

Unmasking the enduring legacies of apartheid in South Africa through Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the dispensation of democracy in South Africa, the country was presided by a system of apartheid that perpetuated colonial policies that discriminated against non-white (South) Africans. Nevertheless, the democratic jurisdiction dethroned and succeeded the apartheid regime in 1994. This galvanised South Africa to undergo a political transition from segregation (autocracy) to peace, equality and unity (democracy). The political emancipation engineered a shift of identity and also made a clarion call for South Africans to subscribe to a democratic identity branded by oneness and harmony. However, as South Africa sought to redress herself, it unearthed appalling remnants of the apartheid past. Twenty-seven years since democracy took reigns in South Africa, the country is still haunted by the horrors of the past. It is the apartheid government that has bred hegemonic delinquencies that encumber the South African society from extricating herself from discriminatory identities such as racial tension, division, inequality and socio-economic crises. This qualitative study sought to scrutinise the vestiges of apartheid in South Africa. It has hinged on the literary appreciation of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which reflects on the menace that the enduring legacies of apartheid pose to livelihoods in the democratic period. Mpe's post-apartheid novel is chosen for this study by virtue of its exposure and protest against apartheid influence in the newly reconstructed democratic South African society. Scholarly attention has been satisfactorily paid to the implementation of socio-economic transformation in the country, however, there seems to be an inadequate scholarship to explore the pretexts or the genesis of socio-economic transformation setbacks, which this study aims to unmask.

Key words: Apartheid, Corruption, Democracy, Inequality, Post-apartheid, Poverty

INTRODUCTION

The apartheid government during its rule in South Africa tussled to maintain a firm uphold of the country's socio-economic and political institutions until 1994 when the country had its first democratic elections. The elections culminated with democratic forces triumphing over the apartheid command and dispensing new legislation in the country. This resulted in the abolishment of many racially-motivated and discriminatory apartheid laws such as Bantu Education Act, 1953; Extension of University Education Act, 1959; Coloured Persons Education Act, 1963; Indians Education Act, 1965; Immorality Act, 1927; The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, 1949; Mines and Works Act, 1911; Native Building Workers Act, 1951; The Population Registration Act, 1950 and The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, 1953. It is the anti-apartheid agents that relentlessly fought against this totalitarian apartheid regiment and the battle for freedom engendered a political upheaval that saw the apartheid brigades being subdued. Montle (2020: 7) notes that "the democratic regime aimed at reconstructing

a South African society that cherishes peace, equality, oneness and human rights." However, this reconstruction of the South African society appears to be sabotaged by apartheid influences, which are still championing colonial stereotypes in the country.

It is the apartheid legacies that hinder socio-economic transformation in South Africa and catalyse socio-economic problems in the country. Therefore, the study identifies the unaddressed apartheid legacies such as inequality, racial tension, white privilege, poverty and corruption that still menace the country despite reclaiming democracy as the gap. Hence, it aims to unmask these apartheid legacies and point out their degree of destruction on the democratisation of South Africa. Sall (2018: 14) states that "racial division and white privilege is a reality in South Africa...colour-blind ideologies such as the rainbow nation defend white privileges and reinforce the blindness towards awareness of white privilege." In spite of the dispensation of democracy, South Africa is yet to utterly exorcise the apartheid wraith that still demonises the country and its people. This is confirmed in Mpe's narration, which is a compelling reflection of life in

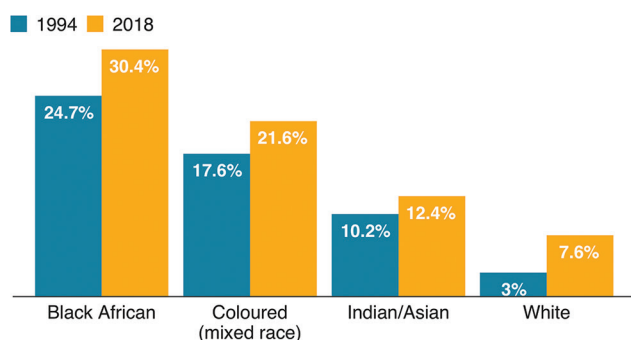
South Africa subsequent to the downfall of apartheid. It mirrors the dichotomy of socio-economic, psychological and political issues that perturb and hinder social transformation in the country. Rafapa (2014: 156) notes that “Mpe’s post-apartheid novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* asserts black society’s undergoing of introspection as an antidote against some grovelling at the feet of the ever-invincible ogre called apartheid.” Despite the South African society being under the governance of democracy, the vestiges of apartheid are still vexing the previously oppressed citizens of the country who had hoped that the new era would occasion socio-economic transformation in their lives. This is corroborated by Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, in which, a string of maladies unfolds at a residential neighbourhood of Johannesburg called Hillbrow. Mpe presents Hillbrow as an aftermath of apartheid. It is known as one of Johannesburg’s violence-ridden black neighbourhoods with a high crime-rate (Negash, 2011; Rafapa & Mahori, 2011) owing to the “massive growth of the population of poor and unemployed blacks after the end of Apartheid” (Conway, 2009: 849).

Apartheid Legacies in the Democratic Period

Equally important, political and socio-economic shifting attempts in South Africa have not successfully eluded colonial and apartheid identities. Lephakga (2017: 21) notes that “colonialism divided the world in two: the centre, which is occupied by Europeans, and the periphery, which is occupied by non-Europeans. This division institutionalised poverty amongst the colonised to maintain the supremacist status of the coloniser and the colonial status of the colonised as non-beings.” Thus, the socio-economic identities of many previously repressed (South) Africans, from the apartheid period to the democratic age appear to have virtually lingered uniform. This is substantiated by the graph below, which compares the unemployment rate in 1994 and 2018 according to diverse racial groups (Black/African, Coloured, Indian/Asian and White):

Unemployment Rates have Risen, but Still Highest among Black Africans

How unemployment rates have changed



Source: Stats SA, 2018 figures are Q4, 2018 BBC

According to the graph, the Black/African race in 1994 experienced the highest level of unemployment. Moreover, 1994

is the year that the democratic government assumed duties in the country. However, in 2018, which is twenty-four years subsequent to the dispensation of democracy, the Black/African race still records the highest unemployment rate. Sall (2018: 2) avers that South Africa “is yet to reorganise the entrenched social, racial and economic disparities constructed under apartheid.” The constructed identities under apartheid that persist on and have birthed ills that marginalise South Africans in the post-apartheid era as portrayed in Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilises a qualitative methodology to unmask the maladies that the apartheid regime birthed into the democratic society of South Africa. According to DeFranzo (2020), qualitative research could be used to discover trends in attitudes, reactions, opinions and thoughts, and profoundly scrutinise the problem. Moreover, the study is purely text-based and draw from a literary approach. Thus, textual analysis has been adopted, which, Cautfied (2020) perceives as an essential technique in literary studies as this field of study entails an in-depth analysis of texts. Furthermore, the study has sampled Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* out of South African post-apartheid narrations by virtue of its portrayal of the magnitude of apartheid legacies in the democratic period.

Data Analysis Technique

The findings from the sampled literary text for this study, which is Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, will be presented, analysed and organised in themes using the thematic analysis technique. The thematic analysis “is a method of analysing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly” (Cautfied, 2020: i).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hill* are presented and organised in themes below to fulfil the objective of this study, which is to unmask the enduring legacies of apartheid in the South African society:

Inequality and Poverty

Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* mirrors the high levels of inequalities and poverty in the democratic South Africa through the residents of Hillbrow. Terreblanche (2002: 26) notes that “issues such as poverty in South Africa have been shaped and created over a very long period by the power structures on which the systems of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid were based.” In the novel, Hillbrow is portrayed as an unfavourable and crime-rated place and its demeaning identity in the post-apartheid period is inspired by, among other things, poverty. Green (2005: 5) states that “by the 1990s Hillbrow was considered either a sophisticated

melting pot of culture, class, and ethnicity or a decaying cityscape of violent crime, drugs, prostitution, and AIDS.”

To this note, democratisation has not emancipated the residents of the Hillbrow in the novel who are unsettled by extreme poverty. Ndinga-Kanga (2019: 1) opines that it is “apartheid South Africa that socially engineered black poverty and South Africa’s continued capitalist system has created structures that perpetuate poverty.” As a consequence, due to desperation and pressure from poverty, the residents at Hillbrow in the novel, especially the youth engaged in immoral activities such as drug abuse and prostitution: “I wish those girls and boys in our villages had more respect for their genitalia and did not leave them to do careless business in Hillbrow, only so that we can attribute the source of our dirges to Nigeria and Zaïre ...” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 20). Furthermore, Majoni (2014: 10) asserts that “families back home are at risk because they are not well taken care of. The wives may engage in extra-marital affairs to fend for the children.” This is a reflection of the reality of many black South Africans who claim that it is poverty that propelled them to resort to demonising acts. For instance, a woman on Daily Sun (26/05/2020) confesses:

I have no choice. After my step mum died, her family wanted nothing to do with me. They threw me out of my late father’s house and I had nowhere to go, I decided to live in shelters. I dropped out in grade 8. I could not get a job anywhere, so I decided to sell my body. They sometimes give me R70, which makes me very happy. They pay me before I sleep with them.

Mpe’s novel affirms that malicious acts such as drug abuse and prostitution, which are inspired by poverty, often breed a dire nemesis, HIV/AIDS. This illness found a space within the post-apartheid identity of Hillbrow. Drug addicts often go to extreme measures to feed their cravings and some of their efforts expose them to the risks of contracting HIV. Montle, Mogoboya and Modiba (2019: 150) found that the addicts devised a means of drugging themselves christened Bluetooth, which is “transferring the feeling of intoxication contracted from snorting drugs from one person to another through blood transfusion.” The addicts inject themselves with one another’s blood and this poses a risk to their health. In Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Sammy suffered from drug abuse and his addiction birthed more problems for him. This includes his reckless sexual behaviour, as he would consistently have unprotected sexual intercourse with prostitutes to the degree of sleeping with one under his girlfriend, Bohlale’s watch. As a consequence, Bohlale sought comfort from Sammy’s friend, Refentše whom she also engaged in sexual acts with. Refentše’s ex-lover, Refilwe secured a scholarship to study for her Master’s degree at Oxford Brookes University in England. Throughout her study in England, Refilwe fell in love with a Nigerian man, and at a later stage, she found out that she is HIV positive and that she contracted the virus from her birth country, South Africa and migrated with it to England (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 117). Furthermore, poverty also inspired another ill in the novel, which is xenophobia: “Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug

dealing” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 17). The novel detects xenophobia as one of the legacies of apartheid.

During the period of political oppression, anti-apartheid South Africans went into exile because of their endangered lives and hardships meted out by the apartheid government. In the post-apartheid age, tables appear to have turned as South Africa is now experiencing an influx of foreign nationals from neighbouring countries. To this note, Mnyaka (2003) notes that the country has altered from being the originator of fugitives to becoming a recipient of foreign nationals. Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* unveils the wedge between South Africans and foreign nationals: “Cousin would always take the opportunity during these arguments to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow... Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with their drug dealing” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 17). Mpe divulges the shift of scapegoating from apartheid to immigration. Hence, Kosaka and Solomon (2013: 6) note that “with inspiration from the apartheid years, South Africans sometimes subject Makwerekwere [a derogatory term used for a black person who cannot demonstrate mastery of local South African language] to the excesses of abuse, exploitation and dehumanising treatment on the basis that they have the wrong colour to invest in citizenship.” Therefore, Xenophobia enkindled by the notion that “non-citizens pose a threat to the recipients’ identity or their individual rights, and is also heedfully allied with the ideology of nationalism” (Kosas & Solomon, 2013: 15). This is corroborated in the novel:

Makwerekwere stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants filling each corner of our city and turning each patch into a Hillbrow coming to take our jobs in the new democratic rainbowism of African Renaissance that threatened the future of the locals Bafana Bafana fans momentarily forgetting xenophobia and investing their hopes in the national team... (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 26-7).

The assertion, “*Makwerekwere* stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants filling each corner of our city ...” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 26) implies that South Africa is swamped with foreigners to a degree that every second person appears to be a foreign national (Pace, April 1999: 4). Moreover, referring to foreign nationals as *Kwerekwere* and other offensive terms, accusing them of witchcraft and job theft poses a menace to the authenticity of *Ubuntu* as a peace-building mechanism amongst Africans. The attainment of liberty in Africa brought African states together to embrace the renaissance of Africanism and the efforts to preserve and promote African culture. However, Mpe’s narration also debunks the misconceptions about foreign nationals: “while we are busy blaming foreigners for all our sins, hadn’t we better also admit that quite a large percentage of our home relatives who get killed in Hillbrow, are in fact killed by other relatives and friends – people who bring their home grudges to Jo’burg. That’s what makes Hillbrow so corrupt” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 18).

Rafapa and Mahori (2011: 164) note that “while finding fault with society for maltreating foreigners, Mpe sees the apology of South Africa’s Department of Home Affairs

towards foreigners as a major contributor." Furthermore, not only are the foreign nationals made scapegoats for poverty due to job competition but also for the spread of HIV at Hillbrow: "these Africans from the West were the sole bringers of AIDS and all sorts of other dirty illnesses to this centre of human civilisation" (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 10). Adams (2012: 12) states that "disease [HIV/AIDS] might be thought of as preoccupied with notions of the foreign, whether this manifests on the level of xenophobia or the uncanny experience of the familiar body made strange."

Corruption

Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* portrays corruption as a malady that has permeated the socio-economic dimensions of the post-apartheid South Africa. The theme of corruption has received tremendous scholarly attention in the African context and many scholars have depicted it as a legacy of colonialism (Asante, 1988). The colonial leaders were distinguished by selfishness, greed and favour upon the white identity at the expense of African identities. In the same fashion, the occupants of democratic leadership positions as reflected in Mpe's novel adopted the tradition of greed as they practised corruption that enriched them at the expense of their poor followers (Armah, 1961). In the South African context, the apartheid system, which perpetuated colonial traditions, dispensed merited opportunities according to racial favour and empowered the minority population in the country (Ikejiaku, 2009). This tradition manifests in corruption today. Achebe (1965) contends that although Africans have achieved freedom, their lives are still moulded by colonial undertones. In the novel, corruption is presented as an apartheid legacy that has not been completely addressed. It is divulged within the peripheries of immigration: "If the black South African nationals were to examine themselves, they will find the cause of corruption not to be *Makwerekwere*, who are compassionately described as a convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in people's lives" (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 118). The novel presents incidents of crime where an insider is working with the perpetrators. For example, the robbery at the police station became successful due to an insider who fed the thugs with information (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 104). The police officials are implicated in most of the criminal activities that occur in the novel. This includes sexual violence as the police officials often solicited sexual acts from foreign women in exchange for exempting them from arrest as illegal immigrants (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 21). Moreover, the police targeted illegal foreign nations and raped the women whereas threatening the men with arrest if they do not pay bribes: "oceans of rands and cents [bribes] from these unfortunates, who found very little to motivate them to agree to be sent back home" (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 21). The post-apartheid period became overrun with corruption, nepotism, moral decay and fraud. The foreign nationals conspired with South African officials to fabricate false identity documents and illegal marriages. "*Makwerekwere* had also learned a trick or two of their own. Get a member of the police, or a sympathetic South African companion, to help

you organise a false identity document – for a nominal fee. Or, set up a love relationship of sorts with someone from the city" (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 21). Hence, Crush (2008) states that foreigners used the money to lure South Africans to dangerous acts such as corruption.

The Gap between Rural and Urban Lives

Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* unmasks the interface between rural and urban identities. During the apartheid era, the ruling government fostered a gap between rural and urban opportunities. The apartheid government introduced the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which regarded urban areas as a residence for white people. Padraig (2015: 1) notes that "the Black (Natives) Laws Amendment Act of 1952 amended the 1945 Native Urban Areas Consolidation Act, stipulating that all black people over the age of 16 were required to carry passes and that no black person could stay in an urban area more than 72 hours unless allowed to by Section 10." The apartheid regime restricted the access of black people to urban areas and outlined that those found in urban areas without passes would be subjected to imprisonment (History Matters Blog, 2011). This instigated a distance between black people and urban areas. Moreover, black people were also denied access to white-oriented universities. Union of South Africa (1959) notes that "under the title, Extension of University Education Act, the Universities of Witwatersrand, Cape Town and Natal were forced to close their doors to the further registration of non-whites, except in the medical colleges; present registrants would be permitted to complete their studies." However, when democracy took reigns, black people were granted the right to study at any institution of their own choice and also reside in the city they want. Albeit South Africa achieving democracy, the gap between rural and urban identities is yet to be redressed. Mpe unpacks the aforementioned point through Refentše and Lerato's romance. When Refentše settled in Johannesburg city, he fell in love with a woman from the city, Lerato: "Then you arrived in Hillbrow, Refentše, to witness it all for yourself; and come up with your own story ..." (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 6). Refentše experienced a different identity in the city but eventually adopted the city lifestyle when he fell in love with Lerato. However, Refentše's parents and friends back in the village were not pleased with him falling in love with a woman from the city: "Since you have admitted that you love us both, would you not feel more at home in the arms of a child of Tiragalong? We know what Jo'burg women can do to a man!" (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 90). Conversely, Refentše defended city women: "Yes, some Jo'burg women are certainly terrible. But the same can be said of some Tiragalong women. Are some of them not known for throwing love potions into the food and drinks of their husbands and illicit lovers? Love potions that are sometimes so strong that they turned the men into madmen?" (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 90). Refentše argues that no one is a perfectionist and that there are weaknesses and Strengths in both the city and village. Furthermore, Rafapa and Masemola (2014: 91) assert that "the rural village of Tiragalong is depicted as an embodiment of surviving African customs and traditions

while Hillbrow is synonymous with urban and metropolitan African living.” Thus, Mpe also divulges the vastness between rural and urban atmosphere through the transition from Tiragalong to Hillbrow: “You discovered, on arriving in Hillbrow, that to be drawn away from Tiragalong also went hand-in-hand with a loss of interest in Hillbrow” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 49). Refentše got exposed to a diverse identity in the city compared to the one he was used to in the village bore witness to the city lifestyle: “Because Tiragalong was in Hillbrow. You always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 49).

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to unmask the apartheid legacies in the democratic South Africa and the extent to which they menace socio-economic transformation. It has utilised Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* to fulfil the aforementioned objective. The narration has reflected on problems whose presence in the democratic period is a direct influence of apartheid such as racial tension, debasement of standards, poverty and corruption. Moreover, Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* has characterised how the post-apartheid life has turned into a sweat-fest because of the unaddressed apartheid legacies. Moreover, the delinquencies that South Africa has inherited from the system of apartheid continue to threaten the lives of South Africans in the post-apartheid era. As has been noted throughout the article, the most enchanting example in the novel can be drawn from Refentše and Sammy’s lives that spiralled out of control due to challenges such as poverty that motivated sexual immorality. Furthermore, one of the dire consequences of apartheid legacies discussed in this article is the hatred of immigrants. The foreign nationals became scapegoats for the atrocities that plague South Africa. Nonetheless, Mpe’s novel endeavoured to debunk these misconceptions and stereotypical images that South Africans held against foreigners: “Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 7), but Refentše learnt that “... while we are busy blaming foreigners for all our sins, hadn’t we better also admit that quite a large percentage of our home relatives who get killed in Hillbrow, are in fact killed by other relatives and friends – people who bring their home grudges to Jo’burg. That’s what makes Hillbrow so corrupt” (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: 18). The study recommends that mechanisms to eradicate apartheid behavioural patterns and empower the previously marginalised South Africans by the apartheid system should be devised and championed to inspire equality, and oneness in the democratic dispensation.

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