

Patriarchy and Intersecting Black Womanhood in Postcolonial Zimbabwe: Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

Dipolelo Magaret Makgoba

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9537-8481>
University of Limpopo, South Africa
magaretdipolelo06@gmail.com

Lethabo Masha

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9409-9683>
University of South Africa
lethabomasha@yahoo.com

Maletšema Ruth Emsley

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6638-871X>
University of Limpopo, South Africa
ruth.emsley@ul.ac.za

Abstract

Many African nations envisioned the prospects of true liberation for everyone following colonial independence. For women, this freedom promised an end to their marginalisations that surface through intersecting oppressions of sexism, racism, and classism. Through a thematic analysis of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018), this article examines how being Black, female, and often poor continues to define women's experiences in postcolonial Zimbabwe. In addition, African Womanism and intersectionality are employed as theoretical lenses with which to explore how Shona traditions and colonial legacies, such as socio-economic challenges, are portrayed in the novel as impediments to a gender-equal society. The study's findings indicate that female characters such as the protagonist Tambudzai, Nyasha, Mrs Taka, Netsai, and Mainini Lucia remain confined by rigid gender roles, economic marginalisation, and post-independence disillusionment, which undermine their aspirations and agency. In this way, the study argues that Dangarembga demonstrates how neocolonialism and patriarchal structures jointly perpetuate women's oppression. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to African Womanist literary scholarship in Southern Africa, and Sustainable Developmental Goal (5) 2030, by addressing the continued subjugation of African girls and women as a result of their intersectional identity. Theoretically, this study reaffirms the significance of employing African

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 42 | 2026 | #20846 | 20 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/20846>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2026



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Womanism and intersectionality as interpretive perspectives on postcolonial women's lived experiences as Black, female, and poor.

Keywords: African Womanism; intersectionality; marginalisation; patriarchy; post-colonialism

Introduction

Across Africa, women continue to carry the dual burden of histories that they did not write and futures that they must fight to shape. Their lived experiences are not formed in isolation but are deeply influenced by historical and structural forces that continue to marginalise them and define their position in society. According to Rodney (2018), the daily realities of African women are shaped by centuries of intersecting forces such as colonial exploitation, entrenched cultural norms, and the inequities of global capitalism, which together determine who holds power, who labours, and who benefits. The forementioned phenomenon has been creatively demonstrated through fiction by writers such as Sindiwe Magona, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Yaa Gyasi whose literary themes include female marginalisations owing to their intersectional identities, and the legacies of colonialism in facilitating gender inequalities. Dangarembga (2022, 64) posits that

[e]ven though writing while black and female does not constrain my writing process, it does position my writing's content. I write from my personhood, scattered as it is across continents and within voids. Through words, I raise the blade of the guillotine, reach for the dismembered parts, and rejoin them to the rest of my being, while the monster of empire practised through patriarchy snaps at my heels.

The above statement is testament to the fact that most African women's writing is informed by real life experiences of the personal and collective's memory of the impact of colonialism and patriarchy on Black women, such as economic marginalisation.

Part of the colonial conquest in Africa was rooted in economic motives driven by the desire for resource control (Munyai 2020). Consequently, colonial powers often restructured traditional economies and gender relations to benefit male authority, disrupting roles in which women had wielded political and economic power. The situation for African women is further complicated by factors such as poverty, limited access to formal education, and gender-based violence (Ngalesoni, Msendo, and Mwakifwamba 2025). In a study on pre-colonial women leaders in Southern Africa, Musingafi, Mukhothu, and Musi (2024, 83) point out that "women such as Nehanda and Mantsopa have occupied key roles in the developments that have shaped the course of African history" and have influenced political and economic spheres. These leadership roles were sustained by indigenous systems of socialisation and education that prepared both women and men for communal responsibility. However, this balance was disrupted under colonial administration, which privileged men's and boys' access to Western education and leadership, while relegating women to domestic or exploitative labour (Chuku 2018). As a result, following the end of formal colonialism in Africa, most African women have for a while played "catch-up" and experienced discrimination on

multiple fronts: as women within patriarchal cultures and as Black citizens within racially stratified societies.

In the context of on-going postcolonial reforms, women's activism has gained prominence, yet state responses remain inconsistent. Lihiru (2024) addresses this imbalance by demonstrating that in Zimbabwe, women remain structurally excluded from substantive political power through a gender quota system that contradicts both constitutional provisions and international equality commitments, entrenches patriarchal control, and limits women's participation to a compensatory rather than transformative presence. This argument reflects research indicating that the world is only 68.5% of the way to closing measured gender gaps. In addition, the 2024 SDG Gender Index reveals that there is no single country that is on track to achieve full gender equality by 2030 (World Economic Forum 2024). These statistics expose the enduring and systemic nature of gender inequality worldwide while also demonstrating that gender injustices remain structurally embedded rather than progressively resolved. For this study, the figures affirm the depiction of postcolonial fiction focusing on women's persistent marginalisation shaped by intersecting social, economic, and political forces. Therefore, representations of women analysed through African Womanism and intersectionality are crucial for critiquing how global inequalities translate into lived, everyday experiences that persist despite international commitments to gender equality.

In light of this, the subtext of intersectional oppression that manifests through women's objectification cannot be overlooked. According to Sani (2023, 11), the literary theme of objectification portrayed in African novels written by women reflects various forms of violence that persist in postcolonial African society. Some postcolonial feminist scholarship tends to examine the colonial disruption of African gender systems and the persistence of patriarchal cultural practices as separate phenomena, but for Coly (2019, 11), "the African female body is an archive for the study of colonial and postcolonial discourse" wherein the colonial construction of this body haunts the postcolonial. Therefore, this study considers it worthwhile to explore how these two forces intersect to shape the experiences of women characters in contemporary African societies. To be specific, this study examines how colonial and indigenous patriarchal systems continue to shape women's experiences in Zimbabwe through a close reading of Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) underpinned by African Womanism and intersectionality as theoretical lenses. Together, these theories offer a lens for understanding the layered inequalities that the depicted Zimbabwean women face in a postcolonial context confronted by racism, sexism, and classism. Dangarembga's socially conscious narrative offers an intimate yet politically charged portrayal of women navigating systemic oppression while striving for autonomy. The thematic analysis demonstrates that postcolonial gender inequalities cannot be dismantled without confronting both the colonial economic order and the patriarchal values embedded in traditional and modern institutions.

Theoretical Framework

To effectively achieve its main aim, this study adopts triangulation through the employment of African Womanist and intersectionality theories. Used together, these frameworks aid the understanding of why some female characters, despite their education, remain marginalised. Their shared identity as Black, female, and lower-middle-class in a neoliberal Zimbabwe constrains their mobility.

African Womanism

Alongside Clenora Hudson-Weems and Alice Walker, Okonjo Ogunyemi conceptualised Womanism in the 1980s to articulate the specific struggles and aspirations of African women within their relevant contexts. According to Ogunyemi (1985, 64),

more often than not, where a white woman writer may be a feminist, a black woman writer is likely to be a womanist. That is, she will recognise that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy.

This highlights the importance of reclaiming women's voices in African literary discourse, as the absence of female perspectives not only distorts historical and cultural realities but also limits a fuller understanding of African identity and society. Grounded in the African communitarian philosophy which others regard as *Ubuntu*, Ogunyemi's theorisation emphasises the importance of Black unity by imagining a community in which every individual possesses agency and promoting gender equity while valuing African heritage, family bonds, and communal solidarity. The focus of the Womanist theory extends beyond gendered power struggles to also address global power structures that continue to oppress Black people.

Recognising the need to distinguish her approach from both Western feminisms and African American Womanisms, Ogunyemi refined her theory to African Womanism in 1996 as detailed in her book *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. The addition of the modifier "African" intentionally centres the sociocultural and historical experiences of women on the continent, which differ from those of forementioned counterparts.

There is a need to define African womanism ... Not only is sexism a problem, other oppressive sites include totalitarianism, militarism, ethnicism, (post)colonialism, poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism ... As such, these issues must be addressed, and ignoring them is problematic. (Ogunyemi 1996, 114)

Ogunyemi's justification of African Womanism foregrounds an ideology that acknowledges the intersecting identities of Black women by situating their struggles within interconnected familial, communal, national, and global spaces. Thus, the theory is crucial for this study because it provides a lens to analyse the depicted African

women's experiences as shaped by both gendered and structural forms of domination in postcolonial Zimbabwe (Taiwo 2019). The theory further provides a framework to analyse how Dangarembga's female characters negotiate care, survival, and agency within oppressive socio-economic and political contexts.

According to Okafor (2020), Ogunyemi's renaming further emphasises the importance of acknowledging the specific cultural and social backgrounds of Black women in shaping their lived realities. This shift in terminology is significant as it resists the universalisation of women's experiences and instead affirms African women's knowledge systems, values, and historical condition as central to theorising their oppression and agency. Ogunyemi (1985, 72) asserts that these values include solidarity, shared responsibility, and the restoration of community, expressed in terms of wholeness and self-healing. In an interview with Arndt (2000), Ogunyemi observed that although African men also experience oppression within global systems, some of them perpetuate the subordination of women within their own communities. As such, African Womanism seeks not only to improve the position of Black women but also to bring about broader societal transformation by promoting mutual respect and cooperation between the sexes in the Black community.

African Womanism is thus relevant to the current study precisely because it concerns itself with both patriarchy and the legacies of colonialism, which are also central to Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality.

Intersectionality

To examine how overlapping social identities and systems of power shape the lived realities of African women, American legal scholar Crenshaw popularised the concept of intersectionality in the late 1980s, to highlight the compounded effects of race, gender, class, and other markers of identity which operate simultaneously, producing distinctive forms of privilege and oppression. Despite Nikiema's (2024, 73) claim that most Francophone African fiction scholarship is reluctant to welcome intersectionality as an analytical lens on patriarchy, the current study explicitly considers it relevant for the critique of Anglophone literature such as *This Mournable Body*. In the literary text under discussion, the significance of intersectionality is illustrated through the female characters whose experiences are shaped by interconnected factors such as race, class, gender, and the sociopolitical environment.

Crenshaw's (2013) perspective of the cause of Black women's harm as intersectional highlights the limitations of single-axis frameworks in addressing African women's complex struggles. According to Nikiema (2024, 72), "the contemporary pertinence of Intersectionality lies in its inherent adaptability to diverse settings and demographic variances." Applied to the African context, intersectionality reveals how patriarchy intersects with the enduring legacies of colonialism and racial hierarchies. Moreover, the analysis of race encompasses those ideologies that are externally enforced and those that are inherently valued by a particular grouping of people, although "race" is

fundamentally constructed on discrimination. These internal and external factors further simultaneously work with gender and class to curate specific marginalisations of African women.

In summary, combining these two theoretical lenses provides a triangulated framework for analysing the selected text wherein, despite their education, some female characters remain marginalised, and their shared identity as Black, female, and lower-middle-class in a neoliberal Zimbabwe constrains their mobility. African Womanism is relevant to draw attention to *This Mournable Body*'s grounding in cultural heritage, community survival strategies, and the inclusion of men as partners in change, all of which are often seen as resisting Western feminist ideologies. On the other hand, intersectionality illuminates how these cultural dynamics operate alongside global and systemic forces such as racial inequality, economic precarity, and gender-based violence. Thus, the two frameworks situate the individual struggles within both their immediate cultural context and broader economic and sociopolitical systems. On its own, intersectionality might overlook culturally embedded survival strategies that African Womanism offers.

Synopsis of *This Mournable Body*

This Mournable Body was first published in 2018 and concludes Dangarembga's trilogy of *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006). Set in postcolonial Zimbabwe during the 1990s, a period marked by economic collapse and political instability, the novel follows Tambudzai Sigauke as she confronts unemployment, poverty, fractured family ties, and racial stratification, revealing how colonial legacies and cultural values continue to shape gender and social relations in the late 20th century through to the 21st century. In *This Mournable Body*, Dangarembga critiques the consequences of what Fanon (1963) terms "the pitfalls of national consciousness" facilitating the continued subalternity of African women, given particular spatio-temporal considerations. Moreover, the novel brings to the fore the nervous condition facilitated by the interface of tradition and modernity.

Within the broader context of postcolonial Africa, women writers such as Dangarembga use literature as a platform to articulate women's voices and experiences, which are often pushed to the periphery. This affirms Ogunyemi's (1996, 95) observation that in theorising African Womanism, women enter the cultural and political arena through the very act of writing, producing a counter-discourse that challenges and redefines dominant narratives, a role clearly evident in Dangarembga's portrayal of Tambudzai's struggles.

This Mournable Body opens with an emotionally unstable and unemployed Tambudzai (Tambu henceforth) living in a rundown Harare boarding house despite acquiring education through her brother's death and uncle's generosity. Otieno (2019, 22) explains that although Tambu is university-educated, she fails to achieve the success that she hoped for, facing unemployment and experiencing both racial and gender

discrimination in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Eventually, her efforts to secure work lead to a short-lived teaching post, which ends in disgrace, exacerbating her sense of failure.

Owing to financial challenges, the protagonist is then forced to reside at a hostel owned by Mrs Manyanga. There, Tambu meets and interacts with fellow lodgers who include Gertrude and Mako, who also have their fair share of troubles. For instance, Gertrude and Mako's experiences reflect how women's bodies are objectified through their physical appearance, which is also confined by restrictive gender expectations in the private and public spaces. Apart from the hostel women, there is Tambu's cousin Nyasha, an educated and socially engaged woman who faces disillusionment when her community development work is undermined by societal resistance. On the other hand, Tambu's sister Netsai, a disabled liberation war veteran, as well as Mainini Lucia and Christine, struggles with poverty and neglect, underscoring the state's failure to support ex-combatants, more so females. Nyasha's domestic helper Mrs Taka (also Mai Taka), who is trapped in a marriage that upholds male authority, exemplifies the endurance of patriarchal norms in the domestic life of married couples, in contrast to Nyasha's more egalitarian marriage with her partner, Leon.

Figures such as Mrs Manyanga, Mrs Moetsabi, and Pedzi further depict the resilience and resourcefulness of women navigating everyday challenges in a post-independence context. As her mental health declines, Tambu is admitted to a psychiatric hospital. On release, she returns to her home village and becomes involved in a women's eco-tourism project led by the chairwoman of the local women's club. This work offers a measure of stability while also questioning the commodification of cultural heritage for economic survival. Therefore, through Tambu's trajectory and her encounters with other women, *This Mournable Body* portrays the unfulfilled promises of liberation, the persistence of gender inequality, and the psychological cost of systemic oppression in postcolonial Zimbabwe. In Mavengano's (2024) view, the novel's title is metaphoric of a nation that is beyond redemption and all that its citizens can do is helplessly mourn their homeland. Indeed, Dangarembga's characters display defeat amidst their country's manifestation of the legacies of colonialism as facilitating part of their continued marginalisation and oppression.

Navigating Economic Marginalisation through Intersectional Identities in Postcolonial Contexts

Economic barriers in *This Mournable Body* reveal how historical and systemic forces continue to constrain women's lives in contemporary Zimbabwe. In the novel, postcolonial economic marginalisation reflects the enduring legacy of colonial capitalism, which entrenched racially stratified labour markets and unequal access to resources between Black and white people, as well as men and women (Marazanye 2016). Dangarembga depicts this mainly through Tambudzai's prolonged unemployment and seasonal employment, despite her university education. In addition,

Mai Taka's navigation of the personal to protect her employment is another relevant example.

As mentioned in the novel's synopsis, Tambu is a sociology graduate; however, systemic barriers hinder her ability to secure employment. Dangarembga relates the events of one morning when Tambu decides not to go collect her mother's parcel from her landlady, to avoid over-familiarity and possible disclosure of Tambu's background.

You spend the morning writing a letter to your cousin Nyasha, who has become a filmmaker in Germany, in which you ask for advice concerning leaving Zimbabwe. You want nothing more than to break away from the implacable terror of every day you spend in your country—where you can no longer afford the odd dab of peanut butter ... by going away and becoming a European. (Dangarembga 2018, 59)

The extract above demonstrates the extent of the effects of unemployment in postcolonial Zimbabwe, where leaving the country to seek employment is an option even for the educated. Valerie Tagwira's novel *The Uncertainty of Hope* (2006) depicts a similar theme through characters such as Katy, her husband, and their son-in-law who engage in transnational travel for economic relief (Pfalzgraf 2021). Thus, employment migration stands out as part of the key themes of the postcolonial Zimbabwean novel. Research shows that Tambu's inclination to explore migrant employment is not unique to her but resonates with many young women in sub-Saharan Africa because of the broader socio-economic patterns to which they are exposed. According to Mhazo and Thebe (2021, 631), these economic calamities in Zimbabwe can be attributed to partisan politics and failed public policies since the 1990s, "when the government signed up to the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme, IMF and World Bank stimulus package, when the unemployment rate almost doubled from about 10% in the mid-1980s to about 20% in the 1990s." Moreover, the economic precarity was a result of policy decisions that set the country back and increased inflation significantly, disenfranchising most African people, especially women.

In addition, Tambu encounters both racial and gender prejudice at work, which combine to create accentuated challenges such as limiting her progression. For instance, Dangarembga constantly references Tambu's stint as a copywriter at a white-owned advertising agency where race and gender hierarchies limited her progress:

Once more you refuse to harbour anything like resentment or jealousy concerning Tracey's diverse advantages, such as the salary she had earned at the advertising agency that was many times yours by virtue of her being an advertising executive while you were a mere copywriter, although your qualifications were similar, and were obtained from the same institutions—first the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, and then the university [sic] of Harare. (Dangarembga 2018, 177)

For one, Tracey, a former schoolmate and colleague with similar qualifications, was promoted to an executive role while Tambu remained overlooked. Furthermore, Tracey

plotted with her fellow white colleagues to steal ideas that Tambu had worked hard for (80). On another occasion, in a key project where Tambu designed a detailed marketing plan, her contributions were presented at a board meeting by a white male colleague who failed to credit her (42). This act of taking ownership of her work not only denies Tambudzai the acknowledgement she merits but also limits her professional progress. Such an incident reflects intersectional marginalisation, highlighting how she endures overlapping layers of discrimination. Furthermore, Tambudzai's experience is in line with Jaiyeola and Aladegbola's (2020) argument that African economic systems still channel resources and authority to white or male actors. Dangarembga's portrayal of workplace bias critiques this persistent imbalance.

The persistent threat of financial insecurity profoundly affects Tambudzai. After seeking accommodation at Mbuya Riley's with no success, Tambu goes on to stay at Mrs Manyanga's. While there, the protagonist is confronted with the harsh realities of poverty and decides to adopt the principle of "less eating and less spending" to get by (Dangarembga 2018, 41). Additionally, she resolves to be economical in her preparation of food. One day as Tambu looks out of the window, she reflects on her situation and the obstacles that lie ahead, openly questioning her own abilities and expressing doubt about the future:

You are concerned you will start thinking of ending it all, having nothing to carry on for: no home, no job, no sustaining family bonds. You have failed to make anything for yourself, yet your mother endures even more bitter circumstances than yours. How with all your education, do you become more needy than your mother? (Dangarembga 2018, 41)

The above extract demonstrates the fact that acquiring formal education has made no economic difference for African women such as Tambu, who compares her struggles to her mother's endurance under harsher conditions that denied her access to education and, by implication, financial independence. In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga (1988) writes about Tambu's journey at the Ladies College of the Sacred Heart following many hurdles that threatened her access to missionary education, especially as an African girl in colonial Rhodesia where boys were prioritised to acquire education.

Tambu's strategies to end her life's downward spiral of financial insecurity include considering marriage to one of her landlady's three sons. This phenomenon is representative of the current milieu wherein some women opt for romantic relationships as a means to secure financial stability and social standing. For instance, Panashe Chigumadzi's novel *Sweet Medicine* (2015) narrates the story of Tsitsi, a young woman navigating the economic inflation in Zimbabwe in the 2000s who resolves to get involved with a wealthy man for security. Under the persuasion of her university friend, Tsitsi uses her feminine charm to lure her boss into a sexual relationship for financial gain (Ndlovu 2016). Therefore, both Dangarembga's and Chigumadzi's novels highlight the extent to which economic considerations influence Zimbabwean women's marital decisions, often overshadowing personal desires.

Following her intensive search for employment, Tambu ends up at the Ministry of Education, surprising the official at the front desk who points out that citizens in the country rarely willingly return to teaching.

You have never 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 extract supports Mareva, Gonye, and Rubaya's (2013) findings that the teaching profession in Zimbabwe began to be unattractive compared to its popularity soon after independence. Tambu's teaching period at Northlea High School is short-lived because of the challenges of the educational system which resurrected her mental breakdown. After persistently witnessing unruly learner behaviour in and outside the classroom, a moment of impatience leads to uncontrolled distress and Tambu physically assaults one of her students, Elizabeth, for not providing a definition as per the teacher's request (Dangarembga 2018, 94). This incident severely affects Tambu's professional life, resulting in suspension and further exacerbating her mental health issues, ultimately leading to hospitalisation. It is through Dr Winton's probing that Dangarembga reveals that being born into a poor family, hustling for education, and guilt about her brother's death being the only way to access fulltime education have caused Tambu's mental state. In addition, the protagonist's experiences at Steers et al. seem to have contributed to existing mental health conditions, although with lesser effect than the familial situation. This supports Petroni et al.'s (2017) argument that psychological strain can be intensified by socio-economic pressures and systemic inequalities that limit young women's opportunities. The narrative further accentuates how economic instability, limited employment prospects, and societal expectations collectively heighten the vulnerability of women navigating professional and personal challenges in postcolonial contexts.

Tambu's breakthrough is facilitated by her connection with Ms Stevenson, who works for Green Jacaranda and empowers her to finally go home after a long while. On her drive home, her Mazda SUV attracts the attention of the children in the village.

"That's murungu," answers another.

"No it's not. That's a person." The girl says, turning to keep the car in sight. "And, hey, can you see, it's also a woman." (Dangarembga 2018, 224)

The village children's association of a Mazda SUV with a white person and fascination with a woman driver reflect the rarity of an African woman who can afford such a car passing their streets. This essentially highlights the constraints of Black women's economic independence even in postcolonial Zimbabwe, a society in which African women are confronted with many economic uncertainties.

In another example, Dangarembga employs the character of Mai Taka to depict that despite constitutional guarantees of women's rights in various African countries, women continue to experience inequalities such as insufficient support for their education and work conditions that overlook their biological needs, including maternity-related issues (Johnson-Hanks 2006). The biological processes unique to women are often treated as personal and not seriously addressed in the workplace (Bıyıklar and Balcioğlu 2025). Women's fear of pregnancy, for example, is closely linked to the harsh realities of high unemployment and widespread economic instability, proving that with limited access to secure employment and minimal social protection, many women occupy vulnerable positions in the labour market. The possibility of pregnancy creates anxiety about losing their jobs, since some employers consider maternity leave an inconvenience or an additional expense. Mai Taka's denial of her pregnancy, justified by her claim that she has too much work to be pregnant, is indicative of the trend. Be that as it may, the storyline goes on to show that Mai Taka was indeed pregnant. According to Becker, Fernandes, and Weichselbaumer (2019), such fears are justified as employers frequently discriminate against women they perceive as likely to become pregnant, which highlights how workplace practices continue to undermine women's rights in competitive labour markets. This article argues that such discriminatory tendencies build on the compounded intersections of inequality that women face.

Gendered Violence and Control of Women's Bodies

This Mournable Body portrays how patriarchal power employs both overt violence and subtle social surveillance to regulate women's autonomy. Katembo (2015) points out that in Zimbabwe, gender-based violence (GBV) is entrenched in cultural norms that legitimise male dominance within and outside of the domestic sphere. Dangarembga's novel reflects Katembo's statement through the depiction of sexually and physically violent acts committed against Mrs Taka, Gertrude, and Mako by men such as Shine and Mr Taka.

Mr Taka embodies authoritarian control through his interactions with his wife, reflecting broader patriarchal attitudes present in the society that the novel portrays. One of the major incidents depicting Mr Taka's abusive behaviour towards his wife appears when Nyasha's family plans an outing to the cinema and requests that Mrs Taka come with. As the car is about to exit the yard, Mr Taka appears from the bushes, and his wife instantly knows that he is looking for her because he threatened her and told her not to go. Subsequently, Mrs Taka asks to be let out, but Leon and Nyasha disapprove. The little crowd then has a continuous exchange of ideas on how to convince Mr Taka to let his wife go because it is part of her job. When that also fails, Mrs Taka angrily bursts out,

"Are you the one who tells me to wear a uniform, Silence?" Mai Taka flares up. "No, it's not you who has to tell me!"

Silence shines the cold light of his eyes on his wife.

“Mai Taka”, he warns. “Someone taught you to lie to me. I told you leave that one, that dress you are wearing. I told you put on your uniform”.

“It is alright now. Go, I will see you when you come back”. (Dangarembga 2018, 155)

Mr Taka’s insistence on interrogating his wife at home underscores his need to regulate her movements. Moreover, his speech is filled with intimidatory remarks, which suggest that he will deal with his wife accordingly upon her return. Mrs Taka is, however, unmoved because her husband had already kicked her feet the very same morning, suggesting that she is used to the physical abuse. Although such conduct is often defended as a form of discipline or rooted in genuine concern, it functions fundamentally as a tool to silence women and maintain control (Hatcher et al. 2013). This incident illustrates how domestic patriarchy in postcolonial contexts continues to constrain women’s freedom, while also suggesting that community support can mitigate its effects. Dangarembga thus uses this part of the story to reflect African Womanism’s point that African relationships between males and females should not be romanticised as perfect because in such a context, misogyny has many potential dangers for women (Ogunyemi 1996, 119). This theoretical element cautions against a single-sided advocacy against race as the sole oppressive tool but rather suggests that interracial sexism exists and manifests through incidents such as the one depicted between Mr and Mrs Taka.

In addition, Dangarembga brings to light the regulation of dress and control of female bodies through the characters of Shine, Mako, and Gertrude. *This Mournable Body* reflects the public and private objectification of women’s bodies by depicting how the postcolonial African society polices and scrutinises women’s appearance, reflecting colonial legacies that cast Black female sexuality and bodies as deviant. Similar themes have been discussed by scholars such as Poozhikkal and Kunhi (2024), who explore the reasons informing Muslim women’s choices of dress as depicted in Shelina Zahra Janmohamed’s *Love in a Head Scarf* (2010) and Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). In the first chapter of *This Mournable Body*, Tambudzai witnesses her hostel mate Gertrude attempting to board a taxi while wearing a short skirt. Onlookers react with ridicule and vulgar commentary: Women accuse her of corrupting morals, and a man crudely suggests someone should open her thighs for him (Dangarembga 2018, 22–24). Additionally, the taxi driver refuses her entry, stating that “this car is not a bedroom.” This public humiliation demonstrates deeply rooted beliefs that a woman’s clothing justifies harassment. Dangarembga thus reveals how women’s bodies are treated as public property to be monitored and judged (Masha and Mogoboya 2024; Settler and Engh 2015). Notably, Tambudzai initially feels a sense of satisfaction at Gertrude’s humiliation, exposing her own internalisation of patriarchal attitudes.

This Mournable Body further underscores that adherence to values of modesty in dress does not safeguard against assault. One of Tambudzai’s hostel mates, Mako, dresses modestly and conceals her body, yet she is raped in the hostel by another lodger, Shine.

This harrowing incident emphasises that sexual violence stems not from women's behaviour but from entrenched power imbalances and male entitlement facilitated by patriarchy. Tambudzai explains that Mako's silence during and after the ordeal was a survival strategy, reflecting the limited recourse available to women in such situations. Therefore, the novelist dismantles the myth that modesty protects women and instead positions violence as an expression of patriarchal dominance. Through scenes of domestic interrogation, public humiliation, and sexual violence, *This Mournable Body* exposes the systemic policing and punishment of women, as well as the pervasive misogyny that renders them vulnerable to abuse. Jenkins (2017) frames rape myths as forms of hermeneutical injustice, wherein victims lack the interpretive tools to understand or articulate their experience as rape due to socially entrenched myths that distort perception and comprehension. This distortion not only delegitimises women's experiences but also reinforces misogynistic structures that normalise sexual violence and perpetuate victim-blaming narratives.

War, Liberation, and Political Marginalisation

The legacy of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle is a central scope in *This Mournable Body*. Dangarembga depicts several characters whose experiences as war veterans or as relatives of veterans reveal post-independence disillusionment. For instance, Tambu's mother believes that the government should provide economic support and relief for ex-combatants such as her daughter Netsai who sacrificed immensely. According to Ndhlovu and Wielenga (2023, 824), "although the Zimbabwean post-independence government made attempts to promote gender equity following the liberation struggle, women ex-combatants continue to experience unequal access to redress compared to their male counterparts." African Womanism emphasises the need to recognise the political aspects involved in the pursuit of women's liberation within the African context, which are also understood within the construction of the postcolonial nation state (Ogunyemi 1985, 1996).

Tambudzai's sister Netsai, who lost a leg during the liberation war, returns to a community that offers minimal support. Her disability and dependency expose the state's neglect of female ex-combatants, revealing how inadequate rehabilitation programmes, lack of economic opportunities, and limited social recognition leave them marginalised despite their contributions to the liberation struggle (Barnes 1999). Netsai's struggles with poverty and the stigma of female ex-combatants suggest that public gratitude for women's wartime service was superficial. For instance, she is forced to be the primary parent of her two daughters who were conceived in Mozambique but stay with their grandmother because their mother cannot adequately care for them.

"My daughter ended up with one leg, although she started with two". Mai leans forward and rubs her own shin. "One leg and two children, Tambudzai. That mathematics does not work out. That is why these children are uneducated. It is the wrong numbers. Netsai could not work. You sent nothing. The people those girls fought the war for despised and hated these girls' mother". (Dangarembga 2018, 232)

In the above extract, Tambu's mother expresses disappointment in the state government that deployed her daughter and others to go fight but failed to provide supportive initiatives catering for their selfless act. She further explains that it is Netsai's disability that restricts her financial provision for her daughters, which disadvantages them and keeps them from accessing education. This storyline is in line with Moyo's (2018, 2) observation that while "a political transition had been ironed out, there was a need for a social and economic transition that would help former combatants."

Similarly, Tambudzai's aunt, Mainini Lucia, carries profound personal trauma. Her son, who had been guiding cattle to safety during the conflict, was killed by Rhodesian soldiers. This loss epitomises the indiscriminate brutality of war and what it has taken from women such as her. Settler and Engh (2015) observe that, during colonial wars, African women's bodies became symbolic sites of conflict, a history reflected in Lucia's grief. Despite their trauma and the stereotypical views held by those who were left at home who regarded women ex-combatants as "drinking blood and flying with evil spirits" (147), these women demonstrate resilience and agency:

Congratulations, Mainini, you say. Your respect for your aunt Lucia swells tremendously. You are glad that you have listened to her and honoured her as a mother. And you, also Kiri, congratulations, you smile. Even though you came back from war it is like you didn't go. Now you are just like everybody else who is advancing. (Dangarembga 2018, 146–147)

Lucia uses her wartime experiences to build self-sufficiency by establishing a security company that employs women such as Christine, who expresses that Lucia has made a place for veterans in her company. By branding her business and wearing a self-designed uniform, Lucia reclaims dignity denied to her in the army and upon their return.

In combining wartime history with gender critique, *This Mournable Body* positions Black women at the intersection of colonial violence, patriarchal oppression, and political exclusion. Through characters such as Netsai and Mainini Lucia, Dangarembga captures both the enduring trauma and the determination to reclaim agency. Their entrepreneurial initiatives and collective resilience demonstrate that, even in the face of betrayal by the post-independence state, women carve out spaces of empowerment and redefine their identities in postcolonial Zimbabwe (Makombe and Mvere 2025).

Healing through Solidarity

Despite its sobering portrait of hardship, Dangarembga (2018) ultimately gestures towards healing grounded in cultural roots and communal solidarity through various women who came through for Tambu when she needed help the most. For instance, following Tambu's admission at the psychiatric clinic, the turning point in her recovery is when she moves to Nyasha's house at Mainini Lucia's suggestion (119). Furthermore, her former college mate and colleague Tracey helps Tambu secure a new job that offers

a five-year leased house with an option to buy (176), marking a significant step towards her stability and self-renewal. The role brings financial stability and allows her to revisit her village after a long absence, taking goods for her family. This physical and symbolic journey back to the countryside marks the beginning of Tambudzai's healing. Chitando (2021) explains that Tambudzai's acceptance of care and reconnection with family signify a form of cultural and spiritual renewal. In African Womanism terms, Tambudzai's healing involves reintegration into the community and participation in traditional life, not isolation.

The novel also explores intergenerational healing through the character of Pedzi, a much younger woman whom Tambu once mentored. Tambu's misplaced jealousy leads to a violent confrontation, after which Pedzi is absent from the former's life. However, Pedzi continues to haunt the protagonist as a symbol of her own losses (130). According to Chigangaidze, Matanga, and Katsuro (2022), Pedzi's role forces Tambu to reflect on her failures and ultimately acts as a catalyst for Tambu's self-examination. In African Womanism, younger women are not viewed as rivals but as part of an extended female family whose success should be nurtured (Ogunyemi 1985, 78). Therefore, through Pedzi's memory, Tambudzai begins to let go of guilt and recognise the possibility of change. Pedzi's youthful optimism and Tambudzai's remorseful growth suggest that healing can bridge generations when honesty and support are present. This highlights the novel's message that women's upliftment is a collective journey that spans ages.

Another figure of cultural healing is Mrs Moetsabi, a Mozambican refugee and former guerrilla, who runs a business that honours African knowledge. Through the fashion boutique Queen of Africa, Mrs Moetsabi impresses Tambudzai with her cross-border success, reinforcing the idea that accomplishment is not confined by geography. Moved by this, Tambudzai nods in agreement and remarks, "yes, women like you can flourish" (187). She does not reject modern business but integrates it with respect for tradition and community. By hiring Tambudzai and treating her with dignity, Moetsabi provides Tambu a second chance at meaningful work. In her, Tambudzai sees a model of purposeful leadership that blends African values with practical agency. Together, these narratives of recovery, Tambudzai's return home, Lucia's mentorship, Pedzi's inspiration, and Moetsabi's example demonstrate that *This Mournable Body* envisions healing through cultural reclamation and solidarity. Tambudzai's eventual work at the cultural tourism centre (promoting Shona traditions to foreigners) may be read ambivalently: It commodifies heritage, but it also reintegrates her into communal life and purpose.

Dangarembga (2018) is not presenting the women's situation as if it can be solved by some perfect, magical fix. Instead, she shows a realistic (pragmatic) way for women to survive and cope with hardship. The novel ends without a dramatic or total solution to all their struggles. However, it shows that by staying connected to their cultural roots and relying on support from family, friends, and even younger women, they can lessen the effects of trauma. This reflects African Womanism's belief that healing is not

individual but shared, coming from cultural strength, resilience, and lasting solidarity among women.

Conclusion

All things considered, *This Mournable Body* is a fictional depiction of how Zimbabwe's transition to independence did not dismantle the patriarchal systems that define women's lives. Through its portrayal of women's psychological, social, and economic struggles, the novel underscores how entrenched cultural expectations and postcolonial disillusionment continue to silence women. By employing African Womanism and intersectionality, this article has shown that Dangarembga's work not only documents women's oppression but also provides a lens through which to understand the intersecting forces that sustain it. The study contributes to African literary scholarship by foregrounding the resilience of many Zimbabwean women whose agency remains constrained in postcolonial patriarchal societies in various ways. While characters such as Mainini Lucia and Netsai continue to suffer the impact of past violences such as war, Tambu and Nyasha experience disillusionment that demonstrates that education does not always guarantee survival and fulfilment. More broadly, this study highlights the value of African Womanism as a framework for analysing women's experiences in contexts where both colonial and indigenous systems of oppression continue to operate. It has further shown how the overlapping of social identities shape experiences of power, privilege, or disadvantage. This study, theoretically supported by an intersectional analytical framework and African Womanist backing, enabled a nuanced understanding of how these intersections influence women's lives.

References

- Aduke, A. 2019. "Colonial Legacies and African Women's Socio-Economic Realities." *African Historical Review* 51 (2): 120–138.
- Arndt, S. 2000. "African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An Interview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni." *Signs* 25 (3): 709–726. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175414>.
- Barnes, T. 1999. *"We Women Worked So Hard": Gender, Urbanisation, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930–1956*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Becker, S., A. Fernandes, and D. Weichselbaumer. 2019. "Discrimination in Hiring Based on Potential and Realized Fertility: Evidence from a Large-Scale Experiment." IZA Institute of Labor Economics Discussion Paper No. 12308. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3390298>.
- Bıyıklar, M. A., and Y. S. Balcıoğlu. 2025. "Breaking the Silence: Women's Reproductive Health in the Workplace through Collective Voice." *Gender, Work and Organization* 32 (6): 2353–2368. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.70016>.

- Chigangaidze, R. K., A. A. Matanga, and T. R. Katsuro. 2022. "Ubuntu Philosophy as a Humanistic–Existential Framework for the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 62 (3): 319–333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211044554>.
- Chigumadzi, P. 2015. *Sweet Medicine*. Seshego: Blackbird Books.
- Chitando, E., ed. 2021. *Innovation and Competition in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism: Megachurches and the Marketization of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350176027.ch-001>.
- Chuku, G. 2018. "Colonialism and African Womanhood." In *The Palgrave Handbook of African Colonial and Postcolonial History*, edited by M. Shanguhya and T. Falola, 171–211. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59426-6_7.
- Coly, A. A. 2019. *Postcolonial Hauntologies: African Women's Discourses of the Female Body*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvfjczrh>.
- Crenshaw, K. W. 2012. "From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally about Women, Race, and Social Control." *UCLA Law Review* 59: 1418–1472.
- Crenshaw, K. W. 2013a. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." In *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, edited by M. A. Fineman, 93–118. New York: Routledge.
- Dangarembga, T. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. London: The Women's Press.
- Dangarembga, T. 2018. *This Mournable Body*. Minnesota: Graywolf Press.
- Dangarembga, T. 2022. *Black and Female*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Hatcher, A. M., P. Romito, M. Otero, E. A. Bukusi, M. Onono, and J. M. Turan. 2013. "Social Context and Drivers of Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Kenya: Implications for the Health of Pregnant Women." *Culture, Health and Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* 15 (4): 404–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2012.760205>.
- Jaiyeola, E. F., and A. I. Aladegbola. 2020. "Patriarchy and Colonization: The 'Brooder House' for Gender Inequality in Nigeria." *Journal of Research on Women and Gender* 10: 3–22. <https://repository.crawforduniversity.edu.ng/server/api/core/bitstreams/d2658d26-f6d4-4b1a-bbfc-7df816b13a87/content>.
- Janmohamed, S. Z. 2010. *Love in a Head Scarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Jenkins, K. 2017. "Rape Myths and Domestic Abuse Myths as Hermeneutical Injustices." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34 (2): 191–205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12174>.
- Johnson-Hanks, J. 2006. *Uncertain Honor: Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kahf, M. 2006. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Katembo, A. 2015. "Reducing Cases of Gender Based Violence in Mashonaland Central Province: Zimbabwe." PhD diss., Durban University of Technology.
- Lihiru, V. M. 2024. "Domestic and International Law Contradictions in Zimbabwe's Gender Quota System." *African Human Rights Law Journal* 24 (1): 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2024/v24n1a6>.
- Makombe, S. P. M., and Z. G. Mvere. 2025. "Post-War Reintegration Challenges Faced by Women Freedom Fighters: The Case Study of Gweru, Midlands, Zimbabwe." *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6 (6): 36–41. [https://indianapublications.com/articles/IJHSS_6\(6\)_36-41_686bd6b44d4557.94027733.pdf](https://indianapublications.com/articles/IJHSS_6(6)_36-41_686bd6b44d4557.94027733.pdf).
- Marazanye, K. 2016. "An Analysis of Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment in Zimbabwe." PhD diss., Stellenbosch University.
- Mareva, R., J. Gonye, and C. Rubaya. 2013. "Wither Teaching in Zimbabwe? Teachers' and Secondary School Pupils' Views on the Teaching Profession." *International Journal of English and Education* 2 (3): 501–516.
- Masha, L., and M. Mogoboya. 2024. "Female Sexualities under a Patriarchal Microscope: An Interrogation of Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*." *Journal of Literary Studies* 40 (1): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/16769>.
- Mavengano, E. 2024. "The Semantics of Gender, Politics, and Religion in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80 (2): a9030. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9030>.
- Mhazo, T., and V. Thebe. 2021. "'Hustling out of Unemployment': Livelihood Responses of Unemployed Young Graduates in the City of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56 (3): 628–642. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620937035>.
- Moyo, K. G. 2018. "Coping Strategies amongst Ex-Combatants: The Case of Ex ZPRA Ex-Combatants in Bulawayo." *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance* 8 (8.1): 1–19.
- Munyai, A. 2020. "African Renaissance: Effects of Colonialism on Africa's Natural Resources and the Right to Development." *Journal for Juridical Science* 45 (1): 1–27. <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/jjs/article/view/4423/3792>.

- Musingafi, M., P. M. Mukhothu, and M. Musi. 2024. "Matrilineality, Women Power and the Matriarchs of Precolonial Southern Africa." In *From History to Herstory: Culture, Gender and Religion in Archival Material in Southern Africa*, edited by Leshota, P. M. Musingafi, I. Mokhele, and M. Mukamane, 69–84. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ndhlovu, N., and C. Wielenga. 2023. "Unequal Access to Redress for Women Ex-Combatants in Zimbabwe: An Intersectional Analysis." *African Identities* 21 (4): 824–839. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1976105>.
- Ndlovu, I. 2016. "Politically Induced Economic Precarity, Syncretism and Female Representations in Chigumadzi's *Sweet Medicine*." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 30 (3): 96–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2016.1251227>.
- Ngalesoni, O. L., A. R. Msendo, and G. A. Mwakifwamba. 2025. "The Dual Burden of Women Entrepreneurs. A Case Study of Mbuyuni Village, Monduli." *African Journal of Social Issues* 8 (1): 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajosi.v8i1.5>.
- Nikiema, P. 2024. "Francophone African Literature and the Question of Interlocking Identities: An Intersectional Approach to Literary Analysis." *The French Review* 98 (2): 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.1353/tfr.2024.a947601>.
- Ogunyemi, C. O. 1985. "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (1): 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494200>.
- Ogunyemi, C. O. 1996. *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Okafor, S. O. 2020. "Patriarchy and Women Plight in Africa: The Consequences of Living in Passivity." *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology* 17 (2): 57–74.
- Otieno, D. O. 2019. "Narrating the Female Body in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*." MA diss., University of Nairobi. https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/108598/Otieno_Narrating%20The%20Female%20Body%20In%20Tsitsi%20Dangarembga%E2%80%99S%20This%20Mournable%20Body.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
- Petroni, S., M. Steinhaus, N. S. Fenn, K. Stoebe, and A. Gregowski. 2017. "New Findings on Child Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Annals of Global Health* 83 (3–4): 781–790. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aogh.2017.09.001>.
- Pfalzgraf, M. 2021. "Flânerie in Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope*." *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* 58 (2): 18–28. <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v58i2.8403>.
- Poozhikkal, S., and Z. M. Kunhi. 2024. "Decolonising the Modest Dress: Intersectionality, Agency, and Choice in Diasporic Muslim Women's Fiction." *Ishal Paithrkam* 40: 41–54.
- Rodney, W. 2018. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Verso.

- Sani, A. M. 2023. "Objectification, Rejection, Suppression, and Feminine Resistance in African Novel." *Minna Journal of Educational Studies* 8 (1): 10–17.
- Settler, F., and M. H. Engh. 2015. "The Black Body in Colonial and Postcolonial Public Discourse in South Africa." *Alternation* 14: 126–148.
- Tagwira, V. 2006. *The Uncertainty of Hope*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Taiwo, O. S. 2019. "African Womanism as a Response to Simone De Beauvoir's Existential Feminism." PhD diss., University of Ibadan.
<https://pgsdSPACE.ictp.it/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1060/taiwo.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
- World Economic Forum. 2024. *Global Gender Gap 2024: Insight Report June 2024*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Accessed June 20, 2025.
<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/>.