

Tsitsi Dangarembga *Black and Female*

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Review of Dangarembga, T. (2022). *Black and Female*. London: Faber, 158 pp.

After the publication of her latest novel, *This Mournable Body* (2018), which completed her trilogy, which began with her magnum opus *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and was followed by *The Book of Not* (2006), in August 2022, Zimbabwean novelist and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga published *Black and Female*. This essay collection is a philosophical, historical, political, and intimate testament in which the author explores significant moments of her personal life and the most critical stages of Zimbabwe's history with the aim of 'remembering' those people whose identities and experiences have been fractured by the intersections of history, race, gender, and class. Significantly, Dangarembga sheds light on the legacy of imperialism in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the implications of being 'black' and 'female' in Africa, and episodes of racial and gender discrimination and psychological abuse she experienced directly in her home country and in England. These insights allow readers to understand the political issues she describes poignantly in her trilogy and capture the similarities between her style and that of Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, whose works *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) have inspired Dangarembga since the writing of her debut novel, *Nervous Conditions*.

Dangarembga dedicates *Black and Female* to her mother, Susan Ntombizethu Dangarembga; her sister, Rudo Dangarembga; and



Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Submitted 2023-09-07

Published 2023-12-18

Open access

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Citation Villanova, I. (2023). Review of *Black and Female*, by Dangarembga, T. *Il Tolomeo*, 25, 335-340.

Sheri and Ines, “whose journeys demanded much that is unspeakable” (n.p.). Her story collection consists of three main chapters, preceded by an introduction in which she introduces herself. Dangarembga was born in 1959 in Mutoko, Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe – a former British colony that she describes as

a vicious society that constructed me as essentially lacking full humanity, needing but never able, as a result of being black-bodied, to attain the status of complete human. (14)

The author explores Zimbabwe’s wounds and her own by analysing the milestone political events that have marked her home country’s history from colonial times to the present. The injustices she endured have significantly impacted her life, privately and publicly, physically and psychologically, rationally and emotionally, and urged her to write the present collection of essays.

In the first chapter, “Writing While Black and Female”, Dangarembga discusses her status as black and female and the role that writing plays in her life. She emphasises how the first wound for all people labelled as ‘black’ is “the wounding empire” (19) – i.e. “a guillotine” (29). For her, writing back against the empire is a double-edged sword: it opens wounds but also heals them. During this process, “the trauma subsides with each set of words, sentences, paragraphs and pages” (22-3). Writing has shaped her path as a woman, writer, and intellectual; however, it was not always easy. Dangarembga received several rejections, especially after the submission of her first two plays, *The Lost of the Soil* (1983) and *She No Longer Weeps* (1987), and her debut novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988), so much so that she was on the verge of abandoning her writing career permanently. In 2002, she founded the International Images Film Festival for Women, and more than a decade later, she completed the last novel of her trilogy, *This Mournable Body*, published by Graywolf Press in 2018 and by Faber in 2020.

Some parallels between Dangarembga’s prose writing and Fanon’s can be drawn from the first chapter of *Black and Female*. While Fanon describes Black subjects as “sealed” in their blackness (1986, 11), Dangarembga refers to blackness as what “swallowed [her] existence each night” (35), therefore, “a condition imposed on [her], rather than being an experienced identity” (41). Fanon and Dangarembga conceive “the idea of blackness” as a cage and analyse the different implications of the terms ‘black’ and ‘blackness’, which are related not only to skin colour, but above all, to the inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination to which Black people are continually exposed.

A significant aspect that distinguishes Dangarembga from Fanon is the issue of gender. As scholars Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford argue, Black women who live in or come from former

colonies are “doubly colonised” (1986) by colonialist and patriarchal realities and representations simultaneously. In her essay, Dangarembga discusses the explosive combination of sexism and racism and the way they have made Black women

product[s] of an apparently benign imperial patriarchy that educated [them], but modelled them in its desired mode of ‘little more than imperial male subject maintainers’. (50)

In this first chapter, Dangarembga confesses that feminism “gave [her] theory to practice” (54); that is, feminist theory taught her how

[She] was constructed as a female person whose content and possibility was predetermined, and how [her] refusal to occupy that space was a form of rebellion, albeit a powerless one that simply confirmed the lack that society inscribed into [her]. (51)

Many African-American and Caribbean feminist writers have inspired Dangarembga’s work, including Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Paule Marshall (56). Their determination and feminist ideas gave Dangarembga the strength to cope with the challenges she faced, especially during the years following Zimbabwe’s independence (56). However, the author confesses that she found “the fire for [her] writing” (52) in intersectionality – a theoretical concept introduced in 1989 by the American scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who describes how several axes of identity constitute the multiple and intersected forms of discrimination to which women are exposed and simultaneously capture their efforts to cope with these injustices to which they are subject. Significantly, in her female trilogy, Dangarembga stresses the interconnectedness between race and gender and foregrounds women characters’ struggles to achieve independence and emancipation in colonial patriarchal Southern Rhodesia alongside the psychological costs these struggles entail.

In the second chapter of her collection, entitled “Black Female and the Superwoman Black Feminist”, Dangarembga explains how she needed a superwoman to overcome her constant fear, sense of inadequacy, and anxiety. The many ‘nots’ that characterise her life can be compared to the withdrawals and unfulfilled expectations of her trilogy’s titular heroine, Tambudzai (Tambu) Sigauke, also encapsulated in the title of the novel *The Book of Not*. The injustices Dangarembga endured in her life destabilised her and made her nervous, exactly like Nyasha – another central character in the trilogy – who, due to the constraints imposed by society, started struggling with nerves, anorexia, and bulimia. It is no accident that the title of Dangarembga’s first novel, *Nervous Conditions*, is taken from Jean-Paul Sartre’s

preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, describing the condition of colonised subjects and their alienation following the process of cultural assimilation.

During colonialism, Black African women were forced to cope with multiple forms of oppression, even those with a privileged position, like Dangarembga's mother - the first black woman in Southern Rhodesia to obtain a bachelor's degree. First educated at Fort Hare University in South Africa and King's College London, she later earned a master's degree at University College London (73-4). Once back in her home country, in 1965, she started teaching and became an inspiring role model for several young Rhodesian women. However, her life experience was limited by the constraints imposed by a colonial patriarchal society that relegated women to marginalised positions (74).

The political events that followed Zimbabwe's independence included an armed struggle that lasted from 1966 to 1979 and ended with the formation of the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the introduction of discriminatory laws against women. Women had to demonstrate they were "wife material" (98) and usually occupied subordinate positions in private and public sectors. As Dangarembga explains, because of this misogynistic system, being a feminist in her home country could lead to negative repercussions:

To be a feminist while black and female in Zimbabwe is to live at the epicentre of structural racism and a brutal militarised patriarchy that has co-opted significant state institutions either in part or in their entirety. (96)

Even strong, emancipated women who believe in feminist values and hold successful positions prefer not to flaunt their achievements and conform to the subordinate roles that society expects of them. Accordingly, as Dangarembga argues, their silence makes them even more invisible (100).

The third and final chapter of *Black and Female*, "Decolonisation as a Revolutionary Imagining", deals with the cognitive and affective-subjective forms of colonial violence. Dangarembga discusses the sense of alienation she experienced in Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom, which she also mentions in Chapter 1. At the age of two, indeed, she moved to England with her family, and there, because of her 'blackness', she "could not conceive of [herself] as a person" (117) but started perceiving herself as "a shadow" (116). Although Nyasha's alienation in England was briefly mentioned in *Nervous Conditions*, in this chapter, Dangarembga focuses on the feelings she experienced abroad and back in Zimbabwe. Her trauma was

so intense and so all-consuming that [she] could not identify with it, resulting in further distancing from [herself] so that identification with [herself] became impossible. (115-16)

The educational system in her home country was segregated to comply with the ideals of the civilising mission. Although several funds were allocated to African student bursaries, once at school, Black students were often discriminated against by their white teachers, peers, and the institution itself. In the trilogy's second novel, *The Book of Not*, Dangarembga foregrounds the traumatising and epistemicidal colonial education in her country, and through the character of Tambu, focuses on Black Africans' experiences of settler racism and class alienation, capturing their exhausting efforts to reclaim their dignity.

Quoting Fanon once again, Dangarembga points out how Zimbabweans were "melanated people" or "not-I" (143), condemned to live "a life that was wretched" (144) if they did not comply with the rules imposed by the colonial system. These sentiments are evident in the novel that concludes the author's trilogy, *This Mournable Body*, which tackles the transition from colonialism to globalisation and captures an adult Tambu, who struggles to find a job in Harare and continues to deal with her sense of alienation and loss of identity, emphasised by the use of second-person narrative. Through her fiction, Dangarembga shows how racial and gender disparities still characterise Zimbabwe, and the social and psychological costs they entail are visible in the feelings of failure and emptiness embodied by Tambu.

To conclude, *Black and Female* is a political, historical, and intimate collection - part manifesto and part analysis - which helps readers understand several issues the author analyses in her trilogy. The global society that colonisation has constructed has undermined Black people's religion, language, cultural and legal systems, and sadly, patriarchal and anti-black ideology is still embedded in twenty-first-century relations. Dangarembga argues that "our cognitive-affective systems are the only true site of decolonisation", which requires from us "a new revolution of the imaginary and its products" (151). As the systems of the colonial enterprise have suppressed and devalued the discursive products of black imagination and endeavour and continue to do so today, only by fighting for equality and initiating action will it be possible to bring about changes to the present situation.

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