



Divulging Women's Plight: A Critical Examination of Gender Exploitation and Suppression in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

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Abstract. This article critically examines the portrayal of gender exploitation and suppression in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *This Mournable Body*. Drawing on the legacy of early African female authors and the works of contemporary African female writers, the study explores the depiction of women in the novel and their experiences, challenges, and injustices. Using a postcolonial feminist approach and employing close reading as a method, the article probes the preconceptions, norms, and narratives within the novel that perpetuate gender inequality. It investigates the portrayal of female characters, their agency and representation, and the intersections of gender with other dimensions of identity. The analysis reveals how women in the novel are subjected to public abuse, including street harassment, public shaming, and victim-blaming and domestic exploitation. It also highlights the intense subjugation, discrimination, and oppression faced by women in the Zimbabwean society depicted in the novel in general. By shedding light on these issues, the research aims to contribute to the promotion of gender equality and social justice, elevate women's voices, challenge patriarchal myths, and advocate for radical transformation within and beyond the literary world. The article employs a systematic approach that combines textual analysis with a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework.

Keywords: Gender exploitation, *This Mournable Body*, Postcolonial feminist, Gender equality, Textual analysis

1. Introduction

After several African countries got their independence from colonialism in the mid of the 20th century, many new African writers started to address a plethora of African issues. And the majority of the writers were male and have traditionally incorporated women into their works; however, "women were portrayed as a subordinate way that is diametrically opposed to their historic status"¹. Kolawole quoted in Epic 2 also asserts that "most male writers continued to fictionalize women as objects or mirror characters that are vehicles for cultivating a world of male heroics." However, early African female

authors such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*³, Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*⁴ and Charity Waciuma's *Daughter of Mwnbi*⁵ established a legacy of appropriating and valorising female experience, successfully subverting certain set notions of the female subject Wilson- Tagoe⁶ and Cornelissen⁷. These three writers encountered the earlier reconstructions of female characters by male writers because women often appeared fixed in roles. Wilson- Tagoe⁸ put it that "The works of the early female writers countered fixed images of women through narrative strategies in which their female characters appeared in shifting and seemingly contradicting poses, giving the writers leeway to present them as complex and subtle".

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* woman- centered universe contains similar juxtapositions of perspectives and perceptions. Such dynamic depictions challenge a rigid and static understanding of a woman and urge a more challenging awareness of women as individual characters. Indeed, the entire design of *Efuru* embodies specific deliberate tactics for excavating and elevating women's submerged worlds and consciousness⁹.

Grace Ogot's protagonist in *The Promised Land* is both a typical wife and an astute observer and critic of both her husband and her society. The theme of migration, as well as the juxtaposition of husband-and-wife viewpoints, provide a foundation for Ogot's revisionist subversions of women's predetermined roles in patriarchal society Wilson-Tagoe ¹⁰

In the 1970s, African former women's themes were enlarged and developed by writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Rebeka Njau, and Miriam Were, while South African writers such as Miriam Tlali and Bessie Head explored similar issues through the prism of apartheid. By placing women at the centre of their texts, they are able to construct alternate versions of history¹².

Contemporary African female writers continue to investigate various subjects and issues which are important to their societies and the world at large. And one of the common themes that emerge in their works is gender inequality.

Gender inequality is widespread problems that have long afflicted communities worldwide, especially in Africa. As a result, African literature, with its broad and diverse body of work, provides a great prism through which to explore and comprehend the complexity of gender dynamics on the continent. This research seeks investigate the portrayal of women in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) unveiling the experiences, challenges, and injustices they face. characters, their relationships, and the broader socio-cultural setting.

Using a critical lens, the article tries to probe existing preconceptions, norms, and narratives in *This Mournable Body* that perpetuate gender inequality. It investigates the portrayal of female characters, their agency and representation, and the extent to which women are given voice and autonomy inside the novel. Furthermore, it investigates the intersections of gender with other dimensions of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality, to create a more thorough understanding of the intricacies of women's lives.

It is intended that through conducting this critical study, a better understanding of gender exploitation and suppression in *This Mournable Body* ¹³ would emerge, eventually contributing to current dialogues and attempts to promote gender equality and social justice. This study intends to elevate women's voices, challenge patriarchal myths, and promote radical transformation inside the literary world and beyond by exposing their struggle.

This research employs a systematic approach, combining textual analysis as a method and postcolonial feminist approach as a theoretical framework. The purpose of this research is to offer

light on how Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* both reflects and influences society conceptions of gender roles and identities. Similarly, the study seeks to unravel the ways in which gender exploitation and oppression manifest within the novel by providing an in-depth examination of the This approach combines the insights of postcolonial theory, which explores the legacy and effects of colonialism, with feminist theory, which focuses on the analysis of gender and power dynamics. Postcolonial feminist criticism specifically

examines how gender inequality intersects with issues of race, class, and culture within postcolonial contexts. Given its emphasis on the unique experiences of marginalized groups, this framework is particularly well-suited for analyzing the complexities and nuances of gender inequality in African literature. By employing postcolonial feminist criticism, researchers can delve into the interplay between colonial legacies, cultural norms, and gender hierarchies in African novels, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Through the method of close reading, the novel is carefully examined to uncover relevant insights. By extracting pertinent data, the research critically examines how gender inequality is depicted from a postcolonial feminist perspective. This organized and comprehensive approach allows for a detailed exploration of the novel's portrayal of gender disparities, providing valuable insights into the broader discourse surrounding this theme.

2. Analysis and Discussion

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *This Mournable Body*, the portrayal of women is multifaceted, shedding light on the challenges they face within their society. The maltreatment and harassment experienced by women in this patriarchal setting form a significant aspect of the narrative. These women find themselves subjected to the dominance and exploitation of men, restricting their freedom and agency. Any deviation from societal norms exposes them to severe social criticism and discrimination. Even the slightest mistake is met with harsh treatment, amplifying their vulnerability. Particularly, the manner in which they dress becomes a focal point for victimization, as it is judged through the lens of community expectations. In general, here are some types of exploitation and suppression the novel addresses. This includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse against women, such as public and domestic violence and sexual assault.

2.1. Public Abuse of Women

Public abuse of women refers to acts of harassment, discrimination, and violence against women that occur in public spaces. Public abuse of women has detrimental effects on their safety, freedom of movement, and overall well-being. It reinforces gender inequality, restricts women's participation in public life, and perpetuates harmful norms and stereotypes. Addressing public abuse of women requires creating safe and inclusive public spaces, promoting gender equality, raising awareness, and implementing legal measures to hold perpetrators accountable. It also involves challenging societal attitudes and behaviours that tolerate or condone such abuse, fostering respect, and promoting gender-sensitive education and social norms. This type of abuse encompasses various forms. The novel in particular portrays the following major public abuses.

Street harassment and public

humiliation are issues stated in the novel. Women experience unwanted attention, catcalling, verbal abuse, stalking, or groping in street and market areas. This form of harassment made women feel unsafe, intimidated, and violated. Besides, women are subjected to public shaming, derogatory comments, or derogatory gestures that aim to degrade, humiliate, or belittle them based on their gender and appearance.

In this regard, Dangarembga skilfully highlights the societal pressures and gender-based harassment experienced by women through the character of Gertrud in the novel. Gertrud becomes a target of public scrutiny and harassment due to her clothing style,

effectively illustrating the broader issue at hand. As Tambudzai states, "She pushes out every bit of

her body that can protrude—lips, hips, breasts, and buttocks—to greatest effect"¹⁴. While she was going to the "Combis" as Tambudzai describes, "The crowd shifts and regroup. Men inside and outside combis exhale sharply. ¹⁵ " Then, the men in the "combis" [minibus] humiliating and embarrassing through laughter and saying like "There's a little fish. It's going to show its mouth hole, just like it does when it's out of water, a man shout"¹⁶. By simply looking at her body, they were abusing Gertrud to the worst.

The description of the woman pushing

out every part of her body that can protrude, such as her lips, hips, breasts, and buttocks, underscores the emphasis on physical attributes and sexualization. This portrayal reduces the woman to her physical appearance and objectifies her as an object of desire. By highlighting these specific body parts, the narrative reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is determined by her ability to conform to societal standards of attractiveness, perpetuating a culture of objectification.

The reaction of the crowd and the men inside and outside the "combis" further reinforces the objectification and suppression of women. The crowd's shift and regrouping suggest a collective response, highlighting the attention and scrutiny directed towards the woman's body. The sharp exhalation by men inside and outside the "combis" indicates their heightened interest or arousal in response to her presence, further objectifying her and reducing her to a source of sexual pleasure.

The men's humiliating and derogatory remarks, such as comparing her to a fish and making derogatory comments about her mouth hole, demonstrate the dehumanizing treatment inflicted upon the woman. Their words reduce her to an animalistic or subhuman status, emphasizing her vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of their objectifying gaze. The laughter further compounds the humiliation, as it highlights the men's enjoyment at her expense, perpetuating a culture of demeaning and belittling women.

This analysis reveals how the exploitation and suppression of women are perpetuated through the objectification of their bodies, the male gaze, and the normalization of derogatory language. It highlights the ways in which societal norms and expectations contribute to the devaluation of women, reinforcing gender inequality and patriarchal power structures.

Overall, these extracts shed light on the oppressive treatment of women, showcasing the objectification, humiliation, and dehumanization they endure within the given context in public places. This critical analysis prompts a reflection on the harmful effects of such practices and calls for a revaluation of societal attitudes towards women, challenging the objectification and suppression of their autonomy and agency.

Tambudzai's narrative also serves as a portrayal of how people respond unfavourably to Gertrud, not simply due to her attire, but primarily because she is a woman. And Tambudzai states "The crowd ripples and fidgets, hums and buzzes with amusement"¹⁷. Everybody was insulting and shaming her. The driver says, "What's the matter with you? Since when are naked people allowed to come into vehicles?"¹⁸. Other drivers then asked her again. "Who told you my combi's a bedroom?"¹⁹... In this way they threw her to the ground and "The mass of people moves forward." "The crowd groans again. Now it is a moan of disappointment"²⁰.

The first extract, "The crowd ripples and fidgets, hums and buzzes with amusement," indicates the presence of a crowd that seems to derive entertainment or amusement from the situation. This suggests a voyeuristic gaze, where the woman is objectified and subjected to public scrutiny. The crowd's reaction perpetuates a culture of objectification, treating the woman as an object of amusement rather than respecting her dignity.

Furthermore, victim-blaming is another form of abusing women experience as in the above extract. When women experience any form of assault or abuse in public, they may face victim-blaming, where their actions, clothing choices, or behaviour are unfairly scrutinized and blamed for the abuse they endure. As a result, the driver's comment, "Since when are naked people allowed to come into vehicles?" reflects a derogatory and judgmental attitude towards the woman. The driver's words imply that the woman is somehow at fault for her own mistreatment, blaming her for her appearance and implying that she should conform to societal expectations of modesty. This demonstrates how women's autonomy and agency are restricted, and they are held accountable for the actions and judgments imposed upon them.

The question posed by other drivers, "Who told you my combi's a bedroom?" further reinforces the societal expectation that women should conform to rigid gender roles and restrict their behaviour to certain spaces. This question implies that the woman is transgressing social norms by assuming that public transportation should provide a safe and respectful environment for all passengers. It highlights how women's presence and behaviour are policed, reinforcing patriarchal control and suppressing their freedom.

The physical act of throwing the woman to the ground demonstrates a clear display of violence and the exertion of power over her. This act not only physically harms her but also symbolizes the dominance of patriarchal norms and the collective participation in her suppression. The crowd's disappointment, expressed through the groaning and moaning, reflects a sense of entitlement and the expectation that the woman should conform to their expectations or face consequences.

Overall, these extracts reveal the deep-rooted gender inequality and the oppressive treatment of women in public places. They shed light on the exploitation, objectification, victim-blaming, and violence that women often experience in society. This critical analysis exposes the systemic and cultural factors that contribute to the suppression of women's voices, agency, and autonomy, urging us to question and challenge such oppressive practices.

Similarly, Tambudzai explains that in

Zimbabwe, anti-women sentiment was at an all-time high. As Tambudzai, the subjugation, discrimination, and oppression of women in Zimbabwe was incomparable to any other nation, even to Arab countries: Yemen, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The author states this: "There can't be a country that hates women as much as this one." "Yemen," nods Leon. "Pakistan. Saudi Arabia" 21. This shows that though women in the mentioned countries are extensively repressed, the way women treated in her nation, Zimbabwe is the worst of all. Based on the novel, because of their biological sex and gender difference, women are vulnerable to physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, repression, and economic deprivation.

Tambudzai's observations shed light on the extent of subjugation, discrimination, and oppression faced by women in Zimbabwe. The author conveys the intensity of this situation

by asserting that it is unparalleled, even when compared to Arab countries such as Yemen, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

The extract highlights the author's statement: "There can't be a country that hates women as much as this one." This phrase emphasizes the magnitude of misogyny and gender-based oppression experienced by women in Zimbabwe. It suggests a deep-rooted systemic issue where women's rights and well-being are severely undermined.

The inclusion of Yemen, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia as points of comparison underscores the severity of the situation, as these countries are known for their challenging contexts regarding women's rights. The nod from Leon to the mentioned countries further reinforces the acknowledgment of the grave circumstances faced by women in Zimbabwe.

In short, the extract prompts a critical examination of the intersecting dynamics of gender, power, and culture within the context of Zimbabwe. It highlights the urgent need to address and challenge the deep-seated patriarchal structures and norms that perpetuate the subjugation and discrimination faced by women. Postcolonial feminism seeks to amplify women's voices, advocate for gender equality, and dismantle oppressive systems that deny women agency, dignity, and rights.

Similar fashion, Dangarembga explains how deep patriarchal mindset is ingrained in the contemporary Zimbabwean society. The novel depicts how society perceives men's superiority and women's abasement. The following excerpt demonstrates that women are nothing to some people. Women are just numbers because they are poor and cannot compute with men. The narrator describes it thus:

Whatever they are telling you now, capital is never human, it's only numbers. Capital's just like your politicians. It knows those women out there are nothing but quantities! Think about your aunt at the homestead, Nyasha! She's a bit in a calculation²².

This Mournable Body exposes the pervasive harassment faced by girls in public spaces due to their biological sex identity. The novel portrays a distressing incident where two men engage in explicit abuse towards girls who had exited Queen Moetsabi's shop. These men use derogatory language and make demeaning remarks, demonstrating their rudeness and arrogance. By referring to the girls as "little girls" with a negative connotation and questioning their femininity by asking if they have grown testicles, the men seek to assert their dominance and belittle the girls. Their comments perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and reinforce patriarchal power structures. These men say, "Yes, that boss of yours should come out if she wants to speak to us, and not send us little children." "Tell me, my young sister," a young man says. "Can it be that you have grown your own testicles?"²³

The provided extract highlights the intersections of gender, power, and colonial hierarchies within a postcolonial context. It portrays a situation where men belittle and dismiss the authority and capability of a woman, emphasizing gender-based power imbalances.

The comment made by the men, "Yes, that boss of yours should come out if she wants to speak to us, and not send us little children," reveals the underlying patriarchal assumptions that women are incapable of holding positions of authority or making decisions on their own. It reflects the power dynamics that undermine women's agency and perpetuate gender inequality.

Furthermore, the phrase "Tell me, my young sister, can it be that you have grown your own testicles?" employs sexist and derogatory language to question the woman's femininity

and ability to assert herself. This insults and devalues her by associating power and competence with masculinity, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms and patriarchal structures.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this passage raises issues of gendered power dynamics within a postcolonial context. It demonstrates the ways in which colonial and patriarchal ideologies intersect, leading to the marginalization and belittlement of women. It also illustrates how gender-based power imbalances are reproduced and perpetuated through language, undermining women's authority and agency.

Postcolonial feminism seeks to challenge these power dynamics by advocating for gender equality, dismantling patriarchal structures, and amplifying women's voices and leadership. It calls for recognizing and challenging the ways in which colonial legacies and patriarchal norms intersect to maintain systems of power that disadvantage women.

2.2. Domestic Exploitation of Women

This Mournable Body reveals the physical torture, domestic violation, and harsh repression that a women experience at domestic level. Women experience a difficult situation from their partners in many ways. As husbands and sexual partners, men characters in the novel harasses and abuses women severely. Women are attacked physically and emotionally at regular basis. In this manner, women are represented as possessed objects, passive decision makers and servants of their partners.

A woman named Mai Taka was represented here as the victim of a brutal attack from her husband. He stopped her from doing what she wanted to do. He wants to control and manipulate her. Tambudzai depicts Mai Taka being harassed excessively by her husband, which was a common occurrence in many African traditions. Beating a woman is considered right and shows pride. The wife herself endures all the abuse and pain routinely. Tambudzai states that the husband had angrily spoken out about how his wife was out of his control. She was going with her employers, and that was not a good decision according to the man. He expresses his anger by saying, "I just want to know, is it good for my wife to think she belongs to another family? A family that is not mine? Even if it is the family of her Europeans?"²⁴

The above extract reflects the intersection of gender, power dynamics, and cultural norms within a postcolonial context. Firstly, the statement alludes to the concept of ownership and control over women within a patriarchal framework. The speaker's concern centres around his wife's sense of belonging to another family, emphasizing the possessive language used ("she belongs to another family"). This highlights the societal expectation for women to be owned or controlled by their male partners, which is a reflection of traditional gender roles and power imbalances.

Secondly, the mention of the "family of her Europeans" suggests a colonial context, where the wife's family is associated with European heritage. This brings forth the postcolonial element, where cultural identity and power dynamics are intertwined. The speaker's unease may stem from the colonial history, where European influences are seen as a threat to traditional norms and values.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this statement raises questions about the perpetuation of gender inequalities and the impact of colonialism on gender dynamics. It

demonstrates how colonial legacies can shape notions of ownership, cultural identity, and the role of women within a society.

Postcolonial feminism seeks to challenge these power structures and cultural norms, aiming for gender equality and the recognition of women's agency within postcolonial contexts. It calls for the deconstruction of patriarchal values and the re-evaluation of cultural practices and identities, while also addressing the historical influences that have shaped gender dynamics in postcolonial societies.

Tambudzai explains what happens in the room next to her in order to reveal how girls were sexually exploited. She states that the man who lived next door always brought her new girls. She stated that the man was oppressive. He even tried to assault her as he did to others, and she was cautious about his situation every time. In short, she says, "You devise ways of avoiding contact, especially with the man in the bedroom next to yours who changes girlfriends more frequently than he does his trousers" 25.

The extract reflects the intersection of gender, power relations, and resistance strategies within a postcolonial context. It highlights the experiences of a woman who is aware of the potential threat posed by a man who has a history of assaulting others, and her cautiousness in navigating this situation.

The passage underscores the prevalence of sexual assault and the pervasive nature of patriarchal violence against women. The phrase "he even tried to assault her as he did to others" indicates a pattern of predatory behaviour, reinforcing the power dynamics that perpetuate gender-based violence. This aligns with postcolonial feminist concerns about the ways in which colonial and patriarchal systems contribute to the marginalization and victimization of women.

The woman's cautiousness and her strategy of avoiding contact reflect her agency and resilience in navigating a hostile environment. By consciously trying to protect herself, she exercises resistance against the potential harm posed by the man in question. This highlights the ways in which women in postcolonial contexts find creative ways to assert their agency and protect themselves in the face of patriarchal violence and oppressive systems.

Additionally, the mention of the man changing girlfriends frequently serves as a commentary on the objectification and disposability of women within a patriarchal society. It suggests a lack of respect for women's autonomy and reinforces harmful gender norms.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this passage calls attention to the need for challenging and dismantling patriarchal power structures, addressing the pervasive nature of gender-based violence, and creating spaces where women can exercise agency and safety. It underscores the importance of empowering women to resist and navigate oppressive environments while working towards larger systemic changes that prioritize gender equality and justice.

Besides, the novel, *This Mournable Body*, has depicted the sexual assault women experience. In this regard, Mako is victims of men's violence sexual assault. She was sexually assaulted, and she described the bitter incident she faced. Tambudzai explains what she heard from Mako, saying, "Did anything happen?" Bertha asks when Mako is calmer. "I told you what happened," Mako said. "He enjoyed himself behind me. And I thought only let him finish. Let it be finished. Let him go. So, I kept quiet" 26 . She was helpless in this situation. The man harassed her sexually, and she was victimized because she was a woman.

The above extract emphasizes the experiences of Mako, who becomes a victim of sexual harassment, and how her voice is silenced or dismissed within the patriarchal system. Firstly, Mako's description of the assault reflects the unequal power dynamics between men and women. The use of the phrase "He enjoyed himself behind me" suggests that the perpetrator derives pleasure and asserts dominance through the act of sexual assault. This underscores the power imbalance and the objectification of women's bodies.

Furthermore, Tambudzai's question,

"Did anything happen?" can be seen as reflecting societal disbelief and a tendency to dismiss or downplay women's experiences of sexual violence. This response echoes the pervasive victim-blaming culture that places the burden on survivors to prove or justify their assault.

Mako's statement, "So, I kept quiet," illustrates the pressures and constraints faced by many survivors of sexual assault. It signifies the sense of helplessness and the internalized expectation to remain silent, often driven by societal norms and fear of stigma or retaliation. This reinforces the power structures that perpetuate the victimization of women and deny them agency.

In short, the extract highlights the ways in which gender inequality operates within postcolonial contexts. It underscores the need to address not only the physical act of sexual assault but also the broader social and cultural factors that contribute to the silencing and victimization of women. Postcolonial feminism aims to challenge and dismantle these power dynamics by advocating for the recognition of women's agency, amplifying their voices, and advocating for systemic changes that address gender-based violence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the portrayal of women in African literature has evolved over time, reflecting both the historical subordination of women by male writers and the subsequent efforts of early African female authors to challenge and subvert fixed gender roles. The works of Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, and Charity Waciuma set a precedent for appropriating and valorizing female experiences, presenting complex and multifaceted female characters. These pioneering female authors paved the way for subsequent generations of African female writers to explore a wide range of themes and issues, including gender inequality.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *This*

Mournable Body, serves as a lens through which to examine the experiences, challenges, and injustices faced by women in African society. Through a postcolonial feminist approach, the research aims to analyze the novel's portrayal of female characters, their agency and representation, and the intersections of gender with other dimensions of identity. By critically examining the text, the study seeks to shed light on how the novel both reflects and influences societal conceptions of gender roles and identities.

The analysis reveals that *This Mournable*

Body addresses various forms of exploitation and suppression of women, particularly in public spaces. The novel depicts instances of public abuse, including street harassment, public humiliation, and victim-blaming. These portrayals highlight the objectification, dehumanization, and violence endured by women within a patriarchal society.

By employing a systematic and comprehensive approach, this research seeks to contribute to current dialogues and efforts to promote gender equality and social justice. By elevating women's voices, challenging patriarchal norms, and exposing the struggles

they face, this study aims to foster a more inclusive and equitable literary landscape and society as a whole.

Through the use of a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework and close textual analysis, this research provides valuable insights into the portrayal of gender inequality in *This Mournable Body*. By uncovering and interrogating the novel's depiction of gender disparities, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics of women's lives and promote transformative change.

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