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## Exorcising the ghost of the past: The abandonment of obsession with apartheid in Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

### Exorcising the ghost of the past: The abandonment of obsession with apartheid in Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

This article examines how Phaswane Mpe's post-apartheid novel, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2000), responds to Njabulo Ndebele's idea of "rediscovering the ordinary". This is probed through analyses of themes, characterization and style. It will be argued that, through *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe makes a call for introspection to the black South African populace of the post-apartheid era, so that instead of simplistically continuing to blame social ills on (the legacy of) apartheid, they examine their own attitudes, thoughts, perceptions and feelings regarding socio-political problems like corruption, crime, xenophobia and HIV/AIDS. In this respect Mpe stands apart from other black South African writers, such as Zakes Mda, who have produced their writings in the post-apartheid period. Ndebele's theory denounces the "spectacular" way of writing, which he sees as characterising the literary output of black South African writers during the apartheid era. However, this perspective has relevance beyond the apartheid era, in as far as black South African fiction writers should not deny society its natural wholeness of existence by not exploring diverse themes. **Key words:** Phaswane Mpe, post-apartheid, 'rediscovering the ordinary', South African literature.

### Introduction

In a critique of black South African literature prior to the advent of democracy in 1994, Njabulo Ndebele (1991: 37) observes that the "history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle", which has led to "the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation". He further asserts that this has resulted in a "society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and *the mature acceptance of failure, weakness and limitations*" (Ndebele [1991: 47]; our emphasis). It is clear from his observation that he laments the absence among blacks of the ability to undergo introspection, as they escape into blaming apartheid for every social challenge they are facing. He goes on to point out that one of the many weaknesses in this approach is "not permitting itself the growth of complexity" (Ndebele 1991: 47). The relevance of such an apartheid-era social analysis in today's post-apartheid South Africa lies in the fact that, as soon as excessive focus on apartheid gives way to a more balanced look

at reality, the view of society grows into the complexity hitherto hindered by a “spectacular” lens.

In an interview with Lizzy Attree (2005), Phaswane Mpe explains that he considers the process of exploring the politics of identity not as a burden, “but an opportunity to explore stories that have not been told on the one hand and on the other; to revisit old stories, retell them in a new context and see what you can learn”, because in the process, “you’ll also be seeing what you can retain and what you can do without in the present” (Attree 2005: 146). In Ndebele’s terms, such a literary approach and dissection of society is a “rediscovery of the ordinary”. Mpe’s reference to “a new context” and “in the present” can rightly be interpreted as his concession that an idea like this one of Ndebele remains relevant outside the time in which it was enunciated, provided that it is adapted to the new context and present times. We thus find it defensible to explore Mpe’s depiction of black life beyond apartheid South Africa from the perspective of a “rediscovery of the ordinary”.

The danger of continuing, even beyond 1994, to be spectacular and boil everything down to the effects of apartheid is for real. That is why during an address delivered at a memorial service, Archbishop Desmond Tutu urged former South African political activists to “remember the values and principles that united communities and drove the anti-apartheid struggle” (Archbishop Tutu). Echoing these sentiments at an annual public lecture, a former vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Mamphela Ramphele, bemoaned South Africa’s moral decay and social ills for which she contends “all South Africans are to blame” (Ramphele). She acknowledges moral decay as characterised not only by crime and unemployment but, also by what she calls “the most telling wound left from the past” which is the destruction of family lives, especially among black Africans. For Mpe to have written in the post-apartheid era therefore does not *ipso facto* remove the trap of sliding towards the spectacular.

Such a sliding towards the spectacular, which Mpe successfully moves away from in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2000), includes obsession with the ubiquity of the effects of apartheid in the social life of black South Africans. Writers such as Zakes Mda, for example, do not seem to have parted ways with “spectacular” writing in their post-apartheid writing. Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995), relates the protagonist Toloki’s physical abuse in his rural home and subsequent loss of his shack in an urban settlement at the hands of state-sponsored vigilantes, thus continuing in the post-apartheid era to premise events on the evils of apartheid that are the violent trampling on human rights through physical and psychological infliction.

In *Heart of Redness* (2000) Mda predicates his African characters’ cultural self-immolation on the inferiority complex inculcated on their psyche since the days of British colonialism through to Afrikaner-led apartheid. In *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) he delineates the scandal of sexual relations between prominent Afrikaner farmers and businessmen of the town of Excelsior, and African women of the

neighbouring Mahlatswetsa township – thus breaking the apartheid piece of legislation called the Immorality Act No. 23 of 1950. As Crous (2010: 79) significantly observes, “what happened in 1971 still has an effect” on post-1994 life in the rural community of Excelsior and its environs. That a novel of such content was published eight years into democratic rule attests to Mda’s continued preoccupation with the “spectacle” of apartheid even at that time.

This article sets out to investigate ways in which Mpe, in his 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. In his critical essay, “Stories and storytelling in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*”, Rob Gaylard suggests that, “Phaswane Mpe’s novel can be approached [...] as a contribution to a new genre of writing (the ‘Hillbrow genre,’ perhaps); as a variation on the ‘Jim-comes-to-Joburg’ story; as a post-apartheid dystopian novel; as a self-reflexive novel that engages in meta-fictional play; as an innovative and multi-layered autobiographical fiction” (in Mzamane 2005: 180). In this article we confine ourselves to looking at Mpe’s work as a “self-reflexive” and thus introspective work according to the way Gaylard describes it and as a “dystopian” work. Abrams (1993: 217) defines dystopian writings as “works of fiction [...] which represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination”.

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* will be shown to portray life in Hillbrow’s inner city, where the attention of the reader is drawn primarily to the dual themes of moral decay and the need for moral regeneration in society. The theme of moral decadence features as one of the central concerns of the novel. For instance, the narrator tells us that, “Cousin would always take the opportunity during these arguments to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow” (17). The narrator’s indication that the character Cousin “held [...] foreigners responsible; not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay” (17) reveals what Mpe sets out to expose as the weakness of the blacks inhabiting Hillbrow.

The fact that Cousin’s sentiments are echoed by many others, including the white superintendent in Van der Merwe Street who tells Refentše when he moves into his flat that “Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with their drug dealing” (17) elevates the narrow-minded view of society from the level of an individual character’s flaw to a national level. What Mpe is satirizing with such a characterization is the misplaced indictment of foreigners, particularly Nigerians, for the moral and environmental decay of Hillbrow. In the same way that everything in the past was blamed on apartheid, today societal anguish is blamed ‘spectacularly’ on the foreigners.

Although characters like Refentše’s Cousin and the white superintendent in Van der Merwe Street maintain that foreigners are responsible for the physical and moral

decay of Hillbrow, Refentše is said never to have “shared such sentiments” (17). It is Refentše’s opinion that “the moral decay of Hillbrow, so often talked about”, is in fact no worse than that of Tiragalong” (17). Refentše argues that the rural village of Tiragalong from which Hillbrow has drawn many of its South African inhabitants is “just as bad” (18). The phrase “so often talked about” signifies that Refentše’s view is contrary to the popular view of the majority of Hillbrowans who engage in wholesale xenophobia in commenting about life in Hillbrow. For Mpe to use dialogue like this to negate a social tendency of such an intensity in post-apartheid South Africa and yet evade the trap of spectacular writing, is evidence of effective characterisation.

There is a dimension of bending to populism in the flaw of writing in a spectacular fashion. One of the many ways in which a writer may gravitate towards spectacular writing is by failing to handle a topical issue in a manner that differs from popular ways in which such an issue is conceived of. The highlighting of moral decay and advocating of moral regeneration in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, are symptomatic of a need in South Africa to put moral regeneration on the national agenda. Thus, moral decay and its obverse moral regeneration have certainly been topical issues in the environment in which Mpe wrote. That is why the crux of what moral regeneration entails within the post-apartheid South African context can be summed up in the words of Jacob Zuma, the one-time chairperson of the democratic government’s Moral Regeneration Movement, which is

founded on the principles that South Africans are highly moral beings, know the difference between right and wrong, and are appalled by the symptoms of moral decay [which] include the blatant disregard for the sanctity of human life, the abuse of women and children, crime, substance abuse, lack of respect for the next person and their property and so forth (Zuma).

As an attestation to the topicality of moral decay and moral regeneration, Rauch (2005: 5, 51) has contended that the Moral Regeneration Movement initiative has “suffered from a lack of clarity about both its mission and its strategy” and does “not provide any guidance on exactly how the people could get actively involved in moral regeneration”, nor does it offer “a definition of what kinds of moral issues to focus on, and the drawing of any clear lines about what constitutes immoral behavior”. Such evaluations of a programme of South Africa’s post-1994 government are an index of both the reality of moral depravity and the absence of any sound measures by the government to redress the situation. Mpe can be said to have aimed at filling such a void, in crafting *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. This essay will demonstrate that, despite the magnitude and topicality of the social blemishes handled in the themes of Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the novelist does not degenerate to any ‘spectacular’ characterisation and style.

### **Corruption and the corrupting influence of the city**

Issues of crime and corruption in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are depicted as twin evils that complement each other in the mapping of the inner city as a monstrous habitation. Although Refentše's first night in Hillbrow is almost welcoming except for "the extremely busy movement of people going in all directions of Hillbrow" (7) it is not to remain like that. He is woken from sleep by the sound of a gun, a woman screaming for help and loud police sirens (9). It is disconcerting that the police are going "to rescue someone else, elsewhere, and not the nearby screaming soul" (9). Crime within the inner city is clearly rampant.

Predominantly black neighbourhoods like Hillbrow are not the only ones infested with crime. Areas like Hyde Park, "with its lily-white reputation for safety and serenity" (22), no longer enjoy relative security as was the case under apartheid. We are told that the first time someone takes a knife on Refentše, it is at Hyde Park Village (22). This incident happens when he disturbs thieves stripping cars of their radio sets during one of his visits to his aunt's employer's house (22). Such a milieu is the author's vehicle for satirising the freedom of movement now enjoyed by the formerly oppressed blacks, whose residential ratio is, ironically, an index for unbridled crime and amorality. Hence the character Refentše's observation that "If you consider that the concentration of people in Hillbrow is dense, and work out the number of crimes in relation to the number of people, I tell you, you will find Tiragalong to be just as bad" (18). This remark immediately draws into the crime and depravity quagmire of post-apartheid urban South Africa, rural villages that are supposed to be repositories of African humanist lifestyles.

As writers such as Mphahlele (2002: 147) and Rafapa (2007: 94) have pointed out, life in rural African residences with an African humanist ethos is not compatible with traits that are symptomatic of an unAfrican consciousness, like immorality and the harming of fellow humans, as in committing crime that invariably undermines the sacredness of human life. It is with this perspective that, the gravity with which Mpe is portraying the immanence of crime and moral decay in post-apartheid South Africa will be appreciated. With such a painting of the setting of the novel, Mpe manages to shift focus from the crass injustices of apartheid, towards a call for introspection among the now 'free' Africans in the post-apartheid era. Such an exposition should also be seen as a call on the part of the black South African citizenry to look within themselves before they pass judgment on Hillbrow alone as a high crime zone. It is also the author's way of saying that before we blame the foreigners, symbolised by Hillbrow where they are found in large numbers, let us also look at ourselves, symbolised by the rural village of Tiragalong, to see if we are not equally the source of aberrant acts.

One other way in which Mpe strengthens his censure of the way South African blacks tend to shift the blame to groups outside of themselves, is his blurring of

boundaries between urban and rural social life. It is noteworthy that the narrator emphasises social interconnectedness between rural Tiragalong and urban Hillbrow, in the remark that “a large percentage of our people who get killed in Hillbrow, are in fact killed by other relatives and friends – people who bring their home grudges with them to Jo’burg” (18). A point of reference is Molori’s organising of professional killers to stab his cousin Piet to death, after consulting a Malawian bone thrower who divines that Molori’s mother has been bewitched by Piet and his mother out of jealousy, adding that Piet’s mother “does not like the fact that her son is working as a gardener for a white family, while your mother’s son is working in an office” (76). This leaves the reader in no doubt that despite the crime being committed in Hillbrow, the death cannot be simplistically linked to the lifestyle in Hillbrow or any events endemic to Hillbrow. Unfortunately episodes such as these tend to be clustered with those incidents for which Hillbrow, and by extension foreigners, have become so notorious.

This is not to deny that Hillbrow and other urban black South African residential spaces continue to be adopted by Mpe as a symbol of post-apartheid debauchery. It is inconceivable to have robbers attacking a police station and thereafter be seen just “walking out with a large cache of guns” (104), as Refilwe tells her J-9 friends in Oxford about Cape Town crimes. This is an indictment of the security system that borders on a suggestion of corruption in the upper echelons of society, for inside work cannot be ruled out in an incident like this. In all these incidents, we are not told of any arrests of the culprits involved. This shows that the state of crime in post-apartheid South Africa in which blacks are in charge, and especially in the inner city where blacks are a majority, is out of control, for a variety of reasons including corruption.

### **Corruption and other crimes**

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe portrays corruption at the highest levels of society where we find the security system and the Department of Home Affairs, as organs of state, harbouring within their ranks corrupt officials. We are told that Cousin and his colleagues would arrest foreign black nationals, *Makwerekwere*, and drive them around Hillbrow for infinite periods of time (21). The fate of such cyclic drives includes Cousin and his colleagues receiving “oceans of rands and cents from these unfortunates, who found very little to motivate them to agree to be sent back home” (21). The horrific limits of corruption within South African authorities are conveyed by the hyperbolic reference to bribe money as “oceans of rands and cents” (21). That Mpe depicts the foreigners as helpless victims of the situation is evident in the sympathetic tone of his description of the foreigners as “these unfortunates” (21).

We are also told that, “*Makwerekwere* had also learned a trick or two of their own. Get a member of the police, or a sympathetic South African companion, to help you



organise a false identity document – for a nominal fee. Or, set up a love relationship of sorts with someone from the city” (21). The sympathetic attitude of the author towards the foreigners testifies that statements like these are not primarily a comment on the foreigners’ mode of operation. Rather, they are an acerbic comments on the corruptible nature of the South Africans themselves.

The behaviour by the Hillbrow police can only lead to a vicious cycle of corruption in all its manifestations. When the powers that be are the perpetrators of corruption, we can expect that this will lead to desolation. Such behaviour gives credence to Gaylard’s observation that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a “post-apartheid dystopian novel” in which the new challenges that are presented seem to be escalating and insurmountable (Gaylard).

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* viewed as a dystopian novel, the people of Tiragalong are portrayed as perceiving the city Hillbrow as possessing power to corrupt those who come to it. Not only does it corrupt, but it destroys innocent minds that come to it. The voice that addresses Refentše says, “By the time you left Tiragalong High School to come to the University of the Witwatersrand, at the dawn of 1991, you already knew that Hillbrow was a menacing monster, so threatening to its neighbours like Berea and downtown Johannesburg, that big, forward-looking companies were beginning to desert the inner city” (3). The narrator intimate that, “The lure of the monster was, however, hard to resist; Hillbrow had swallowed a number of the children of Tiragalong, who thought that the City of Gold was full of career opportunities for them” (3).

Diction like “companies” and “full of career opportunities” (3) used to describe Hillbrow, is indicative of the culture of possession and self-aggrandisement, the setting in of which among post-apartheid black South Africans the novelist is lamenting. In this way, the conception of the novel as dystopian acquires the more specific theme of neo-colonial materialism that Mpe is cautioning the black South African populace against. From such a perspective, the Hillbrow inner city can be understood to be a microcosm of post-apartheid South Africa in which a lack of introspection among the blacks may lead to self-destructive, materialist neo-colonial tendencies. Writers on African thinking, such as Mphahlele (2002: 147) have indicated that “Being, in African tradition, is more important than having”.

A society that values being more than having would not be dazzled by the lure of western materialism, represented by Hillbrow in the novel, to the extent of disregarding the spiritual values of Africanness that shun the desecration of the human body and soul by means of crime and immoral conduct. In this way, Mpe consistently calls for introspection among blacks in the post-apartheid era, so that opportunities brought along by liberation do not lead to alienation with African values. This approach is a break from a perceived obsession among blacks to blame all manner of social ills on apartheid.

Mpe's approach is that of maintaining that the opportunities offered by Hillbrow *per se* are not to blame for the ills of society evident in its environs. It is society that should undergo introspection and where residents should make proper use of the available opportunities. It is corrupt people who come to Hillbrow, who make Hillbrow corrupt, be they foreigners or otherwise. It is at this point that Mpe introduces the issue of xenophobia, as one more mechanism by which introspection is evaded. It is significant that 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*" (18). If it is the black South African nationals who kill each other, it is therefore they who are making Hillbrow corrupt. 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 "[c]onvenient scapegoat (sic) for everything that goes wrong in people's lives" (118).

Mpe uses dialogue in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* to try and offset such a victimisation of foreigners as scapegoats for every frailty. In one dialogue, Refilwe tells Refentše that "since you have admitted that you love us both, would you not feel more at home in the arms of a child of Tiragalong? We know what Jo'burg women can do to a man!" (90). Refilwe here avoids blaming philandering squarely on the male character, for the reason that Johannesburg women can corrupt a man and they are thus to blame for the man's loose morals. Refentše's response reinforces Mpe's position that such an apportioning of blame is unwarranted: "Yes, some Jo'burg women are certainly terrible. But the same can be said of some Tiragalong women. Are some of them not known for throwing love potions into food and drink of their husbands and illicit lovers? Love potions that are sometimes so strong that they turned the men into madmen?" (90).

The characterisation in Mpe's novel constantly ridicules the shifting of blame and affirms the need for introspection among black South Africans themselves. That is why the South African character Terror is introduced as "a womaniser of the worst kind" (64) who was "making a career for himself as a rapist" (65). It is the same Terror who, upon learning that Refentše has committed suicide after catching Lerato and Sammy in bed, blackmails Lerato by telling her "if she let him play his games between her thighs, he would keep the secret from her mother" (67). Creation of a character such as Terror is the author's way of highlighting the South African black population's acute need for moral regeneration.

Mpe seems to utilise violence as an externalisation of black South Africans' spiritual death. Even when they are jubilant, the merriment of Hillbrow's residents is accompanied by violence. This leads to the novel about soccer-loving black South Africans opening in a startling manner: "If you were still alive, Refentše, child of Tiragalong, you would be glad that Bafana Bafana lost to France in the 1998 Soccer



World Cup fiasco” (1). To justify such an apparently treasonous view, the narrator graphically portrays the effects of soccer victory in Hillbrow, making specific mention of the 1995 Bafana Bafana victory against Ivory Coast. The jubilation aroused by that success ends with the people hurling bottles of all sorts from their balconies, others boasting a range of driving skills which ends up with a child being fatally hit by a car (1–2). Similarly, on the day that the university car, which Refentše and fellow students have borrowed is hijacked, while they are held hostage by the hijackers, people in Hillbrow are singing *Amabokoboko ayaphumelela* because the South African Rugby team has won the Rugby World Cup (22). The verbal violence of such chanting on the minds of the hostages is no less excruciating than physical violence in the hands of any mob.

Much of the violence that is portrayed in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is perpetrated by black South Africans. The raping of black foreign women is perpetrated by the black policemen (21). These actions by such a body as the police service run contrary to the principles of the Moral Regeneration Movement cited in the introduction. This takes us to Ndebele’s observation that “Power and wealth became the dominant determinants of behaviour: two key ingredients in the recipe of socially embedded corruption” (1998: 24).

Once more, Mpe uses dialogue to pose an antidote to society’s propensity for crime and corruption. When the white Superintendent exclaims that “Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing” (17), the narrator argues that “when locals are prepared to lap at [drugs] like starved dogs” (18) the struggling immigrants will continue their supply. In this way, the real criminals are debunked to be the South Africans themselves, for taking drugs. As for the crime of sexual violence in society, the narrator significantly calls for a change of attitudes thus: “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 and ...” (20). This dialogue puts the stress on South Africans dabbling in the crime of prostitution, rather than shift the blame to the foreigners.

This stance reinforces what the narrator has highlighted earlier, that there are foreigners who are “lecturers and students of Wits, Rand Afrikaans University and Technikons around Jo’burg; professionals taking up posts that locals are hardly qualified to fill” (18). The narrator not only defends the presence of foreigners in South Africa, but goes further to castigate the lack of acceptance of the foreigners’ positive contribution among South Africans. It is clear that corruption, violence and other crimes depicted in the novel are not peremptorily to be attributed to foreigners who come to South Africa in search of sanctuary and job opportunities.

Mpe’s demonstrated position that the perpetration of such crimes should be seen as a result of interaction between foreigners and locals, hints at xenophobia as one of the themes in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

### **Xenophobia on South African soil and further afield**

In his interview with Attree, Mpe provides the rationale for including the issue of foreigners and xenophobia in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as reality, “the question of African Internationals in Hillbrow” is “one glaring presence” in post-apartheid South Africa (in Attree 2005: 141). While finding fault with society for maltreating foreigners, Mpe sees the apathy of South Africa’s Department of Home Affairs towards foreigners as a major contributor, and as running “contrary to the human rights clauses detailed in the new constitution of the country” (23).

The seriousness with which Mpe handles the theme of xenophobia in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, seems to agree with the appeal by commentators such as Kollapen (1999), for the dictionary meaning of xenophobia should not be confined to the fear and hatred of foreigners, but to include its description as a violent practice that results in bodily harm and damage. This view may explain why Mpe puts xenophobia under a magnifying glass that elevates it above local society to national and international dimensions.

Mpe’s indication of the cause of xenophobia in South Africa as the concerns of foreigners taking away jobs that South Africans would otherwise occupy (18), deliberately pokes fun at the perpetrators. That is why elsewhere, through the voice of a character, Mpe dismisses this job-stealing claim. Several years later, the ruling African National Congress party leader, Thabo Mbeki, used similar words in his condemnation of the 2008-attacks on foreigners, stating that some foreigners are more skilled than South Africans and they are, therefore, contributing positively to the South African economy (Dlamini 2008: 6).

When Mpe introduces xenophobia within an international context, the trivial nature of justifications for xenophobia is exposed. In England, the Oxfordians make a distinction between South Africans and other Africans. Refilwe could not “enjoy the bad treatment that she had witnessed the Nigerians and Algerians, for example, receiving at the hands of the Customs Officials at our Heathrow” (100). While back home in Hillbrow the common South Africanness of the urban and rural blacks is denied as exemplified earlier in the stereotypical stigmatisation of Johannesburg women, in Oxford the common Africanness of the black South Africans and Africans from other African states is eroded. It makes no sense that, if such a denial of common Africanness did not impress Refilwe while directed at the foreigners in Hillbrow, it should now appal her when she witnesses it away from home in England. The truth expressed by Gaylard in his critique of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is driven home more explicitly by such a supremacist drama straddling national and international platforms, that the labels we give to each other prevent us from “acknowledging our common humanity” (Gaylard 2005).

The common weakness spawned by bias manifested back home among black South Africans who call other Africans *Makwerekwere*, is highlighted among the residents of

Oxford, among whom there is another word for foreigners that is not very different in connotation from *Makwerekwere* or *Mapulantane* except that it is a much more widely-used term: *Africans*. Refilwe is to observe, in Oxford, that people there “talk about Africans and South Africans” (102). The tendency to see a difference where none exists extends to the relationship between the Oxfordians themselves and the two ‘classes’ they distinguish in their reference to the visitors from Africa. Although “the Oxfordians who talked so distinctly about Africa and South Africa were themselves a hybrid of native Oxfordians and those who had acquired the citizenship by other means” (102), they ironically fail to discern the probability of some of them (the Oxfordians) being of African origin.

There are significant parallels between the treatment of foreigners in South Africa and England. Foreigners, in South Africa, are collectively blamed for bringing AIDS and dealing in drugs, as the dialogue between the narrator and Refentše reveals (19–20). In England, Refilwe learns that “the supposed reason for the treatment” of foreigners like animals is that they are “drug dealers, or arms smugglers, engaged in trading weapons for their civil war-wracked countries” (101). Significantly, this is proven to be untrue, because we are told that the Oxfordian Customs Officials would, after disorganising their luggage, not “offer apologies to those – a significant number of them – found to be innocent as far as the carrying of drugs and ammunitions was concerned” (101).

The voice that directly addresses the departing Refilwe tells her that she has “come to understand that [she] too [is] a Hillbrowan. An Alexandran. A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian. A *Lekwerekwere*, just like those [she] once held in such contempt” (122–23). The significance of this remark is that human beings are the same. It is important to note that Refilwe’s experiences, both at home and abroad, take her through a journey of growth and transformation, summed up in her address by the narrator. Griffith (1990: 51) talks about this growth, which as he points out, takes place in a dynamic character, especially the main character. In this case it is Refilwe who fits the description. Inferring from the tone of the author, which can be detected in the narrator’s intimation that “You have come to understand” (122), this kind of growth is commendable. The growth of Refilwe, who is an epitome of the social ills of post-apartheid black South Africa, coincides with the ideal, introspective society that Mpe, through the moral of the novel, envisages for post-apartheid South Africa.

The manner in which Refilwe attains this growth is remarkable. Refilwe is suffering from AIDS. Upon discovery that she is infected with the AIDS virus, she realises that she was not infected by her Nigerian lover whom she met in Oxford (117). The infection has taken place while she was still in Tiragalong. This revelation subverts popular understanding and media reports, as reflected in the novel by the statement that says, “AIDS’s travel route into Johannesburg was through *Makwerekwere*” and that “Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked” (4). It is apparently

with great shame and a crippling sense of guilt that Refilwe discovers, as Gaylard contends, that she is “no better or worse than anyone else”. This exposition carries with it Mpe’s sentiments and views about the treatment of foreign nationals in South Africa. One can argue that Mpe’s view is that foreigners should be treated with dignity and respect, like any other human being. The novel is pointing out that in the same way that there is a physical resemblance between the departed Refentše and Refilwe’s Nigerian lover (109), there is indeed no difference between *Makwerekwere* and South Africans.

Harris (2002: 169) observes that discourses of the ‘New South Africa’ and the ‘African Renaissance’ are significant in the discussion of xenophobia as “both are in common circulation and yet contradict each other at the point of nationalism.” African Renaissance, he contends, “is defined in terms of continental borders rather than national barriers”, adding that, “In this discourse, an African identity, and not a South African identity, predominates” (Harris 2002: 176). In contrast, “Nationality is a fundamental feature of [the New South Africa] discourse and a South African identity prevails” (Harris 2002: 177). The contradiction presented by the two discourses depicts South Africa as a hypocrite in dealing with xenophobia, because in the advancement of nationalism, xenophobia takes root and flourishes, while African Renaissance “underplays national boundaries and emphasises regional and pan-African cohesion in terms of economics, culture, growth and development” (Makgoba 1999).

The portrayal of the character of Refentše, his attitudes and values represent a stance that advocates for sympathy with the cause of foreign nationals in South Africa. The reader is urged to emulate the character Refentše, and never share the sentiment that “Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came” (17).

### **South Africans’ perceptions of HIV/AIDS**

The novel portrays South Africans in a manner that reveals perceptions towards HIV and AIDS that are characterised by xenophobia and stigmatisation. That is why Mpe has remarked “the twin themes of xenophobia and HIV/Aids in the South African context have to date not received as much attention as they merit, especially given the *high numbers of African internationals* in the country and the high death rate amongst South Africans due to HIV/Aids” (in Mzamane 2005: 31; our emphasis). For Mpe, thus, HIV and AIDS cannot be discussed in isolation from xenophobia, prejudice and stereotypes.

HIV and AIDS are among Mpe’s greatest concerns. These concerns emanate from the fact that although the pandemic is popular in both the press and audio-visual media very little about it appears in South African literature. Mpe says, “I think issues like xenophobia and HIV/AIDS have not been discussed very much in South African literature written in English” (in Attree 2005: 144). It is perhaps on the basis of this

omission that Mpe believes that he has found a mission to be part of the emerging tradition of writers in the post-apartheid era. That Mpe finds it to be “a very odd omission” for HIV/AIDS not to have featured so much in Truth and Reconciliation novels, like Arthur Maimane’s *Hate No More* (2000), attests to his mission to evoke some introspection not only among the readers of black South African literature of the post-apartheid period, but among its writers too. His chief concerns remain xenophobia, prejudice and the perpetuation of stereotypes, with HIV/AIDS serving to bring such societal weaknesses to light.

Mpe’s claustrophobic depiction of Hillbrow in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as “that locality of just over one square kilometre, according to official records; and according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people” (1), foreshadows its inhabitants’ ravaging by runaway infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS. When death strikes at one time, South African migrants in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* ascribe it to a strange illness that “could only have been AIDS” (3). The narrator’s speculation proceeds towards “popular understanding” according to which AIDS is caused by foreign germs that travel down from central and western parts of Africa (3–4). Certain newspaper articles attribute the source of the virus that causes AIDS to “a species called the Green Monkey, which people in some parts of West Africa were said to eat as meat, thereby contracting the disease” (4).

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, people who suffer from AIDS are Refilwe, her Nigerian lover whom she meets in Oxford, and the woman of Refentše’s fiction, who upon discovering that she has AIDS, decides “to pour all her grief and alienation into the world of storytelling” (55). The plot singles out grief and alienation as the two emotions that accompany AIDS. These emotions result from what Mpe describes as the “ignorant talk of people who turned diseases into crimes” (116). When a disease is criminalised, those who suffer from it carry the burden of the pain caused by the disease as well as that of facing their judges.

The most important dimension that Mpe deals with as far as HIV/AIDS is concerned, is the attitude of people towards the disease, the stereotypes that they form around the disease as well as the stigma that haunts the patient. He challenges the mythical stories of South African migrants that are deduced from sensational media reports (4). Mpe also denounces the stereotype that AIDS is caused by the bizarre sexual behaviour of Hillbrowans, for the reasons that those who make the allegation have never seen nor practiced homosexuality and the characters who contract the disease do so through heterosexual relationships (4).

While the novel challenges the prejudices and stereotypes, it dispels denialism by acknowledging the existence of AIDS and its devastating effects on society. When Refilwe returns from England, she returns, “as they say, with a degree in her bag. Troubled by her rapid deterioration” (115). The scourge of the disease carries with it hopelessness, because to date the medical profession has not discovered the cure for

the disease. While Tiragalong people vehemently condemn people who suffer from HIV and AIDS, which they claim can only be contracted from foreigners, the narrator contends that, “They did not realise that several of the people they had buried in the past two years were victims of AIDS” (121). He goes on to point out that “It was easy to be ignorant of this, because this disease lent itself to lies. Such people were thought to have died of flu, or of stomach-ache” (121).

There is also a perception in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* that HIV/AIDS is a disease that infects people who are promiscuous, hence the villagers’ retort upon learning of the health status of the HIV-positive woman, that “she deserved what she got. What did she hope to gain by opening her thighs to every *Lekwerekwere* that came her way?” (54). Mpe’s disagreement with such stigmatisation is well known, from sources like his interview with Siphiso Mahala, in which he emphasises that “many people who are HIV positive are respectable people” (see Mzamane 2005: 51).

One more sphere in which Mpe wishes black South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa to do soul-searching, is in the stereotypes they have forged around HIV/AIDS. The moral to be drawn from the novel is that the spread of the disease cannot be blamed solely on foreigners. This happens as a result of reckless social interaction by both locals and foreigners.

### **Conclusion: rediscovering the ordinary**

Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a work that calls upon its black South African readership to be introspective and reflective. The novel handles themes that can be seen as positively responding to the demands of Ndebele’s idea of “rediscovering the ordinary”. The novel breaks the tradition of the ‘spectacular’ way of writing, by dealing with the experiences of every day life of South Africans in the post-apartheid era. In the novel, the South African social fabric is portrayed as being in a state of turmoil. Here we cite as evidence for this observation Refentše’s cousin’s reference to the two brothels in Hillbrow:

If you want it, he says wryly, you can go into this Building. He points to a building at the corner of Clarendon Place and Kotze, the entrance of which is in Kotze. It is Called Quirinalle. Or if you prefer, you can head on to the very end of Kotze, he continues. You see those green, yellow and red lights dancing? That is Chelsea. One semi-naked soul comes out of Quirinalle and Cousin’s point is made (11)

This is just one of the various social problems highlighted in the novel, that tells us that South Africa’s moral fabric is in a state of decay and that there is a need for moral regeneration. Within an African ethos, it is unethical to turn sex into a commercial commodity. Yet the scene cited above reveals that such activity is commonplace in Hillbrow. The urgent need for moral regeneration is further evidenced by the



juxtaposition of “a terribly noisy shebeen”, *Jabula Ebusuku* and the church “the Universal Kingdom of God” (8) which are said to be competing for the spiritual commitment of the inner city dwellers.

For Hillbrowans to continue to celebrate the national team’s soccer victory immediately after a girl of about seven is fatally hit by a speeding car, is symbolic of the death of morality in Hillbrow. The narrator captures the celebration metaphorically thus, “*Shosholoza* [...] drowned the choking sobs of the deceased child’s mother” (2). The pertinent question one asks here is what kind of people are these, who can continue to be merry in the face of the tragic death of a child. It is against this background that we agree with Gaylard’s assertion that the novel can be approached as a contribution to a new genre of writing and also a post-apartheid dystopian novel.

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* also breaks tradition with what is called “protest literature”, a mode of writing which in South African literature has been characterised by “stories revealing the spectacular ugliness of the South African situation in all its forms: the brutality of the Boer, the terrible farm conditions, the phenomenal hypocrisy of the English speaking liberal, the disillusionment of the educated African, the poverty of African life, crime, and a host of other things” (Ndebele 1991: 40).

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, as a work of art, has in simple narrative terms, reconstructed ordinary experiences of the people in post-apartheid South Africa by portraying the issues that South Africans are faced with on a daily basis. These are issues such as crime, the scourge of HIV/AIDS, the glaring presence of foreign nationals and its consequences, xenophobia and prejudice as well as the exponential rate of unemployment. The novel achieves this by its employment of ordinary characters such as students, who are at the periphery of the spectacle of grand political circles. Mpe presents these characters and their problems in a manner that mirrors the challenges of ordinary South Africans in the post-apartheid era where the focus is no longer on the struggle against an oppressive system of government, which is championed by the white minority.

In the novel there is a call for introspection primarily among members of the black South African citizenry. Furthermore, the readers in general are also encouraged to examine their own thoughts and attitudes in the light of the prevailing circumstances. The novel, therefore, can be seen to be responding to Ndebele’s idea of rediscovering the ordinary.

In order to produce works of art that are thematically relevant, writers need to stop apportioning blame for South Africa’s ills on the legacy of apartheid and begin to reflect on their own thoughts and attitudes with regard to issues that are posing challenges in the new South Africa. We want to believe that Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* achieves this, since it illustrates the author’s views on the call he makes to South Africans to take a closer look at themselves in order to find the real cause of their plight in the light of the prevailing circumstances.

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