

*Journal of Public Management and International  
Relations (JPMIR)*

*Volume 1, Number 1, January 2026  
Pp 156-169*

**Lagos to Joburg: Representations of Nigerian Migrants in the *Welcome to  
our Hillbrow***

**Abimbola A. Thomas**  
Department of English  
University of Lagos, Nigeria  
[Bimboanike@gmail.com](mailto:Bimboanike@gmail.com)

## *Lagos to Joburg*

### Abstract

This paper adopts a qualitative, analytic literary research approach to examine how xenophobia, rooted in South Africa's socio-economic inequalities and unresolved racial tensions, shapes the representation of Nigerian migrants in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Employing close reading, the study analyses textual narratives and character portrayals that foreground migration, exclusion, and violence in post-apartheid South Africa. Although the post-apartheid ideal of the "Rainbow Nation" is supposed to promote inclusion, the novel reveals the persistence of exclusionary attitudes, which manifest discrimination, violence, and the scapegoating of African migrants, particularly Nigerians, for unemployment, poverty, and other social anxieties. The textual analysis is guided primarily by René Girard's psychoanalytic concept of scapegoating, complemented by Marxist literary insights, especially Pierre Macherey's notions of implicit and explicit textual content. These concepts inform the close reading that examines not only overt narrative statements but also silences, omissions, and narrative deflections that reveal the socio-economic bases of xenophobia as a form of projection and displacement. Primary data consist of the selected literary text, while secondary data are drawn from relevant scholarly criticism and theoretical works. The study finds that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* critiques xenophobic perceptions by exposing them as mechanisms of deflection that mask deeper structural failures within South African society. Ultimately, the paper argues that the novel calls for honest self-reflection as a necessary condition for achieving the freedom South Africa continues to seek more than three decades after apartheid.

**Keywords:** Xenophobia, Scapegoating Nigerians, Migration and Exclusion, Post-Apartheid South Africa, Socio-Economic Inequality

## Introduction

Migration, driven by the search for survival, economic opportunity, and a sense of belonging, has become a defining feature of contemporary African life. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, intra-African migration has been accompanied by persistent socio-economic inequalities, high unemployment, and unresolved racial tensions, producing waves of xenophobic hostility that challenge the nation's self-image as a "Rainbow Nation." Literature emerging from this context offers a critical space for interrogating how freedom, identity, and belonging are imagined, negotiated, and denied in post-apartheid society. This study is partly motivated by a long-standing scholarly fascination with the idea of freedom. As a Nigerian woman, the concept of freedom, its promises, limits, and especially its contradictions, has remained a compelling concern, particularly within African cultural realities where freedom is often proclaimed but unevenly experienced. This personal (and

intellectual) preoccupation informs the present interrogation into how freedom is represented, deferred, or displaced in narratives of migration, especially when African migrants encounter hostility within other African nations.

Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* provides a poignant fictional lens through which to explore these concerns. The novel captures the experiences of Nigerian migrants in Hillbrow, a Johannesburg suburb marked by fleetingness, cultural plurality, and moral anxiety. The movement from "Lagos to Joburg" in the novel signifies more than a physical journey in search of "greener pastures." Metaphorically, it embodies how the "foreign African" can be perceived as a threat within the South African imaginary. Through its fragmented narrative voice and its engagement with themes of xenophobia, morality, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS, the novel dramatizes the tension between the expected promises of migration and the harsh lived realities of exclusion, stigmatisation, and violence.

Existing critical scholarship on *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* has extensively examined its narrative experimentation, its portrayal of HIV/AIDS, urban decay, and moral panic, and its critique of nationalism and post-apartheid disillusionment. While these studies acknowledge xenophobia as a central concern, the specific representation of Nigerian migrants is often treated symbolically or incidentally, rather than interrogated as a focal point through which socio-economic anxieties and national frustrations are displaced.

The contention in this paper is that Nigerian migrants in Mpe's novel function as scapegoats upon which South Africa's post-apartheid failures, unemployment, poverty, moral decline, and unfulfilled freedom are projected. The study, therefore, addresses a gap in existing scholarship by foregrounding the Nigerian presence as a critical site for examining how xenophobia operates as both a socio-economic and psychological strategy of deflection. To achieve this, the study adopts a qualitative, analytic literary approach informed by psychoanalytic and Marxist theory. Drawing on René Girard's concept of scapegoating (Girard, 1986) and Pierre Macherey's notions of implicit and explicit textual content (Macherey, 1978), the paper undertakes a close reading of selected narrative episodes that depict migration, violence, and social exclusion. This framework enables attention to both overt representations and narrative silences that reveal the contradictions embedded within post-apartheid notions of freedom. By situating *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* within the broader discourse of African migration literature, this paper demonstrates how the novel complicates celebratory narratives of post-apartheid multiculturalism. It ultimately argues that Mpe's text calls for critical self-reflection as a prerequisite for any meaningful realisation of freedom, one that remains an illusion more than three decades after apartheid.

## Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa has consistently emphasised its deep socio-economic, political, and historical foundations. Rather than viewing xenophobia as spontaneous or irrational violence, scholars conceptualise it as a structurally produced phenomenon shaped by inequality, state discourse, and collective anxieties arising from economic precarity.

### *Lagos to Joburg*

This body of work provides an essential framework for understanding how xenophobic sentiment is both normalised and reproduced in social and cultural narratives, including literary texts. One of the most influential theoretical interventions is Neocosmos's (2006, 2010) articulation of a state-centred discourse of xenophobia. Neocosmos argues that post-apartheid political rhetoric and institutional practices have constructed African migrants as threats to national security, economic stability, and social cohesion. This discourse, he contends, is internalised by citizens and reproduced through media representations and everyday interactions, thereby legitimising exclusionary practices and violence against migrants. Importantly, Neocosmos situates xenophobia within the broader failures of post-apartheid citizenship, where formal political liberation has not translated into material equality. His work is particularly relevant to literary studies, as it underscores how symbolic representations of foreigners participate in processes of othering and scapegoating. Complementing this perspective, Nyamnjoh (2006, 2015) situates xenophobia within wider African experiences of mobility, globalisation, and contested citizenship. He argues that postcolonial African states often replicate colonial hierarchies of belonging, producing what he describes as "insiders and outsiders within." According to Nyamnjoh (2006, 2015), African migrants are frequently constructed as perpetual strangers whose presence destabilises fragile national identities. This conceptualisation reinforces the understanding of xenophobia as historically embedded and structurally sustained rather than episodic. Together, Neocosmos (2006, 2010) and Nyamnjoh (2006, 2015) establish a critical framework that foregrounds the intersection of state power, citizenship, and economic inequality in shaping xenophobic hostility.

Empirical studies further substantiate these theoretical claims by linking xenophobic violence to material deprivation and social insecurity. Crush and Ramachandran (2014) demonstrate that economic competition, unemployment, and service delivery failures significantly influence negative attitudes toward migrants in urban South Africa. Similarly, Landau (2011) argues that migrants often become convenient scapegoats in moments of political frustration, particularly when the state fails to meet citizens' expectations. More recently, Susuman and Sithole (2024) contend that widening inequality, high unemployment rates, and rising crime levels have intensified hostility toward Black African immigrants, especially Nigerians. They argue that perceptions of migrant economic success, particularly among those who settled before 1994, fuel resentment and silent competition, which eventually erupts into overt xenophobic antagonism. These findings reinforce the argument that xenophobia functions as a displacement mechanism for broader socio-economic anxieties. Within literary scholarship, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* has been widely recognised as a critical intervention in debates about post-apartheid identity, urban decay, morality, and violence. Scholars such as Chapman (2006) and Samuelson (2007) read the novel as an urban narrative that exposes the fragmentation of post-apartheid society and the persistence of social exclusion.

Mustafa Mohammed Abdullah et al. (2021) further position the novel within discourses of decolonisation and neo-apartheid, arguing that Phaswane Mpe exposes the continuity of apartheid-era inequalities beneath the rhetoric of democratic liberation. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's theory of decolonisation, Abdullah et al. (2021) contend that South Africa's incomplete liberation manifests in persistent poverty, economic stagnation, and redirected aggression toward foreigners.

Abdullah et al.'s (2021) analysis emphasises that xenophobia in South Africa is predominantly directed at African migrants, who are constructed as strangers responsible for moral decay and economic decline. As they note, xenophobic violence has escalated alongside increasing intra-African migration, with hostility particularly aimed at migrants from other African countries (Abdullah et al., 2021). This reading reinforces broader scholarly claims that xenophobia is structurally produced by post-apartheid disillusionment and sustained through symbolic representations of foreignness. Despite this substantial body of scholarship, a significant gap remains in literary criticism concerning the specific representation of Nigerian migrants in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. While Nigerians are frequently depicted in the novel as emblematic of criminality, moral excess, and foreign intrusion, their function as scapegoated figures through which socio-economic frustrations are displaced has not been sufficiently theorised. Existing studies tend to focus on xenophobia in general terms, without interrogating how particular national identities are mobilised within literary narratives to absorb collective anxieties. This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding the Nigerian migrant as a critical site for examining xenophobia as both a psychological and socio-economic mechanism. By integrating René Girard's theory of scapegoating (Girard, 1986) with Marxist concepts of implicit and explicit content (Macherey, 1978), the paper extends existing scholarship beyond descriptive accounts of xenophobia. It demonstrates how Mpe's narrative strategies expose the contradictions of post-apartheid freedom and reveal xenophobia as a symptom of unresolved structural inequality rather than an inherent hostility toward migrants.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. Examines how xenophobia is represented in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* through the portrayal of Nigerian migrants within post-apartheid South Africa.
2. Analyses the ways Nigerian migrants are constructed as scapegoated figures onto whom socio-economic anxieties and post-apartheid disillusionment are projected in the novel.
3. Investigate how narrative strategies, including silences and omissions, suggest xenophobic ideology, drawing on Pierre Macherey's notions of implicit and explicit textual content.
4. Evaluates how Mpe's novel critiques dominant discourses of post-apartheid freedom and multiculturalism by exposing the psychological and ideological mechanisms of othering and exclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this study draws on

### *Lagos to Joburg*

psychoanalytic, Marxist, and postcolonial literary theories to examine the representation of Nigerian migrants in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Specifically, the framework integrates René Girard's concept of scapegoating, extracts from Pierre Macherey's Marxist Theory of Literary Production, and Edward Said's postcolonial concept of Othering. Together, these provide complementary lenses through which xenophobia is interrogated to apprehend how it is constructed, sustained, and, at moments, critically exposed within the narrative. René Girard's scapegoating offers a psychoanalytic explanation for collective violence, social exclusion, and the management of crisis within communities. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1986), Girard argues that societies experiencing internal conflict or instability often restore social cohesion by projecting blame onto a selected individual or group, whose symbolic or literal expulsion produces a temporary sense of order. Subsequent scholars have emphasised that scapegoating is not a random act but a socially organised mechanism that masks deeper structural contradictions (Palaver, 2013; Williams, 1996). Within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, Girard's framework is particularly useful for understanding how African migrants, especially Nigerians, are discursively positioned as responsible for unemployment, crime, and moral decay. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, scapegoating functions not merely as overt hostility but as a psychological displacement of unresolved anxieties arising from economic inequality, social fragmentation, and the failures of post-apartheid transformation. Girard thus enables the reading of xenophobia as a patterned social response to crisis rather than a spontaneous reaction to cultural difference.

Complementing Girard's psychoanalytic perspective is Pierre Macherey's Marxist implicit and explicit content, as articulated in *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978). Macherey contends that literary texts are produced within specific ideological and material conditions and therefore cannot be understood as unified or transparent reflections of reality. Instead, they are marked by contradictions, silences, and absences that reveal the tensions of the socio-economic structures from which they emerge. Critics such as Eagleton (1976) and Balibar and Macherey (1991) further clarify that these textual gaps are not aesthetic failures but sites where ideology is most visible. Macherey's distinction between explicit and implicit content provides a methodological tool for examining how *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* simultaneously reveals and obscures xenophobic violence. The marginalisation of migrant voices, the indirect narration of violence, and the deflection of responsibility onto rumour and collective narration are read as ideological silences that register the limits of post-apartheid inclusion. Through Macherey's framework, the novel is interpreted as encoding the contradictions of a society that proclaims equality while reproducing exclusion.

Edward Said's concept of Othering further strengthens the framework by accounting for the cultural and linguistic processes through which marginalised groups are dehumanised. In *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism*

(1993), Said conceptualises Othering as a discursive practice through which dominant groups define themselves as civilised, rational, and normative by constructing others as inferior, dangerous, or deviant. Later postcolonial scholars have extended Said's insights to African intra-continental migrations, demonstrating how Othering operates not only across racial lines but also within postcolonial societies (Mbembe, 2001; Nyamnjoh, 2006). In the South African context, this process is evident in everyday language used to describe African migrants, particularly the derogatory term *Makwerekwere*, which transforms linguistic and cultural difference into moral suspicion and criminal stigma. Said's framework enables this study to interrogate how language in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* normalises exclusion and legitimises violence by rendering Nigerian migrants perpetually foreign and threatening.

Examined together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the interconnected psychological, ideological, and discursive processes through which xenophobia operates in the novel. Girard explains the social need for a scapegoat in moments of crisis, Macherey reveals how this need is encoded in narrative silences and ideological contradictions, and Said exposes the discursive strategies through which exclusion is normalised. By synthesising these theories, the study moves beyond surface-level representations of xenophobia to examine how literary form itself participates in both reproducing and critiquing the structural failures of post-apartheid society. This theoretical framework positions *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a text that not only depicts xenophobic violence but also interrogates the fragile foundations of post-apartheid freedom. It enables a reading of the novel as a critical intervention that challenges celebratory narratives of liberation by exposing how economic inequality, symbolic exclusion, and unresolved historical tensions continue to shape social relations in contemporary South Africa.

### **Conceptual Framework**

An integrated literary-critical framework that draws on René Girard's theory of scapegoating, psychoanalytic notions of projection, postcolonial theories of Othering, and Pierre Macherey's Marxist concept of implicit and explicit textual content is adopted. Rather than applying these theories in isolation, the paper enters into a productive dialogue to examine how xenophobia is both represented and structurally embedded in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Girard's concept of scapegoating provides the primary lens for understanding how societies respond to internal crises by displacing blame onto a designated "other." In conditions of socio-economic instability, a community identifies a figure perceived as disruptive, whose symbolic or physical removal offers temporary relief and a sense of restored order. In this study, scapegoating is understood not as a ritualistic act alone but as a recurring social logic that informs narrative construction. The novel demonstrates how post-apartheid South Africa, faced with unemployment, inequality, and disillusionment, redirects collective frustration toward African migrants, particularly Nigerians, who become convenient repositories for anxieties about crime, moral decay, and national failure.

This scapegoating process is reinforced by the psychoanalytic mechanism of

### *Lagos to Joburg*

projection, through which individuals and communities externalise refuted fears, guilt, and inadequacies. In the text, qualities such as criminality, sexual excess, and the spread of HIV/AIDS are projected onto foreign bodies, enabling the dominant group to maintain an illusion of moral superiority while evading responsibility for systemic and historical failures. The emotional satisfaction derived from this displacement explains the persistence of xenophobic attitudes even when such hostility fails to resolve the underlying conditions that generate social distress. Postcolonial theories of Othering further illuminate how scapegoating and projection are normalised through language and representation. This study draws on Edward Said's formulation of the concept of Othering in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) as a process that fixes the self as fully human while rendering the other less than human. In this study, we examine how Nigerian migrants are discursively dehumanised in the novel. We see this in the derogatory term Makwerekwere. It functions not merely as an insult but as a linguistic strategy that consolidates in-group solidarity while legitimising exclusion and violence. As Rob Nixon observes, such terms transform linguistic difference into a marker of inferiority and threat, embedding xenophobia within everyday discourse (Nixon, 2011).

Pierre Macherey's concept of implicit and explicit textual content provides a crucial methodological tool for reading how these ideological processes operate within the novel. Macherey argues that texts often reveal their ideological tensions not only through what they openly state (the explicit) but also through silences, gaps, contradictions, and narrative absences (the implicit or "shadow areas") (Macherey, 1978). In this study, Macherey's framework enables attention to moments where xenophobia is suggested rather than directly articulated; where blame is displaced, responsibility is obscured, or violence is normalised through narrative omission. These silences are read not as narrative shortcomings but as sites where the text unconsciously registers the contradictions of post-apartheid freedom. By reading the novel through Macherey's lens, the study demonstrates how the scapegoating of Nigerians is sustained not only by overt accusations but also by what the narrative leaves unsaid. The normalisation of xenophobic assumptions, the absence of migrant interiority in certain scenes, and the indirect handling of violence all function as "shadow areas" that expose the ideological limits of post-apartheid discourse. When read alongside Girard's scapegoating (Girard, 1977, 1986) and Said's Othering (Said, 1978), these implicit moments reveal how xenophobia operates as a structural necessity within a society struggling to reconcile its ideals of freedom with persistent inequality. Through this integrated conceptual framework, the paper attempts to uncover the psychological, ideological, and textual mechanisms that sustain xenophobia. The framework thus positions *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a narrative intervention that exposes the contradictions of post-apartheid freedom and challenges readers to confront the silences that enable continued exclusion and violence.

### **Methodology**



This study lies within the humanities; hence, it adopts a qualitative, analytical literary research design grounded in textual analysis. The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical and is appropriate for examining how literary narratives construct, negotiate, and critique socio-political phenomena such as xenophobia and migration. The primary objective is not to generalise social behaviour but to analyse how the text, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, represents Nigerian migrants and how these representations function within the novel's broader critique of post-apartheid South African society. The study employs close reading as its principal method of analysis. This approach is particularly suited to identifying both explicit representations of violence and exclusion, as well as implicit meanings embedded in narrative silences, omissions, and deflections. By focusing on how meaning is produced within the text, the study foregrounds literary form as a critical site for understanding the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of xenophobia.

The primary data for this study consist of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which is analysed as a self-contained literary text situated within its post-apartheid socio-historical context. Secondary data include relevant scholarly criticism on the novel, as well as theoretical and contextual works drawn from literary studies, migration studies, postcolonial theory, and South African socio-political scholarship. These secondary sources are used to contextualise the textual analysis and to support theoretical interpretations rather than to replace close engagement with the primary text. The textual analysis is guided primarily by René Girard's psychoanalytic concept of scapegoating, which provides a framework for interpreting how collective anxieties and social crises are displaced onto marginalised groups. This perspective enables the paper to read Nigerian migrants in the novel as symbolic figures through whom unemployment, crime, moral decay, and post-apartheid disillusionment are projected. Girard's theory is complemented by Pierre Macherey's Marxist implicit and explicit content as propounded in *A Theory of Literary Production*. Macherey's framework informs the analysis of narrative silences, contradictions, and absences, allowing an interrogation of what the text cannot fully articulate about freedom, inclusion, and social responsibility.

While not the primary analytical lens, Edward Said's concept of Othering is employed tangentially to illuminate the discursive processes through which Nigerian migrants are linguistically and culturally marked as foreign and threatening. This supplementary perspective is particularly useful for analysing the language of exclusion and everyday xenophobic naming practices represented in the novel. The analytical procedure shows how the analysis proceeds through the identification and close examination of selected narrative episodes and character portrayals that foreground migration, exclusion, and violence. Attention is paid to moments where Nigerian migrants are associated with criminality, moral excess, or social decay, as well as to narrative strategies that diffuse responsibility for xenophobic violence across the community. These episodes are analysed for both their overt narrative content and their underlying ideological implications, in line with Macherey's emphasis on textual gaps and contradictions. Interpretation is iterative and reflexive, moving between textual evidence and theoretical concepts to ensure analytical coherence. Rather than imposing theory onto the text, the study allows

### *Lagos to Joburg*

theoretical insights to emerge from sustained engagement with the narrative. The focus is interpretive and analytical rather than sociological. Nevertheless, by situating *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* within broader discourses of post-apartheid freedom and African migration, the study offers insights into how literature can reflect and critique enduring structural inequalities and exclusionary practices.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* opens Johannesburg not as a glittering land of opportunity but as a turbulent urban space marked by contradiction, where dreams of "greener pastures" collide with harsh socio-economic realities. Central to this narrative are Nigerian migrants who journey from Lagos to Johannesburg in search of prosperity, belonging, and possibility, only to encounter suspicion, hostility, discrimination, and moral scrutiny. Their experiences foreground the tensions inherent in post-apartheid South Africa's promise of freedom and inclusion. We could liken their quest to The Utopian Quest as conceptualised by Adeniji (2013). Nigerian migrants in the novel are represented through multiple and often conflicting lenses: as scapegoats blamed for crime and disease, as lovers entangled in fragile and stigmatised relationships, and as figures whose presence unsettles South Africa's fragile post-apartheid identity. Characters such as Refilwe's Nigerian lover and the "under-waist bliss" peddlers, harassed by the policeman character known as Cousin, embody these tensions. Through such figures, Mpe exposes how xenophobia operates not only through overt violence but also through everyday suspicion, moral judgment, and institutional neglect.

In tracing the movement from Lagos to Johannesburg, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* does more than narrate migration; it dramatizes stigma, displacement, and the precarious search for home. This search is undertaken both by migrants seeking opportunity and by South African citizens who, paradoxically, are already "home" yet remain economically and psychologically dispossessed. Nigerians thus function as a narrative mirror through which Johannesburg confronts its post-apartheid anxieties. Their presence exposes the city as a symbol of incomplete liberation, an urban space that simultaneously welcomes and rejects, promises and withholds. Through this representation, Mpe dramatizes the fragile and uneven nature of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa.

Media headlines and public discourse play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Nigerians in the novel. Reports such as "Three Nigerians who evaded arrest at Jan Smuts Airport were finally arrested in Pretoria Street for drug dealing" (Mpe, 2001, p. 4) establish a narrative framework in which Nigerians are immediately associated with criminality. This association is reinforced by statements like "Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing" (Mpe, 2001, p. 17). These explicit representations construct foreigners as responsible for social decay and moral decline. Through Refentše's observations, Mpe reveals how such prejudices become normalised. Before long, they are circulating casually between private conversations, media discourse, and state institutions. Hillbrow

thus emerges as both a literal refuge for migrants and a symbolic setting of social tension. Mpe further intensifies this critique through the character of Cousin, a law enforcement officer whose actions expose the contradiction between institutional responsibility and lived reality. As a policeman tasked with upholding justice, Cousin instead becomes an agent of corruption and discrimination:

Together with his colleagues, he would arrest Makwerekwere, drive them around Hillbrow for an infinite period of time... 'See it for the last time, bastards,' they would tell the poor souls... Cousin and his colleagues received oceans of rands and cents from these unfortunates" (Mpe, 2001, p. 21).

This episode exemplifies how institutional power reinforces xenophobia through extortion and humiliation. The migrants' willingness to endure abuse underscores their desperation and their belief that South Africa represents a better alternative to life in Nigeria. Ill-treatment becomes a price worth paying, and the early signs of xenophobic violence go unrecognised. Cousin himself remains blind to his complicity, even as he condemns the crime and decay of Hillbrow, conditions he helps to perpetuate. Cousin's rhetoric mirrors broader societal discourse: "Cousin would always take the opportunity... to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow, for which he held such foreigners responsible" (Mpe, 2001, p. 17).

Here, Mpe illustrates the scapegoating mechanism described by Girard: systemic failures are displaced onto a vulnerable group, allowing perpetrators to absolve themselves of responsibility. Nigerians become convenient outlets for anxieties about unemployment, urban decay, and moral decline. This misplaced indictment is further captured in Refilwe's distorted account of Refentše's death, where she blames Lerato, whom she wrongly assumes has Nigerian roots. Her narrative draws on stereotypes of Nigerian men as wealthy drug dealers and moral corrupters: "When they love you, they simply dish out all the money they have... Drug-dealing being such a business" (Mpe, 2001, p. 44).

Through this misrepresentation, Mpe demonstrates how xenophobia thrives on rumour, misinformation, and imagined origins. The repeated association of Nigerians with drugs and crime helps explain the failure of institutions such as the police and the Department of Home Affairs to protect foreigners during outbreaks of xenophobic violence. Othering thus becomes a legitimising framework for neglect and brutality. A critical shift occurs when Refilwe travels outside South Africa and encounters institutionalised racism against Africans at Heathrow Airport. Witnessing the mistreatment of Nigerians and Algerians by British officials prompts her to reflect on South Africa's own prejudices: "She could not enjoy the bad treatment that she had witnessed the Nigerians and Algerians... receiving at the hands of the customs officials at our Heathrow" (Mpe, 2001, p. 100). By juxtaposing South African xenophobia with Western racism, Mpe expands the scope of the narrative beyond national borders. He suggests that social ills thrive on truncated and oversimplified narratives and that a global perspective is necessary to challenge prejudice. Through Macherey's lens, these moments function as implicit

### *Lagos to Joburg*

critiques, silences and contrasts that expose the ideological contradictions underlying claims of freedom and moral superiority. Mpe thus represents xenophobia as a global phenomenon sustained by misinformation and reinforced stereotypes. Hillbrow becomes the entry point through which local and global prejudices intersect, revealing how exclusionary practices limit freedom not only in post-apartheid South Africa but across the world.

### **Conclusion**

As the embodiment of a “Rainbow Nation” committed to reconciliation and diversity, post-apartheid South Africa nevertheless continues to struggle with economic inequality, social distrust, and unmet expectations of freedom. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe exposes how xenophobia functions as a mechanism through which citizens displace deeper anxieties about poverty, unemployment, and the unfinished project of national transformation. Nigerians are scapegoated as a means of expressing and legitimising collective frustration. The novel’s moral trajectory is embodied in Refilwe’s transformation. Her movement through the narrative’s spaces, culminating in Oxford, marks a shift from prejudice to self-reflection. She comes to recognise the shared humanity of migrants and the parallels between South African biases against Makwerekwere and Western racism against Africans. This awakening underscores the novel’s ethical insistence on rethinking stereotypes and confronting complicity. An important implication of Mpe’s representation of post-apartheid xenophobia is the suggestion of collective post-traumatic stress. Having only recently attained full citizenship and political freedom, black South Africans appear reluctant to share these hard-won gains with foreign Africans, figures who mirror their own recent past as marginalised subjects. Xenophobia thus emerges as a defensive response to fragile freedom, revealing the psychological costs of delayed and uneven liberation. Ultimately, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* presents xenophobia not as an aberration but as a symptom of unresolved historical trauma and structural inequality. By exposing the mechanisms of scapegoating, othering, and narrative silence, Mpe challenges celebratory narratives of post-apartheid freedom and calls for a more inclusive, reflective, and humane understanding of belonging in Africa and beyond.

### **References**

Abdullah, M. M., Ahmed, S., & Yusuf, K. (2021). Xenophobia, neo-apartheid, and decolonisation in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 57(3), 345–358. <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.1.25>

Adeniji, A. (2013). “We can redream this world and make the dream real”:

The utopian quest in Ben Okri's primary myths. In *Reading Contemporary African Literature* (pp. 197–212). Brill Rodopi.

Balibar, É., & Macherey, P. (1991). On literature as an ideological form. In T. Eagleton & D. Milne (Eds.), *Marxist literary theory* (pp. 79–99). Blackwell.

Chapman, M. (2006). *Southern African literatures*. Durban: University of Natal Press.

Coetzee, J. M. (1999). *Disgrace*. Secker & Warburg.

Crush, J., & Ramachandran, S. (2014). Xenophobic violence in South Africa: Denialism, minimalism, realism (Migration Policy Series No. 66). Southern African Migration Programme.

Eagleton, T. (1976). *Marxism and literary criticism*. Methuen.

Fanon, F. (1963). *The wretched of the earth* (C. Farrington, Trans.). Grove Press.

Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the sacred* (P. Gregory, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Girard, R. (1986). *The scapegoat* (Y. Freccero, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Landau, L. B. (2011). *Exorcising the demons within: Xenophobia, violence, and statecraft in contemporary South Africa*. New York: United Nations University Press.

Macherey, P. (1978). *A theory of literary production* (G. Wall, Trans.). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Mpe, P. (2011). *Welcome to our Hillbrow: A novel of post-apartheid South Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Neocosmos, M. (2006). From “foreign natives” to “native foreigners”: Explaining xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa. CODESRIA.

Neocosmos, M. (2008). The politics of fear and the fear of politics:

***Lagos to Joburg***

Reflections on xenophobic violence in South Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 43(6), 586–594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909608096655>

Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2006). *Insiders and outsiders: Citizenship and xenophobia in contemporary Southern Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2015). Mobility, belonging, and xenophobia in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 58(3), 1–17.

Palaver, W. (2013). *René Girard's mimetic theory*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Knopf.

Stearns, P. N. (Ed.). (2006). *Encyclopedia of social history*. Garland: Garland Publishing.

Susuman, A. S., & Sithole, M. P. (2024). Influence of socio-economic factors on crime among international migrants in South Africa. *African Human Mobility Review*, 10(1), 12–31. <https://doi.org/10.14426/ahmr.v10i1.1593>

Williams, J. G. (1996). *The Bible, violence, and the sacred: Liberation from the myth of sanctioned violence*. New York: HarperCollins.