



The Hyena's Gaze: Analyzing Animal Symbolism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

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Abstract

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* is a profound exploration of post-colonial Zimbabwe, focusing on the personal and societal struggles faced by the protagonist, Tambudzai Sigauke. Throughout the novel, Dangarembga employs various symbols and metaphors to illustrate the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by her characters. One of the most striking symbols in the novel is the hyena, which plays a crucial role in understanding the protagonist's internal conflicts, the societal decay and the overarching themes of survival and moral degradation. This paper explores the role of the hyena in *This Mournable Body* and how it contributes to the narrative's exploration of identity, fear and societal collapse.

Keywords: Hyena, Colonialism, Identity, Fear, Exploitation



Introduction

Tsitsi Dangarembga is a celebrated Zimbabwean author, playwright and filmmaker known for her insightful explorations of postcolonial African identity, gender and societal issues. Born in 1959 in Mutoko, Zimbabwe, Dangarembga gained international acclaim with her debut novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988), which won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and is regarded as a classic of African literature. Her works including the sequels *The Book of Not* (2006) and *This Mournable Body* (2018), delve deeply into the struggles of African women navigating the complexities of personal and national identity amidst colonial and postcolonial legacies. Dangarembga became the first native Zimbabwean and first black woman to receive the German Peace Prize. She had also been the recipient of the PEN Pinter prize in 2021.

Dangarembga's novel *This Mournable Body* (2018) is actually an extension of her previous novels. Anne W. Gulick claims that *This Mournable Body* is one of the "novels we need rather than the novels we want in the twenty-first century" (465). In *This Mournable Body*, Tambu's misfortunes increase when she returns to her homeland, Zimbabwe. Decisions and circumstances become worse for the protagonist when she stays back in her native land. It soon becomes an existence that touches the borderline of poverty. Her mind and body become burdensome because they need proper nourishment. In Zimbabwe, the aftermath of independence was a dangerous combination of colonialism and materialism. The ecotourism job doesn't suit Tambu and her ancestral roots also betray her because they have been corrupted by capitalism.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolism is a unique device that offers ample scope for the writers to deal with their subjects profoundly and liberally. The readers suddenly transported into a new world of



characters and situations from which they derive diverse views that appeal to them emotionally. Thus symbolism elevates a work of art into a new peak of glory and richness. By observing the objects, places and men as symbols, the readers get a clear understanding of the writer and come to know about his views on various issues.

Abrams reveals that “a symbol in the broadest sense, is equivalent to a sign, that is, anything which signifies something else in this sense, all words are symbols” (320). Going through the African fictions, one can easily understand how writers have referred several symbols and images to make their ideas clear and convincing. African writers give permanent importance to symbols taken from their native land and culture. This provides them more opportunities to speak about their own people, their situations and environment. Through symbols readers of the other countries gain insights into the challenges faced by African people, how they survive these situations and what changes are happening there etc.

Methodology

In order to narrate human relationships, African writers have taken many animal images and symbols of nature. This strategy offers the writers plenty of room to discuss about various issues and readers are persuaded by seeing the symbols. For Dangarembga, animal symbols take a very significant part in all her novels. Animal symbols are not treated as mere agents to expose the emotions of the protagonists, but they influence and motivate the characters to involve in some actions.

Discussion

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*, the author used hyena symbolism to reveal the emotional turmoil faced by the protagonist Tambu. In the novel the word 'hyena', mentioned eighteen times. Hyenas are unique and essential elements in the majority of African



ecosystems. In Africa, the spotted hyena is typically depicted as an unusual and ambiguous creature, often seen as cunning, brutal, carrion-eating and perilous. It also represents attributes such as physical strength, excess, unattractiveness, ignorance and even sacredness.

In the European Middle Ages, bestiary writings portrayed the hyena as a representation of the devil's sinister actions. The hyena has historically been viewed negatively in African folklore and children's stories, depicted as a deceitful, unattractive trickster who is both greedy and foolish. Famously insatiable, the hyena has instilled fear across Africa for a long time. As a nighttime predator and scavenger, it has been linked to witchcraft, malevolence and deceit. During the European Middle Ages, bestiary writings also used the hyena as a symbol of the devil's malevolent activities. According to Beidelman “the hyena is active at night, devours carrion including humans, has a wild almost humanoid laughter, stinks, greedy and indiscriminating in its diet, scheming and calculating yet basically clumsy and stupid and hermaphroditic” (524).

The novel deals with the mental attitude of the ambitious and educated war fighters who are oppressed by the patriarchal system in Zimbabwe at the end of the colonial period and at the initial stage of the liberated Zimbabwe. Dangarembga expresses the hope that even though these strong war fighters have met with some disastrous moments, their will to succeed will never cease. Tambu too longs to free herself from her social shackles and aims for a better life. In order to achieve her dreams, she must impress her teachers and bosses who are white. She gets demoralised when she thinks of the plight of her poor mother and one-legged sister.

Tambu's feeling of isolating herself from others reaches the terrible state when her mental and emotional states take the form of fish, ants and hyenas. Gradually Tambudzai has lost her memory and partly she is in an unconscious state. She is admitted into a mental asylum. She



is unable to think, remember and speak of herself, her surroundings and all the people around her. After a longtime, she comes to realisation. She begins to know where she is and the people who regularly visit her are her known persons; Nyasha, Aunt Lucia and Christine.

Her body has reached a state of inward obliviousness losing her consciousness, identity and reality. Her real situation has become so painful and indigestible that she tries to forget it. Thus, she gradually becomes a victim of insanity and suffers the loss of consciousness. This state of mind frees her brooding over hopeless condition inflicted by patriarchal and colonial systems. In the novel, she narrates how she feels about her mental agony that ends with its surrendering of the body. Through second person narration Tambudzai invites the oppressors into a real world that is filled with physical and emotional torture, loss and mental disorder.

Tambu sees animals like hyena that laugh at her and it is ready to prey on her. Tambu narrates, “The hyena laughs at you as you enter the gate. It has slunk once more as close to you as your skin, ready to drag away the last scraps of certainty you have preserved” (*TMB* 204). She often imagines hyena and other animals sitting near to her and laughing at her miserable state of life. These animals are ready to prey on her, kill her and feed on her body.

Hyenas are known for their agility, strength and greediness. They often employ various strategies to snatch food from other animals. They are very obstinate and selfish. They can survive any situation and adaptable to new environment. Being extraordinary aggressive, people are very much frightened to face such a mammal. It hunts at night and eats mostly carcass. Hence Africans see it as an icon of demonism, witchcraft and evil. The smile of a hyena is identified with the sneer of the demon and all its activities resemble the diabolic deeds of the devil. Dunham reports “learning to ride the hyena is one of a witch’s most difficult tasks” (593).



African literature is replete with the images of hyenas. According to the article “Hyena Symbolism and Meaning?” hyenas “are an important part of Africa’s wildlife ecosystem, and they play important roles in our natural environment” (Kylon). They are symbols of bad Omen, heinous deeds, maladministration, injustice and horrible death. Dangarembga makes use of the hyena’s images to expose hatred, foul thoughts selfishness of her characters.

The image of hyena continues to trouble Tambu for a long time. Hyena often appears in her dreams and takes her to a world of hallucination. Keeping her in this state hyena laughs at her like a terrible beast and attempts to pounce on her: This suggests the mental agony that Tambudzai undergoes. The narrator says, “The hyena is at the bottom of the purple pond of your fear, laughing ... The purple hyena opens its jaws and all sensation vanishes” (*TMB* 104).

Tambu’s reflection on her future course of action is suddenly disturbed by a sharp fearful wail of hyenas. There is a general belief in some parts of Africa that witches frighten people by appearing along with hyenas. The hyenas appeared before Tambu and wailed for two seconds. In that brief moment, Tambu felt her whole-body trembling. She also experienced severe pain on her hands and legs as if someone was prickling her with some sharp material like a spike. She imagined witches following the hyenas with frightening look and devilish smile. The images lingered in her mind for long duration.

In African literature, a unique link is established between the hyena and the witch. Oral traditions suggest that witches ride bare on the hyena, positioned backward at night to carry out certain witchcraft activities and that hyenas reside in the witches’ home at the rear, where it is shrouded in darkness. In the African mythology, hyena is often associated with witches who bring doom and misfortune to people. At the psychiatric ward of the hospital, Tambudzai feels that she is sitting at the back of a hyena. After sometime it deliberately drops her on the floor.



Even though witchcraft increases her insanity by appearing before her like hyena, it is not the real reason for the pathetic and miserable condition of Tambudzai. One cannot deny the fact that the main causes of her destruction and fall are the forces of patriarchy and the legacies of colonialism.

The expression, Tambu ‘Sitting at the back of a hyena’ in reference to Tambu could symbolize her hesitant involvement in unethical decisions to survive. This phrase reflects that Tambu has lost control over her situation; she is being moved along by uncontrollable forces. The hyena, which embodies a predatory or corrupt system, propels forward, leaving Tambu merely a passive observer in her own existence.

Additionally, the hyena may represent the harsh truths of postcolonial Zimbabwe, where survival often necessitates painful sacrifices. Tambu, who was once driven and hopeful, now finds herself ensnared in a system that dehumanizes and takes advantage of her. She is compelled to navigate a reality where her self-respect and principles are continuously compromised, making her experience of riding on the ‘back of a hyena’ a fitting metaphor for enduring in a merciless society.

Tambu’s life is replete with humiliation, isolation and insecurity. After her studies, she leaves her village in search of job in the big city. The job she secures fails to provide her adequate money to care for her family. She undergoes terrible and bitter experiences in the office. Being black, Tambu is slighted by her co-workers who look down on her with contempt. All these pathetic situations affect her mind, and she suffers a mental break down.

During her stay in the psychiatry ward, she feels extremely sorry for her inability to support her family. She finds herself mentally disturbed and stops talking with others. Tambu imagines herself as a hyena and begins to hate herself. Tambu narrates, “They do not know what



it is to struggle with the prospect that the hyena is you, nor how this combat marshals in the task of finishing the brutish animal off, while ensuring you remain alive yourself” (*TMB* 149).

The statement ‘The hyena is you’ serves as a profound recognition of self, societal exclusion, and the instinct to endure. It compels Tambudzai and the reader to face the truths of financial struggle, moral decline and the delicate balance between honor and hopelessness in a postcolonial Zimbabwean setting. Hyenas are typically viewed as scavengers, opportunistic creatures and societal outcasts, eking out an existence on the outskirts of civilization. This phrase implies that she perceives herself in the hyena, an animal compelled to survive amidst a harsh environment. Although she has attempted to separate herself from pain, failure and the challenges faced by those around her, this moment of insight confronts her with the reality that she too is woven into that grim tapestry.

The hyena image continues to haunt her during her stay in sanatorium as she faces with a mental breakdown. During these days she lives in a world of total forgetfulness unable to recognise the place where she lives and the people who come to meet her daily. Still the hyena comes to her dreams daily and reminds her of her terrible condition. When she recovers and realises the importance of unifying her roots and family, these delusional thoughts and hallucinations disappear from her.

Findings

Thus, the novel *This Mournable Body* proves the ability of Dangarembga in handling animal images entirely to reveal the inner feelings of Tambu. The hyena plays a crucial role in the narrative, serving as a powerful symbol of the protagonist’s internal conflict, societal decay and the harsh realities of survival. Only because of hyena’s imagery Tambu can free herself from the impact of colonization and return back to her roots. It is through the symbolism of the hyena



that Tambu is able to liberate herself from the effects of colonization and reconnect with her heritage.

Conclusion

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*, the hyena acts as a symbolic mentor that aids Tambu in reestablishing her connection to her origins while confronting her feelings of displacement and challenges. When Tambu comes across the hyena, it compels her to think deeply about her history and sense of identity, guiding her toward greater self-awareness. This reflection parallels her personal and financial difficulties, encouraging her to embrace her cultural heritage and recognize her limitations. Ultimately, it leads her to head back home, marking her path towards healing and a reunion with her roots.



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