

### **This Mournable Body.**

Tsitsi Dangarembga.

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*This Mournable Body* (2018), the latest novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga, closes her trilogy preceded by *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006). The trilogy deals with the life of Tambudzai, who grows up amidst the complexities of race, gender and class that mark the colonial and postcolonial reality of Zimbabwe.

In *This Mournable Body*, Tambudzai is now a middle-aged woman, single and unemployed, who is confronted by the scarce opportunities to succeed in an increasingly adverse labour market. The means to survive and sustain her life with a certain degree of dignity are not enough, and so Tambudzai is forced to navigate this precarity using different strategies that are, nevertheless, disempowering.

At the beginning of the novel she is forced to leave the hostel in which she has been living due to pressure from the matron because of her age and financial situation. After this, she moves to a shared house but, still unemployed, she finds herself surviving only thanks to the vegetables that she manages to take from the landlady's garden. Things are so bad for her that, eventually, she feels compelled to accept a job for which she is not fully qualified and in which she is not interested at all: she becomes a Biology teacher at a secondary school. Through this process, the reader witnesses the deteriorating mental and physical health of Tambudzai as a result of her struggle to survive, and of the frustration that arises in the face of the impossibility of being a successful woman in her country. The precarity that the protagonist experiences is not only objective, in the sense that she does not have enough income to support herself, but it is also a mental and social space in which she is positioned by a system in which her life is disposable, and in which all the sacrifices she made and efforts that she went to to obtain a university degree do

not matter, because that is just not enough. She is just not enough.

The violence that leads to her being rendered disposable by society has an impact on her experience as a woman, and so she becomes indifferent to all other manifestations of violence that happen around her (sexual and gender based violence towards her housemates, physical and emotional violence towards her landlady, etc.). She herself becomes the perpetrator of violence against one of her students, which causes her to have a mental breakdown and stay in a psychiatric institution for a while.

During her psychological breakdown, the reader also sees another dimension of Tambudzai's precarious existence: the lack of a community that really understands her and on which she can rely. Some of her relatives visit her, and her cousin Nyasha invites her to stay in her house for a recovery period. Still, all of these interactions are meaningless to Tambudzai, who feels misunderstood and absent. Later in the book, when she has another job, her relation to her colleagues is marked by competition and rivalry. Tambudzai is mostly alone with her doubts, shame, and frustration, revealing in this way the isolated condition of her precarious life.

After recovering from the mental breakdown, things seem to be changing for her. She finds a new job in a travel agency and, although she is doing well in terms of income, she is still restless in her efforts to prove to her boss the value of her work and her potential to be successful. Her boss, on the other hand, constantly reminds her that she needs to add value to the business because, once again, her efforts are apparently not enough: it is not enough to be productive, responsible or efficient because, more than that, she needs to be 'employable': to show that she has the proper attitude towards her job, that she is happy working there and, more importantly, that she is able to use her own creativity in service of the company.

The deep association between herself and her job becomes more evident when, in an effort to expand the business, her boss asks her to be in charge of a project aimed at providing a "true, real African experience" to European tourists. Tambudzai is now called the Queen of the Village, as her main responsibility is to coordinate this new branch of the business and bring tourist to her own village. The success that she has been waiting for seems so close now that she ("you", as the book is written in the second voice) "*surrender to this new task, as though the job was the God whom you met for the first time decades before when you arrived at your uncle's Methodist mission*" (emphasis in original). This god also asks her for her entire soul but, unlike the god from the Methodist

mission, this one is crueller and only offers the vague promise of success if, and only if, the market allows it.

*This Mournable Body* is a relevant and painful testimony of the precarity that marks contemporary neoliberal existences, in a context in which privileges like higher education and work experience are not fulfilling the promises of social mobility that they once offered. It is not a coincidence that the book is called *This Mournable Body*, entering into conversation with authors like Teju Cole and Judith Butler who, from different fields and disciplines, have reflected on the vulnerability of bodies that, according to society, do not deserve to be taken care of, sustained, or even mourned.

Even though this is a powerful book that echoes many themes characteristic of our times, the fact that it is the final part of a trilogy makes it difficult to understand this Tambudzai without comparing her with the Tambudzai that we met in *Nervous Conditions*. I missed that Tambudzai, not only because she is now a disappointed and frustrated adult woman, but mostly because in this book the character has lost one of her most powerful characteristics: she is not a reflective human being anymore. If the Tambudzai of the first book was a very clever girl, able to critically reflect on her context and come to radical understandings of sexism and colonialism, the Tambudzai of *This Mournable Body* is actually running away from any process of reflection and of healing, trying to silence her inner voice, and to entertain herself with the fantasy of success and social mobility. Maybe being precarious also means losing our own sense of humanity, and our own ability to be critical of our world.

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