

Womb City

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Womb City is a work of speculative fiction by the Motswana author Tlotlo Tsamaase, concerned with themes of gender, technology and ancestral knowledge. The novel is an example of Africanfuturism, a speculative form of writing with links to science fiction that is rooted in, and draws inspiration from, African cultures (Preite and Xausa).

The speculative mode has long been employed by writers from minoritised communities to challenge the hegemony of hierarchies of knowledge and culture embedded in European colonialism, and *Womb City* forms an important part of that tradition. The text highlights how colonial ways of organizing society persist in the present, particularly in relation to gender, and it explores the potential for both reproductive technologies and subjugated forms of knowledge (Quijano) to bring about gender liberation.

The novel is set in the capital of Botswana, Gaborone, in a dystopian future where both immortality and ectogenesis are a reality. Those with the cash can live forever via a process called 'body-hopping', which involves transplanting one's consciousness into a series of new bodies. Where the bodies come from, however, remains a murky question. The reincarnated residents of Womb City are kept safe by advanced AI technologies that hunt out criminals and, if that fails, by a mysterious phenomenon called the Murder Trials, which "especially scrutinize microchipped people, which means a high majority of women, since female bodies are more microchipped than male" (5). What is involved in the Murder Trials, and the reasons why they target women more than men, remain obscure, but it is known that they are based near a site of cultural and archaeological importance: Matsieng.

The novel's protagonist, Nelah, is a young, successful architect who seems to have the perfect life—a husband, a luxurious house, professional recognition—but things are not as rosy as they seem. Currently the inhabitant of a body with a criminal past, Nelah is microchipped, and subject to constant surveillance and monitoring by the state, and it's representative in her home: her husband, Elifasi, a policeman. Nelah and Eli have been trying for a baby for a long time, and they have lost several pregnancies. They turn to the Matsieng Fertility Fund, also located near the famous watering holes, which provides services in ectogenesis, paying for their child to be gestated in a wombcubator at considerable cost. Unfulfilled and stifled in her marriage, Nelah becomes involved in an affair with a man from a powerful family, Janith Koshal. One night, whilst Nelah and Jan are out for an ill-advised drive whilst high on drugs, they are involved in a crash and kill someone. Rather than calling the accident in to the police, they bury the body, a decision that triggers a chain of increasingly horrifying events, as Nelah and those she loves are hunted by the ghost of the dead woman. Nelah and Jan are driven to investigate the malevolent forces and structures of power, corruption and privilege that lie behind the nightmare their crime has unleashed.

Hanchey suggests that African speculative fiction plays an influential role in imagining decolonisation and bringing it into being, and *Womb City* contributes to that process. The prominence of the myth of Matsieng in the text demonstrates its concern with ancestral knowledge and cultural value. Matsieng is central to the origin myth of the Tswana, the predominant cultural community in Botswana. Matsieng is considered the first ancestor of the Tswana. They are a one-legged giant who emerged from underground, bringing the Tswana people into existence. Today, at the watering holes of Matsieng in southern Botswana, close to Gaborone, ancient footprints still visible in the surrounding rock are thought to provide evidence of Matsieng's emergence.

Though set in a technologically advanced future, the world of the novel is deeply marked by hierarchies of gender and race inseparable from Botswana's colonial history. This is a world in which, as Elifasi puts it, "having a daughter is risky" (24). Despite legal equality being achieved in 1995, women in Botswana still face considerable discrimination and marginalisation in public life (Williams). Botswana also has some of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world, ranked in the top 3 in 2021 (Artz and D'Cruz). In *Womb City*, women's primary function is reproduction, and those who cannot have children are treated with suspicion. For those privileged enough to body-hop, the possibilities of one's life remain tied to the morphological characteristics of the body one currently inhabits, with white male bodies the most prized, and female black bodies the least sought after. Advances in technology have done little to break down entrenched structures of inequality and oppression.

Using the myth of Matsieng, the novel suggests that real decolonisation depends not only on the physical removal of the coloniser, but the transformation of ways of thinking and knowing. Hierarchies central to colonialism and persisting in the present must be challenged by other ways of understanding the world. Matsieng's connection with the Murder Trials demonstrates how ancestral myth has been used to support the status quo, but Matsieng's links to fertility become a powerful source of reimagination in the novel. Though most colonial and contemporary accounts depict Matsieng as a 'he', the novel reimagines the mythical figure as a non-binary god and a maternal ancestor who brought the Tswana into being. The novel suggests that decolonisation depends on developing a different relationship to the past: connecting with ancestors and forms of ancestral knowledge beyond the gendered terms of colonial history. Reimagined as a mother figure, Matsieng symbolises the need to listen to ancestors, both mythical and generational, providing a model of hierarchy rooted in intergenerational relationships and ideas of seniority rather than gender.

Preite and Xausa highlight that Tsamaase's writing has circulated widely in US-based venues, placing xer at the meeting point between Africanfuturism and the global literary market. The novel has been nominated for prominent awards for science fiction writing in the US, including the Locus and Ignyte Awards, however, to date it has received the most recognition in Africa, winning Best Novel at the Nommo Awards in 2025. This may speak to the persistence of Eurocentrism in the global north, but it also highlights the pertinence of Tsamaase's intervention for audiences in Africa. In both the global north and south, Tsamaase foregrounds xer audiences, and for debates about gender liberation and decolonisation, the importance of imagining things otherwise. *Womb City* is an important text because it brings these vital questions to the attention of a range of different audiences.

Artz, Lillian, and Shelly Daphné D'Cruz. 'Sexual Offences in Africa'. *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, edited by Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 853–72. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28099-4>.

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