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TOTSI – ATHOL FUGARD

Synopsis of the plot

The main character in the novel is a gangster known as Tsotsi, which is an informal word for a violent young criminal. He is the unquestioned leader of a gang that preys mainly on township community members. The members of his gang are Boston, Die Aap and Butcher. Tsotsi chooses victims that he and his gang members heartlessly rob and murder. The victims are often mine-workers from rural areas. The cold-blooded killer, Butcher, is the designated hit man of the gang. The novel begins with one of their hits, expertly handled on a suburban train travelling between central Johannesburg and its suburb of Sophiatown, which is in the process of being dismantled by the apartheid authorities.

Boston is plagued by his conscience and, unlike the other gang members, is inquisitive, but Tsotsi does not tolerate people prying into his past. He lives in the present only. When Boston probes into Tsotsi's roots he goes too far and receives a vicious beating from the gang leader.

A major turning point in the story occurs when Tsotsi attacks a young woman and she thrusts a shoebox containing a baby into his hands before running away. His life and the operations of his gang are disrupted by his attempts to hide and nurture the child. Moreover, the presence of the baby in his life triggers the awakening of long-suppressed memories of his own roots – and of the night his mother was arrested after a police raid for supposed passbook offenders. His father returned the day after his mother disappeared from his life and took out his anger on the dog by kicking it to death. On this day, then ten-year-old David Madondo witnessed both his dog's agonised suffering and the stillbirth of her puppies. Panic-stricken, the boy fled and was adopted by a gang of street children who shared their 'home' in old irrigation pipes with him. These recollections, which had been repressed for so long, begin to overwhelm Tsotsi. He embarks unwittingly on a process of change where he finds himself unable to murder or rob a cripple, Morris Tshabalala, whom he has chosen as a victim.

The need to feed and care for the child eventually forces him to get help from a young woman, Mirriam. Moreover, Tsotsi is forced to recognise the humanity of Boston, the gang member he previously beat up for daring to probe into his hidden past. The novel ends on a tragic note as Tsotsi, newly reborn as David Madondo, sacrifices himself in an attempt to save the baby's life when bulldozers come to demolish the ruins where the baby has been hidden.

Summary: Chapter 1

- It is Friday evening.
- A silence falls as the gang members wait for their leader, Tsotsi, to announce what they will be doing that night.
- Boston, a talkative member, has been passing the time with idle talk.
- The slow-witted Die Aap always listens attentively to Boston while Butcher frets with impatience.
- Tsotsi watches them all: he knows Boston's smiles mask fear and Butcher's eyes hide hate, while Die Aap's face is a blank. Only Die Aap can be trusted.
- Tsotsi announces that they will choose a victim on the trains running between the township and the city.
- Butcher immediately approves of the plan but Boston seems uneasy and queries it before he reluctantly accepts.
- Butcher brings his fatal weapon: A sharpened spoke of a bicycle wheel.
- Along the dusty twisted street in Sophiatown, people fearfully give way to the hated gang members.
- Gumboot Dhlamini will be their victim. He is a mine-worker from the distant rural areas where his wife awaits his return home with the money he has earned this past year. He is a tall, jovial, hard-working and always hopeful man.
- On this day he makes three crucial mistakes: first, he smiles as he waits in the queue at the ticket office; second, he is wearing a bright new tie, and third, he lets people see the money in his pay packet when he buys his ticket. All of these are reasons for Tsotsi to choose him and follow him on to the crowded train.
- On the train, the gang surrounds Gumboot Dhlamini.
- Butcher stabs Gumboot in the heart with the sharpened spoke and Boston takes his pay packet from his pocket while the other gang members hold him upright with their bodies.
- People surge for the door as the train arrives at the station.
- The body of Gumboot is left behind.

Summary: Chapter 2

- The gang members are drinking at Soekie's shebeen.
- The butcher is tormenting and ridiculing Boston because he was sick after the murder of Gumboot.
- Boston prowls around reacting like a concerned animal
- Butcher calls for more liquor.
- Soekie brings drinks and tries to persuade Rosie, the woman in the corner, to go home.
- Tsotsi is uneasy: he resents Boston questioning him about his past. He has no memory of his roots. He has lost his identity.
- Boston says it was 'decency' that had made him so sick.
- Butcher and Die Aap take a drunken woman outside
- Boston asks probing questions about Tsotsi's hidden past. He wants to know about his mother or a dog from his childhood. He asks whether Tsotsi has a soul.
- But Boston has gone too far: Tsotsi attacks him and beats him up badly.
- Die Aap and Butcher help Soekie to drag him away from Boston.

Summary: Chapter Three

- Tsotsi was pulled away from Boston before the torment of his hate had been satisfied.
- Now he walks with Boston's last words that one day he will feel something echoing in his mind.
- Everything emphasises his outside status as he shoves his way through groups: some men playing dice get up and quickly disappear when they see him coming nearer; a drunken man falls and reminds him of Boston lying on the floor.
- Everything he sees and hears reminds him of Boston's warning words.
- In a blind panic he runs into the darkness beyond the border of the township.
- He keeps moving, prowling mindlessly through the streets, ignoring a shower of rain, until he can finally dismiss the memory of Boston from his mind.
- Finally he reaches a grove of bluegum trees where he rests.
- Here he reflects on what has gone wrong. It started with Boston asking questions to which he, Tsotsi, did not have the answers.
- He recalls the simple rules he lives his life by: firstly, he starts each day by checking on his knife; secondly, he permits no inner reflections or memories and tries to expel any associations reminding him of his past; and thirdly, he tolerates no personal questions.
- A young woman holding a shoebox enters the grove.
- Tsotsi grabs her by the arm and pins her against a tree with his body.
- She screams and then he releases her as his attention is drawn towards a crying coming from the shoebox.
- She shoves the box into his hands and runs away. The lid slips off the box and Tsotsi finds himself staring down into the wrinkled face of a tiny baby.

Summary: Chapter Four

- The setting is Ramadoola's General Dealer shop where the proprietor, Cassim, is nervous because Tsotsi has been hanging around for some time.
- Cassim fears the dangerous looking hoodlum. But to his surprise Tsotsi wants to buy 'Baby Milk'.
- Cassim sells him a tin of condensed milk and realises that the young man is unable to read the words on the label.
- Once out of the shop, 'free from embarrassment and humiliation he had felt in buying the milk', Tsotsi hurries back to his room
- There he gazes at the baby in awe.
- When he unwraps the fouled rags in which the baby is wrapped it begins to cry.
- Then when he tries to clean the baby he discovers it is a boy.
- The baby's crying makes him feel 'desperate and uncomfortable' and – in vain – he shouts 'Tula!' at it.
- When he feeds the baby with spoons of the condensed milk it stops crying.
- Some men from a demolition squad pass by and this gives Tsotsi the idea of hiding the baby in the nearby ruin where these men had been breaking down buildings.
- He takes the baby to the remains of MaRhabatse's old house and hides it in a corner under an overhang of corrugated iron.
- The baby has disrupted the pattern of his life but Tsotsi cannot understand why he has allowed this to happen.
- He reflects on the woman when the woman under the bluegum tree had 'forced the box into his hands' and in his surprise he had allowed her to escape
- He feels a 'strange, nameless fear' as he thinks back to that moment when, suddenly, a terrible and painful memory had 'stabbed his darkness': it was of a yellow bitch whimpering and in great pain, 'crawling towards him'.
- Now for the first time Tsotsi is curious about the past that he has been avoiding for so long.

Summary: Chapter Five

- Gumboots Dhlamini is buried by the Reverend Henry Ransome in the township's crowded cemetery. Surrounded by stunted trees and a broken fence, the township cemetery is a depressing place.
- When the gravedigger, Big Jacob, asks whom they are burying, the troubled minister confesses that he does not know the man's name.
- Next the focus is on Boston who is painfully regaining consciousness in the back alley where he had been dumped the previous night by Butcher and Die Aap. A little boy is staring intently at him.
- Someone has stolen his trousers so he struggles to put on an abandoned and torn pair lying nearby.
- Boston staggers off down the alleyway in despair. He is convinced that everything in his life is 'utterly finished'.
- In the meantime, Butcher and Die Aap are lounging about, waiting outside Tsotsi's room. They pass the time by throwing stones at a lamppost.
- Butcher is on the point of abandoning the gang when Tsotsi arrives.
- When Butcher taunts a young woman passer-by who is carrying a baby, an idea dawns on Tsotsi.
- Tsotsi wants to know where Boston is, but the others say they don't know.
- On the other hand Tsotsi wants to carry on as always with the gang's operations; on the other hand he cannot stop thinking about the 'baby, the shoebox, the bluegums, the bitch – over and over again'.
- He feels that the gang members are an intrusive nuisance, especially as he is expected to announce their plan of action for the night.
- The 'dark impulses' that normally govern his decisions have been tampered with'. Eventually he vaguely says they will go to the city.

Summary: Chapter Six

- Terminal Place near the gasworks is a busy commercial hub during the day, crowded with shops and hawkers' stands: this is also the bus terminus for township buses.
- Soon after arriving here on the 6.10 special, Tsotsi, who has become separated from Butcher and Die Aap, finds his victim, Morris Tshabalala.
- Morri is a cripple and a beggar: he lost his legs six years ago when a mineshaft collapsed and a beam fell across his legs.
- He had turned his back on his old life the day he escaped without permission of the hospital.
- Now he has to drag himself through the streets, using his arms and hands to keep moving. He is on his way to the Bantu Eating House for supper.
- After his accident Morris struggled to get employment and finally turned to begging. This he did unwillingly and with great bitterness, as he was a proud man.
- Someone steps on his hand. Morris curses but then keeps quiet as the perpetrator stares down at him threateningly. It is Tsotsi.
- Gradually Morris realises that the arrogant young man who stepped on his hand is following him.
- Morris faces the challenge of having to negotiate a dangerous deserted side street. However, a car stalls and has to be pushed down the alley and Morris is able to follow safely behind it to the Eating House
- Morris reflects on the danger he has averted and realises to his surprise that despite the misery and pain of his life, he wants to live.
- A newspaper seller hands him a penny that he left behind and remarks that the tsotsis who will kill for a penny are 'mad dogs' who 'bite their own people'.
- The eating house proprietor, Susa Da Souza, comes to lock up and Morris must venture into the night and try to get 'home' to the derelict hut where he sleeps.
- He has to negotiate poorly lit streets. He realises Tsotsi is following him again.
- He leaves his money behind for the young man but is terrified when Tsotsi boots the pile of coins into the darkness.
- Morris hurls stones and obscenities as his relentless pursuer.

Summary: Chapter Seven

- The point of view switches back to Tsotsi. Just before stepping on Morris's hand, he was thinking 'yet again about the baby, the bluegums, and the bitch'.
- The oath, 'Whelp of a yellow bitch!', tears into his thoughts. When Morris pushes away Tsotsi's foot it sparks off first terror and then hatred of the cripple in Tsotsi.
- Tsotsi chooses Morris because of his ugliness and his deformity. For Tsotsi this bent, broken and 'disfigured remnant' symbolises 'the final reality to life'..
- Tsotsi compares the shuffling cripple to a dog, but the way Morris escapes down the back alley, Tsotsi feels a 'spasm of relief'. For the first time he has 'the strange experience of feeling for a man'.
- Later when Tsotsi finally catches up with and confront Morris, the cripple tells him that he wants to live, that he wants to feel the rain and the wind and see colours of things and hear birds sing.
- Tsotsi has revelation: he does not have to kill his victim; he can choose to let him live. Tsotsi has discovered that there are alternatives: he can 'choose between life and death'.
- Morris tries to share the most beautiful thing he knows, which is mothers' love for their children. However, Tsotsi denies the truth of this statement.
- Tsotsi has a long walk back to his room in the township. He is pursued by racing thoughts of the baby and of Boston, the bluegums and the beggar.
- Only once he emerges from the labyrinth-like maze of streets in the deserted factory area can he sit and think in peace at the railway shunting yards.
- Tsotsi realises that now there is no turning back from these unprecedented experience of feeding a baby and sparing a man's life.
- For the first time he realises he has alternatives: things do not have to be inevitable and what happens from now depends on the choices he makes.
- In a state of confusion and exhaustion, he asks himself: at what point did he make the choice that killing was an alternative – and not an imperative?
- Finally, exhausted, he curls up on the ground and sleeps

Summary: Chapter Eight

- The church bells are summoning the township dwellers to the Sunday service.
- Boston wakes and listens to the bells ringing. He can't move for fear of pain or shame.
- The Reverend Ransome is still disturbed by not knowing Gumboot's name. He prays for God's help on his way to church.
- Tsotsi returns to the ruins. He sees a column of ants like a scribble on the wall, down to the shoebox, and remembers breaking Boston's pencil when he'd caught him watching Tsotsi scribbling aimlessly with it.
- Now Tsotsi destroys the ants that have invaded the tin of condensed milk: some are even in the shoebox and around the baby's mouth.
- He realises that the baby is desperately in need of care and feeding and overcomes an urge to abandon it.
- Near Tsotsi's room Miriam Ngidi is in the queue at the township communal water tap.
- She has a six-month-old baby, Simon. The father left for work one day and never returned. Now she works as a washerwoman in order to survive.
- Back in her room she hears a knock on the door. Tsotsi has followed her. He threatens to kill her baby if she refuses to accompany him.
- Back in his room he drags her forcibly to the bed and demands that she feed 'his' baby. Disgusted, she protests that the child is too dirty.
- He forces her to clean and breastfeed the baby and then allows her to leave.
- It is Sunday night and the people of the township are preparing for sleep before the grind of yet another tough week. .
- But Tsotsi is wide awake: a long lost memory of his childhood has been reawakened and now he relives over and over what happened on that disastrous night when everything changed in his life.

Summary: Chapter Nine

- This chapter provides a flashback into the happy childhood of David Madondo (Tsotsi) until his whole world fell apart when he was ten years old.
- At first we see the young boy protected by the 'warm security' of his mother.
- There is also a rather crabby old grandmother whom the boy respects and fears.
- On this day of the crisis his mother is excited and happy because she is expecting the arrival of his long-absent father the next day.
- Thanks to his mother's stories the boy has a fantasy vision of this unknown father: he sees him as a 'red, glowing man, always laughing, with big hands ... and maybe covered with feathers because she said he was soft and full of love ...'
- In the yard is the family pet, a yellow bitch. She is heavily pregnant and no longer friendly or playful.
- The boy is dreaming about his father when he is woken up with 'all hell' breaking loose in the streets: police have arrived on a passbook raid.
- David sees his mother dragged out of their bed to the police van.
- She tells him to wait at home and not move.
- Later old granny arrives. She goes off with a dress for his mother. Once again he is told to stay put and not to go away from the room.
- But later he hears knocking and a deep, thundery voice calling, 'Tondi!'
- In a blind panic the boy runs into the backyard and then he hears the snarl of the bitch, and a heavy, dull sound as the man kicks the dog, followed by its screech of pain.
- Then he watches the dog's agonised suffering as it drags its now useless hindquarters nearer and nearer towards where he is cowering: then it gives birth to its stillborn litter of puppies and dies beside them.
- Then he sits there hour after hour while the flies settle on the bodies and a 'loathsome stench' arises.
- Finally, unable to bear it any longer, the traumatised child runs away, 'like a little animal being hunted'.
- He encounters a 'ragged pack' of street children who assume he is one of them and urge him to join them.
- They give him crusts and orange peels to eat. One boy, Petah, finds a sleeping place for him in a pipe at a river bed. There he watches a spider spinning its web.
- The boys go off scavenging. After a long, lonely wait, they return. One boy, Simon, who is suffering from malnutrition, is missing. David learns not to ask questions and blots out his own past life.
- David renames himself Tsotsi after an Indian shopkeeper chases him and calls him a Tsotsi. He joins the river gang until it is dispersed in a police raid.
- Later he joins other gangs of older boys and learns all the tough lessons of survival in a harsh and cruel world.

Summary: Chapter Ten

- Tsotsi is awakened by a knocking at his door.
- His first instinct is to feel for the reassurance of his knife but then he remembers the baby. It is still there at the foot of the bed, fast asleep.
- The knife does not bring its usual sense of security. Instead it sets off a chain of memories: the river, the street gangs, his mother, and then Petah.
- The person knocking is Die Aap. But Tsotsi does not want him hanging about – no now with his thoughts filled with memories of his mother.
- Die Aap tells Tsotsi that Butcher has joined another gang.
- Tsotsi tells Die Aap that it is all finished and Die Aap walks off like a drunken man.
- Tsotsi relishes the baby's physicality that can be heard, felt and smelt – and also its dependence on him. His identity and that of the baby have become one. Therefore the baby must stay alive.
- He stands outside his room waiting for Miriam to come by on her way from the water tap. She follows him in.
- Miriam has brought ointment that she smears around the baby's lips; she powders the baby and cleans and dresses it in clean clothes. Then she breastfeeds the baby.
- Tsotsi tells her the baby is called David. He says David 'never saw his father' and is shocked at his own words.
- His thoughts keep returning to the memory of the river where he stayed with the streets children and where they played a game called 'driving to hell and gone' in a rusty, derelict motorcar that had crashed into the river one night.
- Miriam tries to persuade Tsotsi to let her take the baby and look after it but he is adamant that the baby was given to him: that it is his.
- Excitedly he tells Miriam how the baby came into his possession.
- When asked why he wishes to keep the baby, Tsotsi struggles to articulate a reply. He reflects that revenge and hate are over and the riddle of the yellow bitch solved: all he can say now is: 'Because I must find out'
- Once she has gone Tsotsi goes back to the ruins where he hides the baby once more.
- Then he makes the long journey to the river where he finds the pipes and the shell of the motorcar. Now he has confirmed his memories and the truth of all he had recalled about his past.

Summary: Chapter Eleven

- Tsotsi finds Boston at Marty's shebeen where he is lying in a state of unconsciousness brought on by a combination of his injuries and alcohol.
- Fearlessly Marty confronts Tsotsi, blaming him for the state that Boston is in.
- She orders Tsotsi to remove the filthy, stinking Boston.
- Unable to wake him, Tsotsi carries him out.
- Halfway back to Tsotsi's room Boston wakes and when he realises that it is Tsotsi who is carrying him, he cries out in terror and staggers off into the darkness.
- Tsotsi follows Boston and finds him collapsed under a sign. Tsotsi eventually gets Boston to his room
- Here Tsotsi examines Boston with great care. Then he goes off to buy bread and milk.
- At this point Boston's early life is outlined – going back to the time he achieved top marks as a schoolboy and won a scholarship to study to be a teacher. However, he never completed the course. In his final year he was expelled on a rape charge.
- Boston's view is that it was all a mistake: for him human existence is just one big mistake.
- For years he has been avoiding having to face disgrace at home: he has been misleading his mother into thinking he is employed as a teacher.
- In fact he and a partner, Johnboy Lethetwa, were making money forging employers' signatures for clients who needed them for their passbooks.
- When this enterprise ended, Boston, who had become a heavy drinker, teamed up with criminal gangs he met while drinking in Marty's shebeen.
- After his gang killed a night watchman, Boston, sickened by the bloody murder, and an excess of alcohol, turned on his lover, Marty, and ended the relationship he had ever had with a woman.
- Now he has been dragged to this room where Tsotsi, seemingly a changed man, is telling him about the baby and the cripple and his reawakened childhood memories – and appealing to him for help and advice.
- When pressed to explain what all these recent experiences and discoveries mean, Boston says that Tsotsi is asking him 'about God'.
- As dawn breaks, Boston, having refused an offer of milk and break, stumbles off in search of 'the green fields of his youth'

Summary: Chapter Twelve

- Isaiah is the caretaker, bell-ringer and gardener at Reverend Ransome's church.
- Miss Marriot, who works in the church office, is trying to get Isaiah to plant seedlings in straight rows.
- Isaiah gets into a conversation and shares his tea with Tsotsi. He notices that Tsotsi looks exhausted.
- When Tsotsi questions Isaiah about God and about the church he gets a garbled version of the biblical accounts of Jesus, Moses and Noah.
- Tsotsi accepts Isaiah's invitation to 'join in the singing' at the evening service in what Isaiah calls 'The Church of Christ the Dreamer'
- When Tsotsi fetches the baby and carries him wrapped in his coat to Miriam's place he feels 'unnaturally light', almost as if he is floating.
- Miriam goes off to by medicine, which she feeds to the baby before giving him milk and then resuming her laundry work.
- Miriam tells Tsotsi that she has finally accepted that her Simon, father to her baby, is dead and gone. However she realises that life must go on.
- She pleads with Tsotsi to leave his baby, David, in her care but he does not yet trust her sufficiently and takes the baby away with him.
- Tsotsi returns to the ruins where once again he hides the baby.
- The next morning Tsotsi resolves to take the baby back to Miriam and to introduce himself by his real name, David Madondo.
- On his way to the ruins he replies to a milkman's greeting with the words, 'Peace be with you'.
- He hears the sounds of bulldozers and sees dust in the distance. The slum clearance men are razing the ruins.
- Screaming for them to stop, he sprints to the ruins and arrives with just enough time to dive for the corner where the baby is hidden, but 'it was too late for anything' and the wall collapses on top of him.
- When Tsotsi's body is unearthed they find a smile on his face.