

## Understanding South African Xenophobia Through the Prism of J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime 'Scenes from a Provincial Life'*

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### Abstract

The xenophobic violence and discrimination that greets African migrants in post-apartheid South Africa highlights a social and political issue that threatens the idea(l) of the open pan-African society. The article looks at this xenophobia through the lens of J. M. Coetzee fictionalized memoir *Summertime 'Scenes from a Provincial Life'* and tries to develop a new understanding of South Africa's relationship to the African 'other' – or to the 'other' Africa, relevant not only in the context of postcolonial studies but also in a more global perspective on social and cultural responses to processes of migration.

**Keywords:** South Africa, xenophobia, J.M. Coetzee, post-apartheid, postcolonial studies, migration

As the most developed country on the continent, South Africa is often referred to as the 'Europe' of Africa in terms of being the desired final destination of thousands of people. Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, a Nigerian writer, claims that South Africa served as an inspiration to the rest of Africa: "White people or no white people, it was an African country; it was an African star" (Nwaubani 2015). People migrate from all parts of the African continent to South Africa because they are fleeing political oppression or conflicts in their home countries. They seek economic opportunities and a better life that can only be offered to them there and not in their home country. Many wish to study at the high quality educational institutions in South Africa. Or sometimes, it is a combination of all of these.

However, one cannot overlook Nwaubani's use of the past tense when she talks about South Africa as the African star since the relationship between the refugees, asylum seekers, and the host population is strained because of the socio-economical environment in South Africa, with high unemployment, poor service delivery and economic inequality. Since the fall of the apartheid system in 1994 there have been continuous xenophobic attacks on foreigners. The destruction of immigrant-owned property, burning down their small shops, roadside stalls, and even their houses, became common practice and culminated in the 2008 riots that started in the township of Alexandra on the outskirts of Johannesburg. In these xenophobic raids over 60 people were killed and over five thousand people were forced to flee their homes (Nwaubani 2015). Many ended up living in refugee camps as they were afraid of re-integration and some even decided in favor of voluntary deportation to their home countries.

Seven years passed and little changed. Between 2008 and 2015, approximately 350 people had been killed (Blood at the end of the rainbow). As foreigners are seen as scapegoats for the decline of South African economy, in 2015 between March and May, another wave of xenophobic attacks hit the country that left seven people dead and thousands displaced and fleeing their homes again (World Report 2017). Government and public schools are reluctant in admitting or accepting refuge and asylum seeker students (UNHCR Operation in South Africa 2). The 2016 Amnesty International's Annual Report on South Africa noticed that "Police used excessive force against protesters. Torture, including rape, and other ill-treatment of people in police custody continued to be reported. Xenophobia and violence against refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants resulted in deaths, injuries and displacement. Many incidents involved the targeted looting of foreign-owned small businesses in townships" (South Africa 2016). In 2016, in Pretoria, 12 migrants were seriously injured and hundreds displaced in a mob raid against them, and in the Western Cape the looting of foreign businesses was prominent during the whole year.

In general, the attacks are most common in urban areas in Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal, the Eastern and Western Cape, and especially in townships of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Nevertheless, the violence has now spread and has become common practice in urban and rural areas across the land. In order to limit the attacks Amnesty International suggests “educating civil servants on the rights and documentation of foreign nationals; strengthening the capacities of institutions managing migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers; ensuring leaders make responsible public statements; and education campaigns in schools to promote cohesion” (South Africa 2016).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the South African Department of Home Affairs, in 2015, there were above 300.000 refugees and around 800.000 asylum seekers in South Africa (2015 UNHCR). The majority of refugees originate from Zimbabwe, Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Cote d’Ivoire (UNHCR Operation in South Africa 1). According to Statistics South Africa 2016 Community Survey the population of South Africa is 55.7 million, including 1.6 million people born outside of its borders, which equals 2.8% of its population (Grant, Pampalone and Brodie). However, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) reports that the number of international migrants living in South Africa is 3.24 million, or 5,8% of the entire population (Grant, Pampalone and Brodie). Due to the lack of concrete statistical information other humanitarian organizations give information that, additional to official figures, the number of undocumented migrants alone is around two million (Brodie). Altogether, there could be between five and six million foreigners in South Africa, either legally or illegally.

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu’s post-apartheid dreams seem far from reality as South Africa’s diversity is seen more as a source of division than richness and strength. In response to the 2015 attacks Tutu stated: “Our rainbow nation that so filled the world with hope is being reduced to a grubby shadow of itself. The fabric of the nation is splitting” (Blood at the end of the rainbow). Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation highlights that things are always made to mean in a certain context. Different things convey different meanings in different times or situations. By putting themselves in opposition to other Africans, South Africans instate themselves as the centre, as an ideal to which Africa should strive. In South Africa, the African ‘other’ is presented as non-human, almost bestial. These dominant articulations of superiority construct realities with material effects. Xenophobia in modern South Africa serves as a good example of how fast people are willing to forget the past when it suits them.

During apartheid many South Africans were forced to flee the country to other parts of Africa because at home they were discriminated. Now, when the tables

have turned, many makwerekwere, as foreigners from other parts of Africa are derogatorily called, are fleeing their war-torn countries to seek sanctuary, and South Africans could be the ones offering safe haven; instead, they discriminate and work against them (Zajec 48). Almost everybody in Africa has an opinion about South Africa. On the one hand, because so many of the African countries were involved in the struggle against the apartheid regime, today's reality as its final result, is disappointing. On the other hand, South Africans feel like they have been fighting for their rights and freedom for so long, only to see and feel like someone else is reaping its fruits.

John Maxwell "J. M." Coetzee is probably the most famous living South African writer. His 2009 Booker Prize shortlisted fictionalized memoir *Summertime* 'Scenes from a Provincial Life' offers an interesting insight on South Africa in the 1970's. With the apartheid regime in full swing one can already sense the origins of xenophobia gripping the nation today. For the fictional John Coetzee the National Party never cared or set out to save their 'civilization' as "Behind a smoke-screen of patriotism they are at this very moment sitting and calculating how long they can keep the show running (the mines, the factories) before they will need to pack their bags, shred any incriminating documents, and fly off to Zürich or Monaco or San Diego," because there "under the cover of holding companies with names like Algro Trading or Handfast Securities they years ago bought themselves villas and apartments as insurance against the day of reckoning" (5-6).

In *Summertime*, characters describe their experiences with John, Coetzee's fictional alter ego. Sophie, his lover and fellow lecturer at the University, describes that John was not interested in the liberation of the blacks under apartheid, thought he was sympathetic to the cause. She claims he was a fatalist and had utopian visions for the 'New South Africa' that couldn't have come true. Broadly speaking "a discourse of the 'New South Africa' involves concepts such as democracy, deracialisation, reconciliation and unity. Economically, it conveys notions of reconstruction, development and upliftment. Socio-politically, it is aligned with building the nation, and nationalism is a vital element of the discourse" (Harris 177).

Edward Said once noted that the capacity of imperial narratives to reinvent themselves, barely disguised, in the political and economic executives of globalism and new world orders, should be a constant source of concern and attention (Featherstone 170). The fictional John disclosed to Sophie his romanticized version of Africa, something that has for him been lost long ago in Europe; "His philosophy ascribed to Africans the role of guardians of the truer, deeper, more primitive being of human kind [...] What his position boiled down to [...] was old-fashioned Romantic primitivism. In the context of the 1970s, of the liberation struggle and the apartheid state, it was unhelpful to look at Africans in his way" (Coetzee 231). It was a role they were no longer willing to play.

South Africa's political transition to democracy has exposed the unequal distribution of resources and wealth in the country. In the post-apartheid era people's expectations have been raised and the disillusionment that followed resulted in discontent and indignation. People are now more conscious of their deprivation than ever before. Tshitereke notes that "This is the ideal situation for a phenomenon like xenophobia to take root and flourish" (qtd. in Harris 171). When the state represents undocumented, and also documented, African immigrants as parasites to the system, they are seen as the ones blocking the post-1994 national re-building process (Harris 176).

Thus, xenophobia can be understood as the product of social transition, as a defence against the anxiety induced by 'the unknown' (Hobsbawm 264). It can also be seen in the light of South Africa's search for an identity going from "a past of racism to a future of nationalism" (Harris 175). Xenophobia is a central feature of nationalism since it is "a form of violence and violence is the norm in South Africa" (Harris 180). Throughout history violence and nationalism go hand in hand as "The struggle to create the nation-state is a struggle for the monopoly of the means of violence. What is being created - a nation state - is itself a means of violence. The triumph of a particular nationalism is seldom achieved without the defeat of alternative nationalisms and other ways of imagining peoplehood" (qtd. in Harris 182).

In *Summertime* John assesses that "politics [...] brought out the worst in people and also brought to the surface the worst types in society" (Coetzee 228). Despite this, he believes that people "will never abandon politics because politics is too convenient and too attractive as a theatre in which to give play to our baser emotions. Baser emotions meaning hatred and rancor and spite and jealousy and bloodlust and so forth," and sees politics as "a symptom of our fallen state and expresses that fallen state" (Coetzee 229). South Africans may just be adopting the culture of violence they were experiencing during apartheid. This is a culture in which interactions and relations are resolved in a violent instead of non-violent manner, "a culture in which violence is proffered as a normal, legitimate solution to problems [...] as a legitimate means to achieve goals particularly because it was legitimized by most political role-players in the past" (Harris 179). For John "Nothing is worth fighting for because fighting only prolongs the cycle of aggression and retaliation" (Coetzee 230). The experience of hostility may generate further hostility through the deployment of coping strategies such as isolation, superiority and bitterness. Exclusion, alienation, and hostility operate in a complex, ongoing spiral and, as Julia Kristeva comments, "just because one is a foreigner does not mean one is without one's own foreigner [...] As enclave of the other within the other, otherness becomes crystallized as pure ostracism: the foreigner excludes before being excluded, even more than he is being excluded" (qtd. in Harris 181).

As apartheid has left deep scars in the minds of South Africans, their dominant groups define national legitimacy by stigmatizing foreigners. Using the strategy of excluding foreigners, they conquer and preserve their political power. While the common enemy 'apartheid' is defeated, the threat of outsiders has re-emerged. Because the victims of the socio-economic inequality and poverty cannot reach the richest that hold power, they react to the ones closest to them using high unemployment, competition for jobs, for education, even for women, as excuses to justify their attacks. Harris calls this the scapegoating hypothesis of xenophobia (171).

Xenophobia can also be seen as a consequence of apartheid South Africa's seclusion from the international community (Harris 172). Because apartheid isolated its citizens from nationalities beyond, foreigners represent the unknown to South Africans. With the political transition, however, South Africa's borders have opened up and the country has become integrated into the international community. This has brought South Africans, after a long period of international isolation, into direct contact with the unknown, with foreigners. John comments that the National Party felt like foreigners "held the Afrikaners in contempt and would turn a blind eye if they were massacred by the blacks, down to the last woman and child" (Coetzee 5). Therefore, "Alone and friendless at the remote tip of a hostile continent, they erected their fortress state and retreated behind its walls: there they would keep the flame of Western Christian civilization burning until finally the world came to its senses" (Coetzee 5).

According to Harris's isolation hypothesis, the interface between previously isolated South Africans and unknown foreigners creates a space for hostility to develop, since: "When a group has no history of incorporating strangers, it may find it difficult to be welcoming" (qtd. in Harris 172). In the novel Sophie notes how South Africans are isolated from the rest of the world and show "little or no interest in the rest of Africa: Africa was a dark continent to the north, best left unexplored" (Coetzee 222). Consequently, discussing foreigners appears as a very uncanny topic surrounded by mystery, by a fundamental disturbance that defamiliarizes, challenges beliefs and assumptions, producing alienation effects. Contemporary xenophobia can even more prominently be seen through the prism of internal isolation, the isolation of South Africans from South Africans, as a consequence of apartheid. The brutal environment created by apartheid with its homeland systems and enormous emphasis on boundary maintenance has impacted people's ability to be tolerant of difference (Harris 172). Harris emphasizes that "Due to the creation of strict boundaries between South African citizens, as well as between the country and other nations, South Africans might be unable to accommodate, and indeed tolerate difference" (173).

While differences exist, how differences are categorized is always a result of politics and power and not a question of biology. These dominant articulations,



generalizations, and stereotypes that are commonly offered regarding Africa and African foreigners offer insight into the hostility that meets this group and show how opinions can be manipulated. Africa above their country is seen “as ‘the troubled north’, a vague space marked by wars, woes and poverty. In this way, South Africa is divorced from the rest of the continent. Africa appears as a negative space ‘out there’, totally separate from the space ‘in here’ [...] a negative collective force without specific form or identity thereby representing an easy object of blame and anxiety” (Harris 175). This is mirrored in the words of Coetzee’s fictional father who has nothing but disdain for the continent to the north of them; “Buffoons is the word he uses to dismiss the leaders of African states: petty tyrants who can barely spell their own names, chauffeured from one banquet to another in their Rolls-Royces, wearing Ruritanian uniforms festooned with medals they have awarded themselves. Africa: a place of starving masses with homicidal buffoons lording it over them” (Coetzee 4).

The state’s and the media’s negative attitude towards black foreigners, and the use of the language of ‘contamination’, convince people that they threaten the nation by endangering its ability to provide resources, employment possibilities, and the levels of crime. They set up images of Africans as carriers of disease, especially the HIV/AIDS epidemic with South Africa being the country with the highest HIV prevalence in the world and almost six million people infected, and more recently Ebola. As such “the African foreigner is represented as a physical disease that literally threatens the body politic with contamination” (Harris 176). Neocosmos similarly looks back on apartheid’s anti-rural and pro-urban characteristics that “ruralized and devalued black lives [...] whilst urbanizing and valuing white lives [...] The post-apartheid state simply shifted this rural/urban binary opposition to Africa/South Africa, such that Africa is perceived as rural and backward and South Africa as urban and modern” (Matsinhe 298, cf. Maver 2013).

Frantz Fanon observed that the colonized have distorted views of themselves thanks to the colonial past. Bearing this in mind, Matsinhe describes that “longer than elsewhere in Africa, in South Africa one was born into, and became part of, a colonizing figuration, born of a colonial birth, living a colonial life, and dying a colonial death” (300). However, in the novel, Martin, who describes meeting John in 1972, while they were being interviewed for a job at the University of Cape Town talks about this legal, but illegitimate presence in South Africa: “We had an abstract right to be there, a birthright, but the basis of that birthright was fraudulent. Our presence was grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid. Whatever the opposite of native or rooted, that was what we felt ourselves to be” (Coetzee 209–210). Martin considers his position as a South African as even slightly comic since his ancestors “had tailored away, generation after generation, to clear a patch of wild Africa for their descendants, and what

was the fruit of all their labours? Doubt in the hearts of those descendants about title to the land; an uneasy sense that it belonged not to them but, inalienably, to its original owners” (210).

Nevertheless, the long colonial past can be closely linked to the idea of South African exceptionalism, where South Africa is presented as a kind of European outpost. Lazarus writes that “For most whites in South Africa, of course South Africa was not really in Africa at all. It was a “Western” society that just happened, accidentally and inconsequentially, if irritatingly, to be situated at the foot of the dark continent” (610). This entitlement of the white settlers is especially clear in the case of the so-called ‘original Cape colony’. John, “Like many whites [...] regarded the Cape, the western Cape and perhaps the northern Cape along with it, as standing apart from the rest of South Africa. The Cape was a country of its own, with its own geography, its own history, its own languages and culture” (Coetzee 232). In this mythical Cape, Africans were seen as aliens. John echoes Lazarus’s thinking as “he had no feeling for black South Africans [...] They might be his fellow citizens but they were not his countrymen. History - or fate, which was to him the same thing - might have cast them in the role of inheritors of the land, but at the back of his mind they continued to be *they* as opposed to *us*” (Coetzee 232; emphasis added).

Matsinhe speaks of a ‘social unconscious’ when the colonized fantasize of becoming the colonizer (301). The idea was perpetuated as far as claiming that because of the high level of industrialization, or the highly valued democracy, South Africans are different, even having lighter skin than other Africans, and will be able to solve their own problems not following in the footsteps of doom of other African states. Replaying past experiences, the weaker groups “measure themselves with the yardstick of their oppressor [...] always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others [...] And once the ideals of the oppressor become the aspiration of the oppressed, the oppressed has become a cultural clone of the oppressor” (Matsinhe 302). It might be that South Africans merely adopted the only pattern ever known to them. A pattern, where you can be either the oppressor or the oppressed, and there is no middle way.

However, identification with the oppressor goes hand in hand with self-hatred and self-destruction. Fanon wrote: “I am a white man. For unconsciously I distrust what is black in me, that is, the whole of my being” (qtd. in Matsinhe 302). Such thinking can lead to anger and violence, directed either towards oneself or to ‘the other’ since “Aversion to those who resemble the self externalizes self-contempt, and projects negativity of self accrued through generations of vilification to the other. From this point of view African foreign nationals are feared, hated and distrusted not because they are different, but because they resemble the former victims of apartheid” (Matsinhe 302). Freud called this the ‘narcissism of



difference', when the contempt for 'the other' is within us, especially if 'the other' resembles us (Matsinhe 309).

The legacy of apartheid, the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic, ignorance and illiteracy, poverty, growing inequality, the growing number of shanty towns and townships, or the increasing rape and crime rates are just a few problems South Africa is facing. In this light, the idea of South Africa as the richest, economically and technologically powerful, and most educated state on the continent is surprising. However, drawing on Marx's 'commodity fetishism' asserting that through practical experience inverted experience is born, Hage points out that the collective 'we' can experience what 'I' on itself never could (201).

'I' can be uneducated, poor and weak, but 'we' can still be wise, rich and strong. People always strive to be just as the "people who within their communal milieu represent the best of the best" (Hage 201). This process of selection comes with a negative side effect - repression. While creating a perfect 'racialized community', one must suppress negative, unpleasant, underdeveloped members and focus only on the brilliant ones. Hage emphasizes that "along with the positive anesthetization of the self comes the process of negatively aestheticizing the other, the one who is being racialized as inferior" (202). In this sense, "one systematically represses the whiteness of the other and the non-whiteness within the self to end up with a white self and a non-white other [...] through this selective aestheticization, racialized thought manages to create a sense of absolute difference between self and other" (Hage 202). Matsinhe explains the ideology of *makwerekwere* as externalizing internal oppression seeking "to make visible the invisible object of fear" (310). For him, the roots of such an ideology are found in "the psychological realm of ego-weak characters who construct their identity by denigrating others [in need of] scapegoats to externalize what cannot be sublimed" (qtd. in Matsinhe 310).

In *Summertime*, John Coetzee dreamed of "a day when everyone in South Africa would call themselves nothing, neither African nor European nor white nor black nor anything else, when family histories would have become so tangled and intermixed that people would be ethnically indistinguishable" (233). While his wishes might be too optimistic it is important to observe that what might at a first glance seem as a very specific and local problem in South Africa, can also be seen in a more global context, as the problems they are facing are universal. The history of violence and discrimination against African migrants in post-apartheid South Africa describe what has become a social and political issue that threatens the idea(l) of the open pan-African society. The idea to look at xenophobia through the lens of one of the most established contemporary South African writers and to develop a new understanding of South Africa's relationship to the African 'other' – or to the 'other' Africa – is relevant not only in the context of postcolonial studies but also in a more global perspective on social and cultural responses to

processes of migration. How a continent, and within it a country, is packaged or stereotyped, transcends a simple postcolonial frame when the main players are put on a global stage. South Africa's case study can provide global signifiers, give a humanizing perspective, and serve as a human rights narrative overreaching a simple hatred of foreigners looking forward, using the mistakes of the past as learning steps for the future.

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## Povzetek

Ksenofobično nasilje in diskriminacija, ki pričakata afriške migrante v Južnoafriški republiki po padcu apartheida, opozarjata na socialni in politični problem, ki ogroža idejo odprte (pan)afriške družbe. Članek obravnava to ksenofobijo skozi objektiv J.M. Coetzeejevih fiktivnih spominov *Summertime 'Scenes from a Provincial Life'* in poskuša razviti novo razumevanje južnoafriškega odnosa do 'drugih' Afričanov ali 'druge' Afrike pomembno ne samo v okviru postkolonialnih študij, ampak tudi zaradi globalnega pogleda na družbene in kulturne odzive na migracijske procese.

**Ključne besede:** Južnoafriška republika, ksenofobija, J.M. Coetzee, post-apartheid, postkolonialne študije, migracije