

IDENTITY THROUGH ANIMALITY: AN ANIMAL STUDIES APPROACH TO TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *THIS MOURNABLE BODY*

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Abstract:

This study examines the representation and function of animals in Tsitsi Dangarembga's This Mournable Body through the lens of Animal Studies, foregrounding the ways in which human-animal relationships intersect with questions of identity, power and ecological precarity. The novel employs animal imagery, metaphors and encounters not merely as symbolic devices but as critical sites where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are destabilized. Tambudzai's psychological fragmentation and socio-economic struggles are frequently mirrored through animalistic representations, suggesting a collapse of hierarchical distinctions that traditionally privilege human subjectivity. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from posthumanism and eco-criticism, the paper argues that Dangarembga complicates anthropocentric assumptions by exposing how systems of colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy reduce both humans and animals to commodified bodies.

Key-words: *Animal study, Coexistence, Identity, Ecology, Metaphor*

Introduction

The representation of animals in literature has long been dominated by anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize human experiences and values. Animals were relegated to metaphors and narrative accessories, neglecting their inherent rights and treating them primarily as reflections of human qualities. Anthropocentric perspectives, characterized by a focus on human experiences and values, have significantly influenced the portrayal of animals in literature. According to Woodward, "The way that an animal is represented and constructed discursively has ... an interrelationship with the way that culture responds to the real animal". In literary studies, animals emerged as metaphors and were mere products of the human imagination. Their inherent rights were neglected, reducing them to representations of different facets of the human condition.

In literary traditions across periods, animals are frequently mobilized as symbolic devices rather than recognized as autonomous beings. For instance, in William Blake's "The Tyger", the animal becomes a metaphysical construct embodying divine creation and destructive energy, rather than a living creature with its own ecological presence. Similarly, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, animals are overtly allegorical, functioning as political stand-ins that critique totalitarian regimes, thereby subordinating their animality to human socio-political commentary.

Animal Studies in African literature

Animal Studies in African literature examines how animals are represented not merely as symbolic figures but as participants in complex cultural, ecological and ethical systems. In many African oral traditions and written texts, animals often occupy a dual role: they function as allegorical figures in folktales while also embodying indigenous knowledge systems that recognize interdependence between human and nonhuman life. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o incorporate animals within proverbs, myths and everyday imagery, where they reflect communal values, moral instruction and environmental consciousness. Unlike Western anthropocentric traditions that frequently reduce animals to passive metaphors, African literary texts often position animals within a relational ontology, emphasizing coexistence, spirituality and ecological balance.

In works like *This Mournable Body* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, animals are frequently used to expose systems of power, violence and marginalization. Animal imagery—ranging from insects to predators—reflects the dehumanization experienced by individuals under oppressive socio-economic conditions. Mr. Mostafa says that, "in the twentieth century, the literal and figurative animals become particularly

important in gender discourse in women's literature". The blurring of boundaries between human and animal existence reveals how both are subjected to exploitation, commodification and control, particularly within postcolonial contexts shaped by capitalism and patriarchy.

Tsitsi Dangarembga

Tsitsi Dangarembga (born 4th Feb. 1959) is a prominent Zimbabwean novelist, playwright and filmmaker. Her first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), marked a historic milestone as the first book published in English by a Black Zimbabwean woman and in 2018 it was recognized by the BBC as one of the 100 most influential books in shaping global thought. Over the years, she has received several prestigious accolades, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the PEN Pinter Prize. Her later work, *This Mournable Body* (2020 edition), was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, further cementing her international reputation.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *This Mournable Body* (2018) follows her earlier works *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006), together forming a powerful literary trilogy that establishes her as one of Zimbabwe's most significant female voices. Entering a literary space long dominated by men, Dangarembga challenges entrenched patriarchal norms and exposes the contradictions and injustices embedded in postcolonial Zimbabwean society. Alongside writers like Yvonne Vera, she contributes to a women's writing tradition that brings to light marginalized experiences previously overlooked in male-centered narratives. Her works consistently interrogate sociocultural inequalities and political dysfunctions, foregrounding the struggles of those pushed to the margins.

At the centre of *This Mournable Body* is Tambudzai Sigauke, a familiar protagonist whose earlier resilience in *Nervous Conditions* contrasts sharply with her present condition. Set against the backdrop of postcolonial Zimbabwe, the novel traces Tambu's descent into what can be understood as a form of 'bare life', marked by economic hardship, social exclusion and psychological strain. Living in a dilapidated hostel in Harare after leaving an unfulfilling job, she embodies the plight of educated yet unemployed individuals in a collapsing economy. Even her later employment as a teacher does little to alleviate her poverty.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*, the final installment in her celebrated trilogy, provides fertile ground for such analysis. Through its fragmented narrative, second-person narration and focus on the disintegrating psyche of Tambudzai Sigauke, the novel repeatedly invokes animal imagery, metaphors of bodily degradation and ecological anxieties that destabilize the boundary between human and animal existence. Rather than presenting animals as mere background or symbolic ornamentation, Dangarembga integrates animality into the very fabric of Tambu's identity, revealing how colonial modernity, economic precarity and social alienation reduce the human subject to a state of abjection often associated with the animal.

Role of Animals

In *This Mournable Body*, animals play a subtle yet significant role, not as independent characters but as expressive elements that deepen the novel's psychological and social concerns. Through recurring animal imagery, Dangarembga reflects Tambudzai's inner turmoil and fractured sense of self. The distorted fish image, for instance, mirrors her alienation and disconnection from her own identity, while snake imagery evokes anxiety, fear and suppressed trauma. At the same time, animals embedded in the urban landscape, reinforce the harsh realities of survival in a collapsing socio-economic environment, suggesting a world where both human and nonhuman life are shaped by precarity and struggle.

Beyond psychological reflection, animals in the novel also function as metaphors that expose broader themes of dehumanization and social marginalization. Through these representations, Tsitsi Dangarembga blurs the boundaries between human and animal, challenging the idea of human superiority and revealing how systemic forces—such as patriarchy, colonial legacy and economic collapse—reduce individuals to mere bodies struggling for survival. Thus, animals in *This Mournable Body* are integral to its critique of power and identity, serving as a lens through which the interconnectedness of vulnerability across species is made visible.

Animal imagery

In *This Mournable Body*, the opening passage vividly illustrates how Animal Studies can be applied to understand the intersection of psychological fragmentation and animal imagery. The recurring image of the fish in the mirror is not a literal presence but a distorted projection of Tambudzai's self. Dangarembga explains, "There is a fish in the mirror ... There, the fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping, cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales" (Dangarembga 1). The fish, with its 'gaping mouth' and 'purplish eye sockets,' reflects a sense of alienation, decay and loss of identity.

From an Animal Studies perspective, this moment signals a collapse of the boundary between human and nonhuman, where Tambu perceives herself through an animalized lens. The transformation of the fish into a hippopotamus-like figure further intensifies this distortion, suggesting heaviness, grotesqueness and a loss of control over one's body. Rather than granting the animal an independent existence, the narrative uses it as a psychological mirror, revealing how Tambu internalizes societal pressures, failure and shame. At the same time, this passage demonstrates how animal imagery contributes to themes of dehumanization and precarity. Tambu's inability to 'look at yourself' indicates a fractured subjectivity, where her human identity is destabilized and replaced by animalistic representations.

Tambudzai's act of pausing to avoid crushing the beetle suggests a moment of ethical hesitation, where the life of a small creature is briefly acknowledged. Dangarembga narrates, "You stop by the shrub in midstride, to avoid squashing a daring lucky beetle" (4). However, this moment is immediately complicated by her recollection of childhood cruelty—blowing beetles out of their pits and orchestrating violent encounters between ants and insects. These memories reveal how human beings often assert dominance over animals, treating them as objects of entertainment or control. From an Animal Studies perspective, this reflects an anthropocentric mindset in which animal life is rendered expendable, its suffering normalized within everyday practices.

The recurring image of ants in the novel is central to an Animal Studies reading, particularly in understanding the collapse of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Initially, the ants appear in a realistic setting—swarming around vomit on the pavement—suggesting decay, neglect and the material realities of urban poverty. However, their movement quickly transcends mere environmental presence as they begin to crawl over Tambudzai's body. Dangarembga explores as "the ants crawling over you" (82). This shift marks a transition from external observation to embodied experience, where the ants become inseparable from Tambu's physical and psychological state. This moment destabilizes human superiority, as the protagonist is no longer distinct from the swarm but becomes part of the same vulnerable, exposed ecosystem.

As the passage progresses, the ants take on a more intense and disturbing dimension, reflecting Tambu's fragmentation and inner turmoil. Their relentless crawling—"into you," "over your neck," and across her body—suggests an invasion of selfhood, where bodily autonomy is threatened. The exaggeration of ants growing 'as big as wasps' indicates a hallucinatory or psychological projection, transforming them into manifestations of anxiety, guilt and loss of control. In this sense, the ants are not passive creatures but active agents within Tambu's consciousness, embodying her fear of disintegration and her precarious grip on reality. This reveals how nonhuman life is used not merely symbolically but as a medium through which human vulnerability and instability are articulated.

By the end, when Tambu believes she has 'conquered the ants,' the tension remains, indicating only a temporary reprieve. Through this unsettling entanglement, Dangarembga challenges anthropocentric assumptions and presents a world where human identity is porous, unstable and deeply intertwined with the nonhuman realm.

Animals - co-inhabitants of a 'meshed ecosystem'

Tambu's description of Zimbabwe's landscape as "The rumble of a lion's purr, the arc of the tusk of an elephant bull, the calculated flick of a predator bird's wing rekindle awe at the fact that you are part of such existence" (222). These moments foreground the aesthetic and affective power of the nonhuman world, suggesting that animals and nature possess intrinsic value beyond human utility.

Through such description, Tsitsi Dangarembga presents animals not merely as metaphors but as co-inhabitants of a 'meshed ecosystem,' where awe arises from interdependence rather than domination. Thus, the novel reimagines human-animal relations by affirming that identity, survival and meaning are shaped through an intimate connection with the natural world.

The recurring image of snakes within the protagonist's body transforms the internal, emotional experience into something visceral and animalistic. Dangarembga illustrates, "Blood is on your knees. Standing, you reach for a paper napkin and wipe it off, feeling as though the snakes of your womb have opened their jaws and everything is plummeting out of you to the ground." (74). The womb, typically a symbol of creation and fertility, is here invaded and controlled by serpentine forces. These snakes "open their jaws" at the mention of war, linking political violence to bodily disintegration. Animal imagery thus becomes a way to articulate how large-scale historical trauma penetrates the most intimate spaces of the female body. The dissolution of the womb into water suggests not only vulnerability but also the loss of agency, as the body becomes subject to uncontrollable, animal-like forces.

At the same time, the snake imagery reflects inherited cultural memory. The reference to the grandmother's stories situates these animals within oral tradition and indigenous knowledge systems. In many African cosmologies, snakes can symbolize both danger and transformation. Here, however, their presence is unsettling and invasive, indicating how traditional symbols are reconfigured under the pressures of modern trauma.

Portrayal of the hyena

In *This Mournable Body*, the portrayal of the hyena becomes a powerful symbolic figure through which animal studies can explore the blurred boundary between the human and the non-human. Rather than appearing as a literal animal in the external environment, the hyena emerges from Tambudzai's psyche, indicating how animality is internalized and intertwined with human consciousness.

Dangarembga depicts, "The hyena laugh-howls at your destruction. It screams like a demented spirit and the floor dissolves beneath you" (102). The repeated 'hyena laughter' is especially significant. In many African cultural contexts, the hyena is associated with cunning, decay and moral ambiguity. Dangarembga draws on these connotations to externalize Tambu's inner turmoil, presenting the hyena as a manifestation of psychological fragmentation and self-alienation. The animal is not merely symbolic but embodies a culturally loaded presence that complicates human identity. The hyena's role as both predator and voice of authority further complicates the human-animal divide. It questions Tambu, commands her and even seems to control her bodily and mental state. This inversion of power suggests that the human subject is vulnerable to forces that are coded as animalistic, undermining anthropocentric assumptions of dominance.

Moreover, the act of being 'swallowed' by the hyena evokes a dissolution of boundaries between bodies. Tambu's engulfment signifies not just fear but a merging with the non-human, where identity becomes fluid and unstable. The passage also connects animality with illness and psychological breakdown. The hyena appears during Tambu's moments of disorientation, suggesting that what is labeled as 'madness' may involve a return of suppressed animal instincts or fears. This aligns with animal studies' interest in how Western rationality marginalizes both animals and non-normative human states.

Importantly, Tambu's realization that "the hyena is you" marks the culmination of this animal-human entanglement (151). Animal studies often challenges the notion that animality is external to the human; here, the hyena is internal, inseparable and constitutive of Tambu's identity. This suggests that the human self is always already animal, even if it resists that recognition.

Theme of poaching and the commodification

Across the novel, Animal Studies can be explored through the theme of poaching and the commodification of wildlife, which reflects the broader entanglement of ecology, capitalism and postcolonial identity. Africa, as the passage suggests, is home to an extraordinary diversity of animal life, ranging from insects to large mammals, many of which are endemic to the continent. However,

the novel exposes how this rich biodiversity is increasingly threatened by practices such as poaching, driven by both local and global economic demands.

The quoted tourism slogan “Eat only what you dare to pick, kill or catch ... The ultimate eco—in African.” You know there is no such language as African, but you kept your expression constant as you read and continue to do so now. (193)—reveals how animals are transformed into consumable experiences, marketed under the guise of ‘eco-tourism.’ This language masks the reality of killing animals for profit and entertainment, reducing them to commodities within a global capitalist framework.

Through Tambudzai’s critical observation of such discourse, Tsitsi Dangarembga highlights the ideological distortions embedded in these practices. The ironic phrase ‘eco—in African’ and the fabricated notion of a singular ‘African’ identity expose how Western-driven tourism industries simplify and exploit the continent for commercial gain. From an Animal Studies perspective, this moment underscores how animals are denied agency and instead become objects within systems of economic exploitation, mirroring the dehumanization experienced by Tambu herself. Thus, the issue of poaching in the novel is not merely about environmental destruction but also about the intersection of violence, representation and power, where both human and nonhuman lives are subjected to commodification and control in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study establishes that animal studies provides a powerful framework for reinterpreting the narrative strategies of *This Mournable Body*. By moving beyond traditional anthropocentric readings, it becomes evident that animals in the novel are integral to its exploration of identity, embodiment and survival. Dangarembga reconfigures the human not as a superior, autonomous entity but as one deeply embedded within a network of ecological and existential relationships. This shift aligns with posthumanist thought, emphasizing interdependence and the shared condition of vulnerability across species.

The analysis also concludes that the novel critiques broader socio-political structures through its depiction of human–animal entanglements.

Colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy emerge as forces that simultaneously devalue human and nonhuman life, reducing both to objects of control and consumption. By paralleling Tambu’s struggles with the treatment of animals, Dangarembga exposes the inequality embedded within these systems. Consequently, animal imagery becomes a means of resistance, challenging dominant ideologies and inviting readers to reconsider ethical relationships with both human and nonhuman others.

Finally, the paper suggests that *This Mournable Body* contributes significantly to contemporary animal studies by proposing an ethics of coexistence grounded in shared precarity and embodiment. Rather than offering a simplistic moral resolution, the novel presents a complex vision in which compassion, violence and survival coexist uneasily. H. D. Thoreau expressed “It’s not what you look at that matters, It’s what you see”. Through its rich and unsettling animal imagery, the text ultimately calls for a reimagining of human identity—one that acknowledges its entanglement with the nonhuman world and opens up possibilities for more inclusive and empathetic ways of being.

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