

Introduction

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Phaswane Mpe (1970–2004) was one of the major literary talents to emerge in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. A graduate in African literature and English from the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, he was a novelist, poet, scholar, and cultural activist who wrote with extraordinary commitment and originality, both in substance and in form. His intellectual honesty in exploring thematic concerns germane to postapartheid South African society continues to inspire readers who seek to reflect on old and new sets of problems facing the new South Africa. And his style continues to set the bar for many aspiring black South African writers.

Mpe's writing is informed by an oral tradition particular to the communal life of the South African

pastoral area of Limpopo. This, in addition to his modern university liberal arts education; his experience of urban life in Johannesburg; and, ultimately, his artistic sensibility and ability to synthesize disparate elements, has marked him as a truly “home-grown” South African literary phenomenon. It is no wonder that the South African literary community was struck by utter shock and loss in 2004 when the author died prematurely at the age of thirty-four. In literary historical terms, Mpe’s early death was indeed a defining moment. In an immediate way, his South African compatriots—writers, critics, and cultural activists—were jolted into awareness of what the loss of Mpe as a unique literary figure meant for South African literary tradition. In terms of his legacy, it was also a moment of acute revelation that the force and form of his work was a motivating influence for, just as it was inspired by, the emergence of many more writers of considerable talent. To celebrate Mpe’s role as transformative for South African literature is not to make an overstatement. In his book *Words Gone Two Soon* (2005), Mbulelo Mzamane, one of South Africa’s literary dons, has the following to say about Mpe’s influences and literary interchanges as he considers Mpe and Sello Duiker:

There was mutual admiration between Duiker and Mpe. Duiker delivered a moving eulogy at Mpe’s memorial service. . . . From the outpouring tributes to both, it soon became

apparent, first, that they commanded a considerable following and, second, that among their peers there are numerous closet scribes with major stories to tell [about the post-apartheid era]. (xii, xi)

Commenting on Mpe's unique writerly contribution to the continuum of black African literary tradition, the writer and philosopher Antjie Krog observes: "For a long time I have been wondering whether a strong communal sense would have an influence on the telling and writing of stories in black communities." To have a Western-centered notion of storytelling means, she says, to rely primarily on coherent linearity, on the presence of a main narrator and a main story line, and on a proper beginning and end (56). Answering her own rhetorical question, she points out that Mpe remains committed to traditional African forms of narrative that allow him, in his novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, not only to move in and out of the "physical and the metaphysical sphere[s]" effectively but also to employ a communal mode of narrative continuity. The story that begins with "an opening narrator who dies halfway through" is carried on by "another narrator [who] takes over without any obvious change in style or view" (57).

First published in 2001, seven years after South Africa's liberation from the apartheid system, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* provides its readers with substantial criticism and social commentary regarding the lingering and evolving problems of a new South

Africa. It focuses on themes that Mpe often referred to as “taboos” or “sensitive issues.” After a synopsis of the novel’s plot, this brief introduction will address the underlying thematic concerns of Mpe’s book by grouping them under the conceptual categories *euphemism*, *linguicism*, and *xenophobia*. Of course, the novel’s many concerns cannot be reduced to these few groupings. For example, it is evident that Mpe was interested in experimenting with the South African novel as a genre, appropriating traditional or local techniques to tell a contemporary or modern South African story of the postapartheid era. A reader will recognize that in Mpe’s text the *what* (narrative representation) and the *how* (language) are blurred entities; the “question of language” is openly a matter of contention; and the challenging social issues extend to other, bigger realms—including the subjects of history, memory, AIDS, linguistic and human rights, and the difficulties of building a globally oriented multicultural nation. But it is fair to say that the themes of euphemism, linguicism, and xenophobia appear as the author’s central concerns in the novel.

Plot

The plot of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is built around the parallel and intersecting lives of two articulate young black people, one male and one female. It is set in Hillbrow, one of Johannesburg’s violence-ridden

suburbs, and focuses on the thoughts and activities of Refentše, the central male character, and Refilwe, his female counterpart and one-time lover. Both are budding authors who can write in European and African languages, and their proficiency holds great promise. However, their dreams of leading meaningful lives of intellectual and literary creativity are thwarted as they become victims of literary sidelining and, later, of AIDS. When the novel closes we hear, through echoes and flashbacks, Refentše's voice speaking to us from the other world. At the same time, we see Refilwe returning home from Oxford, England. Before her encounter with other African students in Europe, Refilwe had been a bearer of xenophobia directed against black Africans, who are derogatorily referred to in the novel as the *Makwerekwere* (a slang term of uncertain origin). Having met and fallen in love with a Nigerian student in England, a young man whom she has planned to marry, Refilwe has undergone a transformation and no longer harbors prejudice against other Africans by the time she returns to South Africa. She has embraced a pan-African identity and has hoped to build a family. Her homecoming, however, is marked by tragedy: she has contracted AIDS, and she is returning home to die.

Euphemism and Linguicism

The motif of euphemism becomes central in the novel as Mpe demonstrates how the apartheid state

of South Africa managed to keep the black population under its control. As is only too well known, the apartheid state's policy and practice of subjugation of the African masses was instituted in material violence: spatial separation and alienation based on skin coloration; physical detention; the suppression and infiltration of resistance and revolt; the dispossession of land and the eviction of indigenous peoples, followed by their economic exploitation as workers in domestic households, commercial farms, and mineral mines—workers who often led isolated lives secured by what Jonathan Crush calls “panoptical surveillance” mechanisms (832). Also, as Antjie Krog makes clear in her harrowing account *Country of My Skull* ([1998], 2002), the South African state gradually transformed itself into a parasitical paramilitary machine. Given that his South African audience needs no explanation of the material foundations of apartheid, in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* Mpe does not dwell on apartheid's material exploitation and violence. According to Refentše, the novel's hero, the strength of apartheid lay rather in its ability to make many Africans continue to believe its racial supremacist assumptions. Exploiting black Africans' economic dependency, political apartheid systematically worked to manipulate, as Ngũgĩ would say, the “mental universe” of the black populations in order to prevent their thinking about their victimhood (*Decolonising the Mind*, 16). Thus, in one of the most forceful passages of

the book, Mpe shows how life in apartheid South Africa became not only brutal but also unreal and confusing as the black populations that had been driven away from their original spaces were programmed (and coerced) to accept their euphemized spaces as true homes. The novel's narrator says,

The woman of your fiction, Refentše, was writing in 1995, one year after the much acclaimed 1994 democratic elections; one year after the overthrow of the political and cultural censorship, and of the damaging and dishonest indoctrination system which had been aimed at forcing South Africans to believe that life's realities lay exclusively in euphemisms. These spaces called euphemisms . . . became homelands; where any criticism of Apartheid thinking became a threat to public morals; where love across racial boundaries became mental instability. (57)

This passage brings to the forefront the refutation of the black culture's right to exist by the controlling other. This denial had been normalized and internalized to the extent that multiracial and multicultural fraternization and love had become a source of shame in the public sphere of life. Readers will discern from other passages that the power structure of apartheid denied recognition to the history and existence of rural and urban indigenous culture and its political and cultural heroes. For example,

South Africans wishing to join the system had to accept their marginalized identities, including living in cities whose named components served as constant reminders of their subjugation. As the first chapter, “Hillbrow: The Map” (swarming with European icons and images), leaves no doubt, the street naming became what Ngugi wa Thiong’o describes as “a clear case of conquerors writing their own memory on the landscape of [South African] resistance memory”; the history of the black and nonwhite majority was systematically wiped out (*Something Torn and New*, 113–14). Moreover, in the dichotomous constructions of the apartheid system, all white was good and all black was bad, and black migrants who wanted to receive education or to have better jobs were expected to reject their native ways of life and language in exchange for the “civilised status” maintained by appropriating white characteristics and culture (Jackson, 222).

However, from several other passages in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, it is also apparent that it is not merely the remains of apartheid against which young South African men and women must fight and assert themselves today. The central character’s story reveals that even after the fall of apartheid and the ANC’s ascension to power in South Africa, it was difficult to gain access to, reclaim, and make use of South Africa’s indigenous culture and languages. Refentše’s stories and the juxtaposed accounts of Refilwe are highly significant in this regard. Their

stories acknowledge that the ideological marginalization and practical neglect of indigenous African languages and literatures were not and are not the fault of apartheid alone. The clearly stated reality that the two characters have to abandon writing in the Sepedi language because they are unable to make a name for themselves by writing in an African vernacular shows the limitations and failings of the postapartheid state, which seems powerless to put African vernaculars to effective use. This acknowledgment is vital because, as Refentše laments while alluding to the predicament of those who write fiction in local languages, South African writers who want to publish in African languages face a curious dilemma. While, on the one hand, the opportunity of writing in African languages has been guaranteed in the new South African constitution, on the other hand, writers have come to realize that these languages and literatures are viewed as inferior by their own reading public. It appears that, by and large, the indigenous languages and literatures have effectively become the victims of an almost irreversible phenomenon, which linguist Kwesi Kwaa Prah (after Phillipson) calls “linguicism.” Prah suggests that the process of linguicism is set in motion when languages are crowded out, or killed, by the effects of domineering languages—and when that process, instead of being corrected, is reinforced through the validation of “ideas, rationale, structures and practices which are employed to justify and legitimise

the production and reproduction of resources and power differentials between groups defined on the basis of language and language use” (19).

In the novel, the ramifications of this kind of linguisticism are captured in Refentše’s memories as he meditates on the risks and limitations of experimenting with African-language fiction. He writes:

You, Refentše, had written the story of your fictitious scarecrow heroine in an attempt to grapple with these profound questions of euphemism, xenophobia, prejudice and AIDS, to which Tiragalong pretended to have answers. Your story was in English, since unlike the naïve and hopeful woman of your fiction, you knew the limitations of writing in Sepedi. But, like your heroine, you wrote your story in order to find sanctuary in the worlds of fiction that are never quite what we label them. You wrote it in order to steady yourself against grief and prejudice, against the painful and complex realities of humanness. (59)

To a significant degree, this is a continued legacy from the past. In South Africa, black populations have been essentially cut off from their linguistic heritage, particularly in the public space in institutions such as schools, the workplace, and government. Historically this separation has produced conflicting responses from the affected communities.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe—through his male character’s voice—talks about why writing in an African language actually matters to writers, and why it is feared and resisted by the African elite and the publishing establishment. Through the evocation of artistic images and notions of beauty and a native literary value system, Mpe suggests opportunities where African-language literature could become a “sanctuary” of freedom for the individual and also a contribution “to important discussions of life in South Africa” (58). Yet he makes clear that the literary needs of such writers have been, to a large extent, in conflict with mainstream literary enterprise. In practice, this has meant that they could publish their work when they met the limitations set by censors and publishers but were rejected whenever the latter thought those limits had been transgressed. The supposed transgressions have involved matters of content, style, diction, or, as the novel points out, anything that relates to “morality,” however “questionable” and contentious it might be (58). The writer Refentše describes what happened to his peer, Refilwe:

She did not know that writing in an African language in South Africa could be such a curse. She had not anticipated that the publishers’ reviewers would brand her novel vulgar. Calling shit and genitalia by their correct names in Sepedi was apparently regarded

as vulgar by these reviewers, who had for a long time been reviewing works of fiction for educational publishers, and who were determined to ensure that such works did not offend the systems that they served. (56)

Refentše goes on to reveal the contradictions and ironies contained in this practice:

These systems were very inconsistent in their attitudes to education. They considered it fine, for instance, to call genitalia by their correct names in English and Afrikaans biology books—even gave these names graphic pictures as escorts—yet in all other languages, they criminalised such linguistic honesty. . . . In 1995, despite the so-called new dispensation, nothing had really changed. The legacy of Apartheid censors still shackled those who dreamed of writing freely in an African language. Publishers, scared of being found to be on the financially dangerous side of the censorship border, still rejected manuscripts that too realistically called things by their proper names—names that people of Tiragalong and Hillbrow and everywhere in the world used every day. (56, 57)

The use of euphemism is also seen in the representation of AIDS. The disease is viewed as a mysterious and mythical ailment. Rather than being named and explained, it is whispered about,

evoking images reminiscent of the Zulu film *Yesterday* (2004), written and directed by Darrell Roodt. In the film, the frightened Zulu villagers go after the infected heroine and her dying husband, who are said to be suffering from a bizarre disease. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the urban district of Hillbrow and the rural village of Tiragalong compete in mystifying and denying the existence of the “strange illness” (3) while community members point fingers at anyone but themselves as the source of the problem. In this way the affected “other,” the AIDS victim, remains euphemized and thus unseen. But however hard one may try to conceal the truth—and this is Mpe’s point—the disease is not restricted to rural or urban areas but rather cuts across cities, regions, race, gender, and professions; the AIDS pandemic eventually harms everyone in its way.

Xenophobia

The discussion of AIDS is linked to the issue of xenophobia in the novel. Unable and unwilling to accept the real causes of AIDS, the South Africa of Mpe’s fiction largely believes that the *Makwerekwere*—especially the Nigerians—are the bringers of the AIDS disease and immorality. This group of African immigrants and refugees is charged with promiscuity, drug dealing, and violence. Xenophobia also finds expression in other ways. In one example, Refentše’s own mother denies the existence of her

son's relationship with Lerato, who is black but is considered inferior because of her impure African-ethnic pedigree (39–40). A second example pertains to Refentše's death. It is clear that Refilwe's "carefully re-written version" of his suicide is given more credit mainly because she plays upon the xenophobic beliefs of the community (43–44). In yet another example we are told that although "there were exceptions" (54), the inhabitants of the rural setting of Tiragalong celebrate when a person commits suicide or when a damaging person is eliminated violently from the community—because it justifies their hatred of other Africans and urban dwellers. "Tiragalong danced because its xenophobia—its fear of and hatred for both black non-South Africans and Johannesburgers—was vindicated" (54). The revelation of one xenophobic story after another goes unchecked until Refilwe—once an enemy of foreigners—falls victim to AIDS and returns from Oxford to die in her home village. This moment also contributes to the resurgence of an "always already present" yet long-hidden truth within the community. As Refilwe and her community learn the hard way, the sufferers of AIDS are not foreigners alone, and the existence and impact of AIDS can no longer be ignored by the inhabitants of Tiragalong. Thus, Refilwe's homecoming brings all the xenophobic prejudices surrounding AIDS and the mystification of the disease to the community's attention, and Mpe's narrative is brought to a close.

For those who read a work of fiction primarily for the pleasure of reading, seeing Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a brilliant linguistic construction of the imagination will be satisfying enough. Of course, Mpe's novel is a literary-aesthetic rendition or refraction of both real and imagined realities of postapartheid South Africa, and it should, first and foremost, be read as such. But for those who want to examine South African society critically, and who seek to understand more and to "reflect on old and new sets" of problems challenging the New South Africa, one of the questions to be asked is this: What do the stories of the characters in the novel tell (or not tell) us about the hopes and dilemmas of postapartheid South Africa as it struggles to transition from a bitter history of apartheid to a democratic, unified, and stable multicultural and multiracial society? As we have seen, Mpe's novel also opens up an opportunity to raise questions and to think through South Africa's positioning within Africa—particularly in its treatment of African migrants. Equally pertinent are questions regarding the status of African languages and their future. All of these issues are important and do matter in South Africa. Yet despite the novel's attention to problems of euphemism, linguisticism, and xenophobia, which were at the height of their crisis when Mpe wrote this book about a decade ago—and which continue today with differing intensities—it is also vital to step back and to remember that South African society is a

dynamic and resilient society with a distinctive historical capacity for transformation, as is attested by the struggle of its people against apartheid and by the undaunted spirit of resistance of its principal leaders, such as Nelson Mandela. Ultimately, then, the wisdom embodied in Mpe's novel is that in registering serious problems that can explode if left unacknowledged and unattended it provides an appealing catalyst for open debate and resolution via a commonly shared responsibility of South Africans. And with regard to a wider vision of his craft, one may do well to give Mpe the final word:

My vision is to contribute to a critical engagement with, and [make an] artistically sound contribution to, reflections on sensitive issues in South African literature and society. This is important for the sake of fighting against complacency, as well as providing an antidote to those who think that [we] South Africans have nothing to write about in the post-Apartheid context. (Mzamane, 42)

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