pain and suffering women in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Significantly, it is not every man in this crowd who subscribes to patriarchal ideology because the violated woman is rescued by a gentleman who even offered her a jacket to cover her naked body. Sadly, women like Tambu participate in this orgy of violence against a fellow woman merely because she likes 'to see the shape of the pain, to trace out its arteries and veins, to rip out the patterns of its capillaries from the body' (Dangarembga 2018:25). Tambu's indifference reveals her psychological fragility; she has internalised the grammar of patriarchal violence to an extent that she naturalises it.

However, it is also imperative to note that Dangarembga also presents female characters who defy phallogocentric behaviour and prohibitive attitudes. According to Ottoh-Agede and Essien-Eyo (2014), the female gender has over the years envisioned a society where she is accorded recognition. The female gender's agitations generated a protracted pursuit of parity that is embedded in inadvertent *mêlée* between the masculine and feminine genders. For instance, a woman is physically attached by a mob and her body is an object of ridicule which escalates into a mob attack. The pervasive anatomic imageries in Dangarembga's novel project

psychological wounds on the female body which is portrayed as a site of suffering, gender ruptures, sexual objection, and a possible point of breaking the silence and the shifting gender power dynamics. Magege (2016) posits that African women must resist attempts by society to discipline their bodies and roles in acquiescence to tradition and desirability. For Magege (2016), gender constructions of ideal femininity have continuously occupied a disputed terrain as culture and ideology which frame these constructions keep evolving. Cultural aesthetics are encoded through translanguaging practices in which Shona and English are used in the text including the naming of characters. Paradoxically, even sexual perversity hypocritically condemn dressing that reveals the contours of the female body. Men's lust is ignored in the process of disciplining the female body. The search for a break from traditional and patriarchal anchors by women invites violence. By defying the dress code that symbolises gender identity, Gertrude attempts to shame the discourses that classify certain behaviours as male-specific and others as female-specific. The stylisation of verbal lacunae conveys Gertrude's extreme shock, incomplete expressions, and reluctance to articulate the ineffable pain that arises from gender discrimination. Her incapacity to speak out or silence is not evidence of submission or invisibility but rather an act of defiance. Her pain remains under the tongue and cannot be verbalised. The female character resists participation in monolithic gendered narratives. There are also empowered women like Christine and Netsai who are ex-combatants and epitomise a victorious body that emerges from the suffering. These women are not financially crippled. Such characterisation is an enunciation of unconcealed new gender consciousness that disrupts the muteness and fights gender binaries. Some of Dangarembga's characters 'do not act female' in their effort to change the city space. The postcolonial woman subverts the discourse of otherness and conveys the urgency to rethink the logics of gender binaries. The novel presents women who are able to break free from patriarchal bondage by rejecting policed gender boundaries and overriding taboos.

The interface of gender and religion in *This Mournable Body*

The attention in this segment is on the insidious connection between gender and religion in the analysis of *This Mournable Body*. According to Allen (2011:42), gender is a term that refers to, 'cultural norms of femininity and masculinity'. Linguists used the notion of gender to indicate grammatical categories based on sex but independent of sex difference. In feminist discourses, gender is a term that refers to socio-cultural constructs that inform power relations between men and women. De Beauvoir (1953:295) laments that 'One is not born, but becomes a woman'. This view is still relevant in contemporary gender conversations as the socio-cultural and religious milieu feminises one. Butler (1988) concurs with this submission and elaborates that being a woman is historically, culturally, and socially situated rather than being a biological facticity. In the book of Genesis, God granted Adam dominion over creation and feminists have problems with this structure of power which they claim is the root

cause of patriarchal ideology. The term patriarchy refers to the 'legal, economic, and social system that validates rule by men over women; it is systemic in every aspect of society to the point where it is experienced as normal' (Rakoczy 2000:13). According to Rakoczy (2004), for religious believers like those from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR), patriarchy as the rule of the father or man is sanctioned and ordained by God. Rakoczy (2004) also argues that:

Patriarchy is interwoven in the Christian tradition in distinct and pervasive ways. The images of God in Scripture and liturgical prayer are overwhelmingly male: Lord, King Father ... This presumed maleness of God and the male identity of Jesus are used to justify women subordination. (p. 31)

The Bible thus, according to Fiorenza (1983), is a 'His' story that underscores invisibility of female gender. The muteness or erasure of women is conspicuous in the Bible which is recounted from an androcentric standpoint; hence, phallogocentric phrases like 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Ex 3:16). A feminist reading would interpret such a phrase as a trope of sexism and gender construction in the book of Exodus. The Bible, according to Fiorenza (1983), is the story of 'him' not 'her' because the man is visibly elevated whereas the female characters are marginalised and sometimes unnamed; a strategy that imposes invisibility of women. According to Daly (1985), the Bible is the bedrock of female oppression. The New Testament projects an androcentric view in the following quote, 'those who had eaten were about 5000 men, besides women and children' (Mt 14:21). Only men were considered whereas women and children who were also present became invisible and insignificant. The Jewish culture relegated women who were viewed as minors. This endorses the view that men are the normative model of humanity and women are an afterthought. Islamic religion also positions the man as the supreme power whose power is supported by the dominant interpretation of Quranic verses (Barlas 2002). In ATR, Christian, and Islamic doctrines, women are still marginalised and inferiorised. Significantly, religion, tradition, and morality are entangled and used to justify women's control and subordination in Zimbabwe. This view endures in the contemporary times as captured in *This Mournable Body*, irrespective of cultural and historical differences. Women reside in the snare of silence. The widow, Mai Manyanga is obsessed with her Christian faith, she does not question her relegated position within the family. Women like her are zombified; hence, a profound melancholic tone pervades the text because attaining gender justice is a tall order. The scenario is depressing as indicated through the deranged female protagonist Tambu who hallucinates and lives in self-imposed isolation. Tambu has adopted a sexist language and patriarchal ideology and she thinks about other women as 'bitches' and craves to get a man for material benefits. In this way, her attitude for the female gender reinforces sexism and the novel exposes semantics of phallogocentric discourses which continues to

cage women. On the one hand, Tambu's attitude is a survival strategy in a dominantly male culture. Tambu's silence speaks about the muted female gender in a male-dominated Zimbabwean society. She has learnt to accept femininity prescribed by the male gender. The grotesque trope of a naked body of the abused woman evokes deeply entrenched masochistic behaviour supported by both patriarchy and religion in Zimbabwe. The nakedness of the body thematises the vulgarity of patriarchy. Goodson (1991) states that religion, particularly Christianity and Islam, stresses the impunity and inherent sin associated with women's bodies. Regulation of women's dress code is informed by both religion and patriarchy in most African states. Failure to observe the prescribed dress code attracts punitive measures.

The problematics of framing 'new' vistas of becoming in postcolonial Zimbabwe

The conversations about gender relations need to be understood in the context of the deplorable existing cultural, economic, religious, and political conditions in Zimbabwe. The novel *This Mournable Body* presents compelling evidence that demonstrates the daunting circumstances and difficulties encountered by women in their effort to transform themselves from being 'mournable bodies' to speaking subjects who contest oppressive practices. Dangarembga's narrative speaks of the problematics of undoing oppressive practices, shifting contours, and framing new vistas of gender identification in post-colonial Zimbabwe. In addition, the discussion of the existing social, political, and economic background of the text has shown that Zimbabwe is a troubled land. Citizens flee from hunger, unemployment, corruption, eroded salaries, and political suppression, among other ills, that together generate untold anguish and a persistent state of mourning. The lingering challenge is how to bring an end to subordination of women. It becomes extremely difficult to attain gender justice when women connive and participate in their self-denigration. Needless to say, sisterhood among women remains an ideal divorced from existential reality. Thus, women need to disentangle themselves first from patriarchy and other forms of oppression. This could be a major step towards female autonomy and empowerment.

Conclusion

In view of the above discussion, it might be prudent to submit that a stylistics model adopted in this study provides many avenues from which Dangarembga's novel can be studied and interpreted. The study has generated a platform of cross-disciplinary conversations by embracing linguistics, poetics, and theology. There are cases of contradiction and ambivalence of the female's stance in gender discourses and these problematise universalising women's response to patriarchy. The analyses also show that speaking and audibility become the weapon of the muted groups against silencing.

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