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DEPICTION OF POST-APARTHEID IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN  
LITERATURE: AN EXAMINATION OF MPE'S WELCOME TO OUR  
HILLBROW

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**Malesela Edward Montle. Depiction of Post-Apartheid Identity in South African Literature: An Examination of Mpe's Welcome to Our Hillbrow--PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 18 (17), 524-533. ISSN 1567-214x**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper aimed to depict the post-apartheid identity in the South African context from a literary perspective. In the grip of unforgiving pain, when democracy knocked on the doors of South Africa, confusion seems to have sprung into existence in the lives of South Africans who embarked on a quest to change their fate. Along their voyage, they stumbled upon a shocking discovery about the fatal past that has warmed its way back into their lives. This qualitative paper, which is guided by textual analysis has employed Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) to explore the post-apartheid maladies in South Africa. The novel above presents an image of the post-apartheid South Africa in an intense chaotic turmoil and sinking further into the desert of despair as fragile hopes in the lives of characters are dashed. Moreover, the study finds that knots of people in South Africa came to terms with reality and accepted that they have another ace up their sleeves as the indomitable system of apartheid gave birth to identity-crisis in the post-apartheid era. The democratic South Africa is now confronted by a slate of seemingly insurmountable odds such as corruption, inequality, xenophobia, HIV/AIDS pandemic, discrimination, tribalism and racism that have garnered plenty of interest from a variety of researchers in the literature. These challenges stacked against the contemporary South Africa are mirrored and discussed in line with Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

**INTRODUCTION**

The leadership of the African National Congress (ANC), under the presidency of the late Nelson Mandela, won the elections of 1994 and agreed to amnesty as

a pacific way to heal the wounds caused by the apartheid regime. However, the difficult past is still haunting the post-apartheid South Africa (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002). Ostensibly, twenty- two years after the dispensation of democracy, the post-apartheid South Africa seems to have not been able to completely address some of the demeaning challenges within the social and political facets such as identity, inequality and prejudice. Scholars such as Turok and Visagie (2021); Montle (2020) and Sall (2018) aver that the South African society is still vexed by appalling inequalities despite the dispensation of democracy. This study rests on the rapidly growing literature that seeks to authenticate the assertion that the rupture between apartheid and post-apartheid did not yield the anticipated outcomes (see Olick 1999; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2001, 2002; Spillman 2003).

In the light of South Africa attaining democracy, identity-crisis appears to be one of the most undesirable and circumvented apartheid legacies. The majority of post-apartheid South Africans' lives were and are still shaped by the hardships that prevailed over the course of apartheid. De groot and Lemanski (2021) postulate that the impact of the historical past is exposed by the Covid19 pandemic era where inequalities in terms of access to infrastructure are unmasked. This is greatly problematic for a multi-racial country attempting to re-define herself (Teeger & Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2007). These issues are evident in some of the prominent South African literary texts such as Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Furthermore, South Africa is a country, which was led by colonial domination under the Afrikaner government using the colonial strategy —apartheid, which means separateness. This government legitimised racial discrimination and therefore maintained a firm hold on the country's human and natural resources until 1994 when the country had its first democratic elections. However, the end of apartheid has left the South African population with the question: —Who are we? (Mayer & Louw, 2013). Moreover, Wale's (2013: 41) argument in favour of Mayer and Louw (2013) runs as follows:

We can constructively build on the shared desire to unite and move forward from apartheid. To do so, however, South Africans of all races need to come together on the same page about the pressing need to rectify the economic, cultural and psychological imbalance, which pervades our society. Hassan (2011: 42) aptly posits that since the transition to democracy, literature around identity, identity politics, identification and construction of identities has undergone a considerable change. On logical grounds, there seems to be a compelling reason to argue that the newly independent South Africa is challenged with breaking away from the apartheid identity and re-defining herself in the democratic realm owing to the extermination of the apartheid rule, which gave birth to racial, cultural and professional identities. In support of this point, Ndlovu (2018: 25) affirms that “the South African state has seen more community struggles re-emerging to challenge these forms.” Furthermore, the purpose of the study to primarily depict the construction of identity in the post-apartheid South Africa in an attempt to fulfil these objectives:

- To explore the post-apartheid identity of South Africa

- To unmask the enduring legacies of apartheid in the democratic South Africa
- To comprehend the political transition from apartheid to democracy
- To examine new trends in South Africa.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

With regard to the scramble for Africa, the political layout of the continent outlines the hysterical conquest of Africa by a coalition of European powers. The Scramble gradually commenced in the 1870s and became bureaucratic in the late 1880s and 1890s (Roscoe 1970: 1). The altercations amongst the European powers, at times, spiraled out of control on account of stake claims in Africa (Montle, 2020). The most enchanting example is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) which unveils the clatter between the indigenous life of African people and the European life. In the novel, Conrad uses the character of Marlow to expose the stereotypical image and misconceptions about Africa being a dark and uncivilised continent, and Africans being unsophisticated and evil.

In the mid-19th century, Europeans had already taken control of numerous areas of Africa, mainly along the coasts. Specifically, Britain annexed the Cape Colony, tactically located at the southern tip of Africa. It also managed to take control of West African commercial reserves and had a colony of Sierra Leone in its possession, which was predominantly tenanted by descendants of slaves rescued from the Atlantic slave trade. On the other hand, other European sovereignties such as France had conquered Algeria in 1834 whilst Portugal claimed territory in Angola and Mozambique. The question of identity in the post-colonial period received plenty of attention in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s. However, inadequate evaluation was done within the burgeoning states of Africa. Consequently, a rich body of researchers rose rapidly in the contemporary society with an overarching aim of traversing the intersections between post-colonial and orientalist discourses. This section seeks to review literature within the theoretical framework of identity in South Africa. It attempts to accentuate fundamental themes and notions dealt with in relation to identity in the post-apartheid South African literature Brar (2011) maintains that the quest for African identity is one of the fundamental concerns in the African literature. Along similar lines, Yadav and Yadav (2014: 223) propound the view that post-colonial entails "doubleness" in terms of identity and culture, which, as a problematic legacy of colonialism, serves as a negative force that moulds the lives of the people living in the post-colonial age. Based on these researchers' views, it could be maintained that the interface between the African natives and the Europeans during the colonial period is the root of identity crisis in the post-colonial era. In this multiplicity, the colonised people have lost their identity.

In essence, whilst the African traditional societies practised their own customs and values over the course of colonialism, the European decree brought a wave of modernity that added new voices that propagated the western culture, religion and medicine in the African traditional societies. Deane (1985: 117) states that modernity removes the old and brings in the new, persistently upgrading to something else. To reinforce the aforementioned assertion, Soyinka (1976: 89)

avers that “in the province of the political and although the spiritual and the mysterious are never absent or invalidated – certainly the affective or responsive in the lives of the community is constantly used to reinforce this dimension of reality.” Equally important, post-colonial literatures are predominantly influenced by experiences that stem from contact with the Western empire and reflect the negative impacts of colonialism. From the concise phrase, *Post-colonial literatures*, the prefix (post) denotes after and *colonial literatures* connotes the literary works that retort to historical incidents pertaining to the domination of one country by another.

Significantly, the problem of identity or the construction of new identities as enforced by the globalised world has become an integral theme of current post-colonial studies (Sall, 2018). Moreover, Amuta (1989: 16) notes that post-colonial literatures are no less powerful a medium for registering the post-colonial condition and the cultural aftermath of the British Empire. This encompasses diverse identities that arose from the enforced mass migrations of the slave trade and the effects of colonialism on indigenous societies.

## METHODOLOGY

The study utilises a qualitative research method. Patton (2002) maintains that the qualitative research approach is used as an endeavour to understand conditions in their exceptionality as part of a specific context and the interactions there. Therefore, the qualitative approach is relevant to this study as it aims to comprehend, examine and depict the post-apartheid in South Africa through a literary approach. The study also employs content analysis as a design of the study, which Stemler (2001) defines as a methodical technique for constricting many words of a text into less content categories grounded on explicit rules of decoding. The study is purely text-based and draws mainly from thematic patterns in South African literature. Primary data were collected from Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and complemented with supplementary data from secondary material journal articles and critical books. Mpe's novel is purposively sampled out of South African literary texts by virtue of its reflection of the post-apartheid identity.

### *Literary Analysis Of Mpe's Welcome To Our Hillbrow*

Prior to the advent of apartheid in South Africa, the latter had a long and distressing history of racial discrimination and white dominance until the officiated policy of apartheid chimed in to insensitively empower and pave the way for the oppression of black people. Nonetheless, the despicable system of apartheid eventually came to an end in 1994. Consequently, this made an ultimate call for South Africans to introspect and reconstruct their identity in the new South Africa. This is evident in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* which was published seven years after liberation from apartheid. Therefore, this section sets out to explore the concept of identity in the aforementioned literary text. Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a tragic narration that addresses the emerging problems of the new South Africa. It encapsulates all the demeaning challenges and social ills that overrun the democratic South Africa and turned it into a desert of despair. The full-blown

unfolding of this tale sets out at one of Gauteng 's renowned vicinities called Hillbrow. Equally important, Rafapa (2014) 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." Furthermore, the central figures of this narration are Refentše and Refilwe who confront life head-on. Mpe uses these characters to portray deadly issues such as corruption, xenophobia and HIV/AIDS, incorporated with awkward, precarious and salacious moments. To demonstrate, Refentše and Reneilwe are presented as ambitious intellectuals who went to extreme lengths to achieve their dreams but when they suddenly become victims of HIV/AIDS, their worlds are thrown into confusion as their aspirations get thwarted. One of the most significant current discussions in the post-apartheid South Africa is Xenophobia. The latter plainly refers to the hatred for foreigners. It is epitomised in discriminatory attitudes and often ends in violence, and exhibitions of hatred (Mogekwu, 2005). On October 29, 1998, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report on human rights abuses under apartheid. "Let the waters of healing flow," said commission head and 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, South Africa has "looked the beast in the eye." These are some of the words asserted in the whirl of freedom. The disbandment of apartheid has left a mountain of challenges in the democratic South Africa. The latter has altered from being the originator of refugees to become a recipient of foreigners (Mnyaka, 2003). In general, the attainment of freedom brought African states together to embrace the renaissance of Africanism and the efforts to preserve and promote African culture. Additionally, in the South African milieu, Teffo (1999: 153-154) asserts that:

The cycle of violence and criminality which has plagued South Africa during the past few years could be drastically reduced if we were to restore our moral fibre. To this end, the philosophy of *ubuntu/botho* could assist us. As a cohesive moral value that is inherent in all man-kind, once revitalised in our hearts and minds it would go a long way towards alleviating moral decay.

However, there are several reasons that led to the influx of foreigners in South Africa. The folks from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique migrated to South Africa during the lifetime of wars and economic hardships (Adjai & Lazaridis, 2013). These motives drove a wedge between South Africans and foreigners as they felt threatened by the immigrants in terms of job opportunities and other alleged unsavoury acts such as witchcraft. This dashed the fragile hopes of immigrants who came to South Africa looking for a peaceful life just as other South Africans during the diabolical rule of apartheid went into exile looking for a serene life. Kosaka and Solomon (2013: 15) maintain that xenophobia evolves from the impression that non-citizens pose a threat to the recipients 'identity or their individual rights, and is also heedfully allied with the ideology of nationalism. In the midst of this state of affairs, the immigrants are mostly accused of immoral acts such as smuggling drugs, witchcraft and thievery. According to Mbanugo (1999: 4), South Africa is swamped with foreigners to an extent such that every second person appears to be a *kwerekwere*. The term *Kwerekwere* refers to an African foreigner. Xenophobia rose vividly in South Africa only to throw lives of poor

foreigners into tailspins. Moreover, following the former and first black president of South Africa Nelson Mandela 's first presidential speech, there has been a rapid growth of foreigners entering South Africa and this has led to a turn of tables as Africans became nemeses of one another in the post-independence era. From these words, "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" (p.17), Mpe divulges the cycle of divisions and blames after apartheid (Black people and White people) to xenophobia (South Africans and immigrants). This questions the authenticity of humanity and unity that African states attempted to foster. Essentially, when problems spring into existence, somebody or something has to carry the blame. In this case, immigrants are blamed for the short-comings encountered in the post-apartheid South Africa. According to Fine and Bird (2003), South Africans does not possess a negative frame of mind towards foreigners but they are also judgemental and stereotypical. To reinforce the above-mentioned point, the character, Refentše, would argue 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 (p.18). In Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* characters fail to acknowledge the common humanity that lies within the human nature. They tend to turn a blind eye when it comes to the evil nature that South Africans possess. This could be drawn from this exemplar; Mpe poignantly says, "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 Zaire ..." (p.20). The aforementioned assertion weaves a web of wickedness around South Africans. Mpe brings to light some of the malicious deeds such as sexual immorality that South Africans practised. In the course of apartheid rule, the South African economy unjustly disseminated business opportunities only to white people (Ikejiaku, 2009). This paints a picture of white leadership in a pool of greed and corruption. Murove (2010: 47) states that "the perpetual presence of capitalism which is controlled by the hitherto beneficiaries of the racist regime would ensure that neo-colonialism continues to be persistent in the democratic South Africa." As a consequence, this elevated the probability of political transition, coupled with corruption. This is patent in the post-apartheid South Africa where corruption is still domineering. On the basis of the evidence noted above, it could be partially argued that the leadership of apartheid in South Africa practised corruption. For example, it was ascertained that the governance that meted out apartheid crimes against humanity, caused debts amounting to \$26 billion and this was observed to having drained the meager social and economic resources of South Africa (Ikejiaku, 2009). As has been noted, it could be claimed that the one of the noxious acts such as high levels of corruption are still existent in contemporary South Africa. The argument beneath lends support to the above-mentioned point:

the only allegation of political corruption in the new South Africa, which has continued to raise some dust is the US \$5 billion Strategic Defence Procurement Package (known as the 'arms deal'), which was finalised in 1999/2000. By 2003, the case has opened up some surprises; for example, it reveals that Deputy President Jacob Zuma's financial advisor (and an arms dealer in his own right), Shabir Shaik, has been charged with corruption relating to the arms deal (Vuuren, 2005: 29).

In an evocative manner, Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* brilliantly discloses corruption from a psychological sampling as an unacceptable act in the South African society. As Achebe (1966) concurs, though Africans have achieved freedom, they are circuitously still influenced by colonial attributes which is why identity-crisis continues to elevate. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe says "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" (pg. 118). This elucidation captures a fleeting glimpse of materialism and betrayal. It unveils how human beings could be materialistic and illogical to an extent of selling one another in the name of money and power. Corruption is dominant in security systems as well as in distinctive departments of officials in Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. This corruption predominantly revolves around foreigners with some of them being victims and some wrongdoers (Gibson, 2006). For instance, natives would target foreigners and arrest them in an attempt to get bribes. On the aforementioned point, Mpe outlines how foreigners resorted to bribery when perched in precarious circumstances opportunistic officials in South Africa.

Nevertheless, Mpe also highlights the undeniable truth that immigrants also had skeletons in their families. They also played a role in leading a life of corruption. Some of them lured South Africans into dangerous positions (Crush, 2008). This is evident where the foreigners worked secretly with corrupt South African officials to fabricate false identity documents and illegal marriages (p.21). As Achebe (1966) concurs, though Africans have achieved freedom, they are circuitously still influenced by colonial attributes, hence, identity-crisis continues to elevate. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) Mpe says, "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 convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in people's lives" (pg. 118). This elucidation captures a fleeting glimpse of materialism and betrayal. It unveils how human beings could be materialistic and illogical to an extent of selling one another in the name of money and power.

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lured South Africans into dangerous positions (Crush, 2008). This is evident where the foreigners worked secretly with corrupt South African officials to fabricate false identity documents and illegal marriages (p.21). In the novel, sex knows no boundaries and manages to worm its way to every character's soft spot. On one hand, it is turned into a commercial commodity by the desperate and poverty-stricken, and on the other hand, it appears to be the root of all evil acts such as rape, infidelity and betrayal. For instance, the prominent figures of this novel betrayed one another. Sammy was caught red-handed having sex with his friend Refentše's girlfriend. Correspondingly, Refentše did the same thing to Sammy's own girlfriend, Lerato.

Significantly, both men and women in the novel are vastly promiscuous but the guilty conscience that paralyses women is heavier than the one that struck men. This is linked to African traditional norms that allow and forbid certain acts. As Rafapa and Masemola (2013: 84) concur that the evident sexual indiscretion in Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) could be influenced by this Northern Sotho proverb *monna ke thaka o a naba* which is referenced as African nationals stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants' in the novel (p.16). This proverb literally means that a real man should have more than one sexual partner. Mpe employs idioms and proverbs throughout the novel to appeal to the reader's emotion. The most apparent example of the degradation caused by the deadly HIV/AIDS appears to be the appalling turn of events that occurred in the life of Refentše's former village girlfriend Refilwe. She got a prestigious opportunity to study for her Masters in Publishing and Media Studies, at Oxford Brookes in England University, only to disappointingly reappear in South Africa gravely ill with HIV/AIDS. Over the course of her study, she fell in love with a Nigerian man, and at a later stage, she learns of the discreet HIV/AIDS that has affected her whilst she was still in South Africa (p. 117). On the contrary, the immoral acts committed by South Africans debunk the misconceptions that foreigners in South Africa are the ones to take the blame for the spread of HIV/AIDS. Although Refilwe seems to be the less judgemental to foreigners, she was promiscuous whilst still living in Tiragalong, to the point of getting infected with the deadly HIV/AIDS that she obliviously took to England. In addition, sexual immorality has led to deaths in the novel in various ways. For instance, Refentše could not salve his guilty conscience resulted from his own actions of infidelity and ultimately committed suicide, whilst Refilwe died after ailing from HIV/AIDS of which she contracted through her licentious actions.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined some of the distressing challenges that the democratic South Africa is grappling with as evidenced in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. It has been argued that the post-apartheid governance's attempts to remedy the delinquencies that the new South Africa has inherited from the system of apartheid seems to be in vain as the challenges noted in this paper are intensely deteriorating. Given the centrality of identity in the post-apartheid South Africa through Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, it could be maintained that identity is a social paradigm that craves every person's fanatical attention.

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