

The Re-emergence of South African Nationalism in Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain*

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Abstract: Post-apartheid nationalism intended to bind South Africans together through a common identity, rooted not in the old racial divisions but membership in a multi-racial democracy known as the “rainbow nation.” Attempts at post-apartheid nation building, however, did not successfully address the structural inequalities left over from apartheid. Not only have these internal socio-economic divisions persisted but the search for cohesion under a national identity further opened the door to the kind of xenophobic, anti-immigrant nationalism that appears to be on the rise throughout the world. This paper looks at Kopano Matlwa’s latest novel *Period Pain* and the way in which it illustrates the rise in xenophobic, nationalistic violence towards immigrants, which has troubled South Africa over the past decade. Her novel reflects both the rise of new nationalisms, and the re-emergence of old nationalisms which never fully disappeared.

Keywords: South Africa; Kopano Matlwa; post-apartheid; xenophobia; nationalism

“The streets are crawling with bloodthirsty men calling for foreigners to leave the country” (Matlwa 1). These words, written by Kopano Matlwa, apply not only to her home country but also to many nations around the world. The link between South Africa and Australia, embedded as they are in settler colonial structures is the subject of wide-ranging study *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia*. This comparative study explains that “these two Southern spaces, once part of the British empire” shared “their ... settler myths of the ‘empty land’ and policies of a white racial domination” (Darian-Smith et al. 1). Both countries also face an upsurge in xenophobia and a rising discontent with levels of immigration. As a post-apartheid nation, attracting immigrants from the rest of Africa, South Africa is a particularly vexed case. The nation, existent in its modern, democratic form since 1994, is moving from the ethnic nationalism of a powerful white minority state to a xenophobic nationalism against new migrant groups. This is further complicated by the perception that nationalism is a necessary means to advance internal unity in a divided postcolonial nation. Postcolonial theorists since Frantz Fanon have seen nationalism as a space of resistance to colonialism. However, as William J. Spurlin writes, “the new meanings of national identity and citizenship in postcolonial nations ... often slide from operating as a site of opposition ... to ... oppression” (362). The borders of the post-apartheid, postcolonial nation are still the site of exclusion, although new categories of outsiders have emerged. South African authors have the difficult, yet important role of engagement, exposition, and criticism of the politically, economically and socially conflicted situation.

A new generation of writers has recently emerged in South African literature. Described somewhat inaccurately as the “born free” generation, these authors were born, or more often, approached adulthood at the fall of the apartheid regime. These emergent authors have yet to

receive the critical attention and indeed the readership of apartheid era writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Zakes Mda and Nadine Gordimer; however, their contribution is crucial for understanding nationalism in South Africa today. Lynda Spencer, writing in 2009, laments the critical “focus on established writers, often white and/or male” and an “insufficient focus on black women’s writing” (67). In the subsequent ten years very little has changed. In this paper I will consider the work of Kopano Matlwa, one of the most established women authors from the cohort of post-apartheid writers. Matlwa’s work, including *Coconut* (2007) and *Spilt Milk* (2010), deals with the complexity of adjusting to South Africa’s new reality. Her work deals with the themes of identity, nationalism and trauma, themes which pervade contemporary South African literature.

Matlwa’s latest novel, *Period Pain*, leaves behind the hope of the rainbow nation—the idea that all ethnicities are welcome in South Africa, stressing the positive aspects of postcolonial nationalism—and the immediate aftermath of the apartheid. Published in 2016, this novel has moved on from looking at the transition to democracy and instead considers South African life twenty years after the end of apartheid. Many of the ideals and hopes of the transition phase have failed to fully materialise, one of the most important of these is a failure to fulfil the dream of the rainbow nation. The rainbow nation, better described as an idea than a theory, is a widely-used term coined by Desmond Tutu to describe the potential future of a multi-ethnic South Africa, where people from all cultures, language groups and backgrounds could co-exist within one nation (Milazzo 131). This idea has been much maligned in recent years, due to disappointment with the extent to which a truly integrated South Africa has been achieved. This disappointment has been registered on an academic level, as this paper will explore, but also in many newspaper articles as well as in popular culture. Matlwa explained that she wrote the novel to work through her own disappointment with the “new South Africa” and to remind herself why she still believes “in the South African dream” (Jennifer).

Period Pain is the story of a young South African female doctor called Masechaba, who lives with her Zimbabwean friend Nyasha. Masechaba, the narrator, is overwhelmed by the horror of the things she has witnessed working as a doctor in a public hospital, from extreme poverty to violence and xenophobia. She is almost accidentally drawn into starting a campaign against the racist treatment of migrants from other parts of Africa. In part, Masechaba initiates the petition-based campaign simply to gain the admiration of her friend and flat-mate Nyasha. However, she gains a surprising amount of publicity amongst her colleagues and even in the local press. A vicious assault threatens to destroy her belief in herself, her cause and the possibility of articulating a positive South African identity. Through the first-person narration Matlwa explores the complexity of hope and fear for people like Masechaba who wants to believe in a brighter future but is faced with a troubling and unstable present.

As well as exploring manifestations of xenophobia, I will deconstruct the reasons for the rise in xenophobia depicted in the novel, using Tabish Khair’s *The New Xenophobia* to analyse the economic as well as social reasons for an upsurge. Khair claims that xenophobia is far from being “a problem to do with people” (9). Rather, xenophobia arises due to economic and state-led causes. Matlwa’s novel shows that the political and social need for an economically disadvantaged other is as strong now as it was during the apartheid. Even supposedly positive articulations of nationalism, such as the ideal of the “rainbow nation,” can lead to a lack of

justice for the poorest in society. Francis B. Nyamnjoh's analysis is also pertinent when considering such issues. He explains that xenophobia is also rising due to the doctrine of forgiveness and reconciliation, which failed to allow for redistribution. Further, the "concessions made to globalised capitalism," in South Africa as in other nations, lead to an increase in xenophobia (Nyamnjoh 37). Nationalistic discourses are not re-emerging but instead are part of a continuation, as they focus on the diminishing of bodies and the promotion of the nation-state. This paper will consider both xenophobic manifestations of nationalism, but also nationalisms which, despite their efforts to be inclusive, still cause damage to bodies which do not fulfil certain expectations.

Xenophobia in the New South Africa

Xenophobia and the marking of difference are trends that appear to be coming to the fore in South Africa. Matlwa's novel illustrates that the new South African xenophobia has a similar racial-economic structure to the apartheid regime. She highlights the similarities between the racism directed towards new migrants to South Africa, and the racism of the apartheid regime. The narrator, Masechaba, who is constantly questioning her own behaviour, is very aware of this link. Initially she compares her attitude to the xenophobia she witnesses to white liberals who opposed the apartheid yet took no real action against it. She justifies the behaviour of her racist colleagues at the hospital and does not challenge their prejudice. She admits: "... instead of telling them that what they're doing is wrong, and possibly illegal, I do nothing. I'm a coward. If this were apartheid, I'd be one of those quiet white people who just stood by and watched it happen" (Matlwa 49). Masechaba explains the link between anti-immigrant sentiments and the apartheid: "I feel bad about how our country treats them. We should know better, what with apartheid and all" (Matlwa 41). Masechaba understands that the xenophobia towards immigrant communities is unjustifiable, yet she lacks the courage to confront those who engage in such behaviour.

Masechaba is also complicit in many of the hypocritical behaviours until she befriends Nyasha, a fellow doctor at her hospital who is originally from Zimbabwe. As a student she laughs with her peers about the smell of immigrants, even though she is also ashamed. She admits, "I remembered laughing at them myself in first-year varsity when Zanele called them all oorkants and refused to share a dorm room with one because she said they smelt of menstrual blood" (Matlwa 74). Even Nyasha, who she looks up to, does not totally dispel these feelings. When they argue, she criticises Nyasha, blaming her actions on her Zimbabwean roots. In unrelated conversations, Masechaba internally reacts by attributing certain characteristics to Nyasha—characteristics she must have because she is foreign. The reader is party to Masechaba's inner dialogue through the diary form of the novel. Masechaba confesses: "Sometimes I want to tell her to go back to her own country and fix her own problems and stop meddling in ours," though in reality, she insists, "I'd never say that. It's not a nice thing to say" (Matlwa 42). One day finally she says it out loud: "I asked her how she thought her ancestors felt about her running away from her own country and making a nuisance of herself here" (Matlwa 62). Masechaba also believes that being South African is better than being from anywhere else. In her efforts to be kind to Nyasha, she writes in her diary: "I was blessed to be born South African. It's not her fault she wasn't" (Matlwa 42). In this way she exposes a feeling of superiority—being South African is better than being from another South African nation. Despite being aware of the links between her own actions and the injustices of apartheid, she's unable to see beyond

Nyasha's difference. It is an inherent reference point that Masechaba's society has been perpetuating since before her birth and which she is unable to transcend, despite her efforts to think in a different way.

The marking of difference is not based only on nationality but also on a perception of the difference and inferiority of those who are not from South Africa. This is not a national inferiority based on culture but something more inherent to the immigrant group. Discrimination is based on perceived ethnicity, rather than nationality. Khair explains that although xenophobia functions through the idea of difference, "it is not the difference of the stranger that we fear when we are xenophobic; it is a certain construction and understanding of difference (which might or might not exist)" (Khair 21). There are likely as many commonalities as differences between South African citizens and immigrants, or indeed the citizens of and immigrants to any state. However, as Khair explains, xenophobia arises from not the commonalities of an immigrant and citizen, but is formed by augmenting and carefully selecting the points in which they differ. Whether real or imagined differences, they serve the purpose of distinguishing between "us" and "them." Khair uses the example of an American citizen who feels no fear of the Danish family who move in down the street. Even if they speak limited English and have an entirely different lifestyle, the white American citizen is not troubled by these differences. Instead he fears the difference of the African American neighbour whose family have lived in the same town for generations and whose lifestyle is almost identical to his own. Not all differences carry the same weight. This is illustrated in *Period Pain* where the two women's similarities—their age, gender, professional and home country—become forgotten in the face of Nyasha's immigrant status.

In contemporary South Africa illegality is still associated with skin colour. As Nyamnjoh explains, individuals are often assumed to be "Makwerekwere"¹ on the basis that they "look foreign" or are "too dark to be entitled to South Africa, and the police are supposedly able to identify foreign Africans by their accents, hairstyles or dressing styles" (49). Nyamnjoh adds that "people are arrested for being 'too black,' having a 'foreign name' or, in one case, walking 'like a Mozambican,' humiliations which illegal white migrants are unlikely to suffer" (32). Xenophobia constructs the necessary difference, even resorting to the gait of a person. Masechaba understands Nyasha's pale skin to be an indicator that you would not know she was not South African "until you speak to her" (Matlwa 42) In this case the difference in dialect and vocal expression is considered to be far more important than physical similarities. Her pale skin is not enough to make her accepted as a welcome resident of South Africa, whereas another's dark skin might trigger hostility and be the feature that makes them unwelcome—even if their speech is similar to a native South African. Differences are not logically patterned, equally weighed, nor responded to consistently. They are instead subjectively discriminated against given a particular circumstance and this unreliability further disrupts the attempts to lay a foundation for a more united South Africa.

In South Africa today xenophobia as a form of exclusion is based on conceptions of citizenship. Belonging to the South African nation is limited to those who have legal citizenship (Nyamnjoh 40). Matlwa, through the character of Masechaba's mother, shows that even those who

¹ This is an insulting term used for foreign immigrants resident in South Africa, normally other Africans.

supported the anti-apartheid struggle on the grounds of racial equality still demonstrate xenophobia attitudes to more recent immigrants. Immigrants such as Nyasha are seen as being unentitled to partake in what South Africa has to offer. They are seen by Masechaba's mother as stealing and taking things that "real" South Africans deserve. As she warns her daughter away from Nyasha she explains: "Everything you've worked so hard for will be gone, and you'll be left with the nothing they arrived in this country with" (Matlwa 38). Nyasha has trained as a doctor and is working in the clearly stretched and understaffed South African National Health Service. However, her contribution is ignored, she is still condemned by Masechaba's mother as a drain on society. Immigrants are seen as having nothing of value to offer, and to have come to South Africa only to take.

Hatred against foreigners is also justified by Masechaba's mother as part of the liberation struggle, rather than such xenophobia being in contrast to the values of the anti-Apartheid movement. She explains that the foreigners do not deserve anything because: "they come to our country to take from us all the things we fought for" (Matlwa 40). The fight against apartheid is transformed by her mother and turned into a fight to possess the nation. The anti-apartheid struggle is re-imagined not as a struggle to gain equal rights, but instead as a battle to win the nation for "legal" South African citizens, not for all residents. Nyamnjoh explains that citizenship has become the site of exclusion in the new South Africa, but that citizenship is not based upon residency (40). Many of the communities targeted in the attacks that Masechaba witnesses were present during the apartheid, when many black South Africans were also made non-citizens. The apartheid forcibly removed black South African citizens to homelands where they then had to work as immigrant workers in South Africa, with few rights and in terrible conditions. Nyamnjoh explains that rights to citizenship, based on the apartheid definitions of citizenship have influenced present day citizenship allocation. He asserts: "few Makwerekwere who slaved away in the apartheid mines as undocumented migrants have been granted citizenship in the new South Africa, where "only nationals matter" (Nyamnjoh 40). This is despite the fact that the only real "nationals" under the apartheid regime were whites, with many blacks being placed in semi-autonomous zones from which they were forced to commute as migrant workers. The current xenophobic tendencies targeting Makwerekwere are clearly an outcome of a "narrowly nation-state-based citizenship" (Nyamnjoh 40).

Matlwa's novel also explores the way in which migrants are considered to be on the borders of what counts as human. Immigrants look different, and where they do not it is only because they are hiding their difference. Khair's description of the vampire provides a useful point of reference when considering the way immigrants from other African countries are marked as different. He explains that the vampire has to look "almost human" but clearly is not. The vampire's human-like appearance is sinister and motivated by a desire to harm. The vampire, according to Khair, also shares characteristics with animals, placing it in a liminal position between the human and animal (Khair 21). The disconcerting animal/human physicality of immigrants is emphasised by many characters in this novel. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, immigrants are identified with hated animals, in this case cockroaches. For example, at the hospital Masechaba learns that "One of the Nigerian doctors was spat on by a patient yesterday. According to the other interns, the patient said she didn't want to be examined by a cockroach" (Matlwa 79).

Matlwa particularly stresses the physical nature of the rejection of immigrants. Even where this does not go so far as to describe a person as a cockroach, there is a strong sense that immigrants are diseased and can contaminate the community. An otherwise kindly nurse, who sees Nyasha giving Masechaba her water bottle, warns Masechaba: “You can get sick drinking from their bottles” (Matlwa 65). Nyasha is obviously able to hear, but the nurse doesn’t seem to consider this a problem. The remainder of the nursing staff react in a similar way regarding the foreign patients: “They scrunch up their noses when they examine them, they laugh at their names” (Matlwa 48). Nurses blame immigrants for the overcrowded wards. They dehumanize them, though they do not seem to consider the implications of what they are saying. Masechaba does: “They call them dirt” (Matlwa 48). These nurses are the same ones who selflessly use their own money to help other South African patients who cannot afford to pay for their own medical care (Matlwa 28). The novel provides details of xenophobic reaction in a particular setting and this example shows just one realisation of xenophobia in the modern South African setting. Identity is constructed by marking difference and recognising it as inherent.

Matlwa shows that these kinds of xenophobic behaviours can easily develop into something more obviously recognisable as violence. If we consider violence as Khair does, following in the tradition of Levinas, as any act upon another person without their consent (Khair 4), then violence is a constant throughout this novel. It develops into direct physical violence with a series of attacks. Masechaba reflects: “Things have got worse. The xenophobic violence has spread like wildfire. On my call last night, the Emergency Medical Services brought in a foreign national who’d been burnt alive and sustained third-degree burns to 80% of his body” (Matlwa 77). Many people are harmed and even children are wounded in the violence. Matlwa’s novel shows that the hatred which she portrays early in the novel can easily tip over into physical violence.

Thus far this paper has considered what Khair describes as “old xenophobia” which focuses on the construction of differences of paramount importance, which are then identified in the part of the population which is to be excluded (Khair 6). Khair also refers to a “new form of xenophobia,” which is focused on enforced integration of the victims of xenophobia, who despite the required efforts will never hold an accepted position in the hostile community (6). Certain cultural behaviours and even behaviours which are a result of the exclusion process are presented as reasons to exclude a group. This new kind of xenophobia moves away from the physical differences and focuses on cultural differences which mean that the immigrant community cannot or will not integrate. Masechaba’s mother would never refer to a migrant as a cockroach, but she is willing to assign behaviours to a group. She claims that Nyasha is only being Masechaba’s friend to “steal all [her] intelligence” (Matlwa 38). She casts the immigrants into a degree of difference which renders them unknowable: “I’m just saying, Masechaba, be careful in the future with these foreigners. I know you have a big heart and you feel sorry for them, but they’re not people like us. You think you know them, but how can you ever really know them unless you live in their countries and see how they do their things?” (Matlwa 126). Masechaba’s compassion is condemned as it is suggested that she should not demonstrate empathy to those who come from other cultures. While Masechaba is aware of the parallels between current mistreatment of migrants and the racism of apartheid, those around her are unable to, or do not want to see the similarity. Her mother insists that immigrants “are not people like us” (Matlwa 126). Social behaviour rather than physicality marks new

“xenophobia.” Her mother does not believe in physical contamination but rather the malicious actions of foreigners. She suggests that they use “black magic”—rather than an inherent physical difference, this is a cultural one (38). It nonetheless performs the same function in terms of marking difference in foreigners.

Causes of Xenophobia

Thus far it was argued that *Period Pain* thematizes a new kind of nationalism arising in the post-apartheid state. This form of nationalism, which in recent years has occurred in many contexts, draws on a fear of immigrants and an exclusive sense of being South African. The identity of a South African is based on a narrow conception of legal status which is necessarily connected to an idea of ethnicity. Matlwa also illustrates in the novel the causes for this uprising in nationalistic hatred. The novel explores the link between the dominant postcolonial metanarratives in South Africa: truth and reconciliation, the rainbow nation, and the rising xenophobia in South Africa. At first the role of such doctrines may appear to be contradictory—the rainbow nation theory is explicitly inclusive, referring to the acceptance of multiple ethnicities and cultures whereas xenophobia results in exclusion. Aretha Phiri writes: “The year 1994 heralded the birth of a ‘new’ South Africa and the institution of a black presidency. With the aid of media-generated phrases such as ‘Rainbow nation’ and ‘Simunye—We are one!’, the country espoused nonracialism and celebrated its vision of a multicultural society unified in its sense of a diverse but universal humanity” (164).

However, the rainbow nation idea is focused on the inclusion only of those within the South African nation. The postcolonial nationalist narratives denied other affiliations such as race, class or gender with their socio-economic complexities and focused on the idea of simply belonging to South Africa. In “Writing What We Like,” an important collection of essays by young South Africans, Koketso Moeti claims that the concept of the rainbow nation has lost all credibility (638). The ideas of forgiveness and non-racialism mean that there is no need for redistribution and that no one is required to answer for the continuing injustice. Marzia Millazo refers to Desmond Tutu’s “premature call for closure” and the expectation that everyone, black and white, should forgive and forget. She asserts that “today it is mainly black people who are forgiving and reconciling” (131). She further explains that “notions of reconciliation and forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa, as Bhekizizwe Peterson has argued, rely on a series of ‘repressions’ that reproduce ‘abuse, poverty, injustice and alienation’” (Millazo 131). Non-racialism upholds white advantage and fails to allow the expression of anger against continuing injustice, which disproportionately affects those who were previously disadvantaged by the apartheid system.

Nyamnjoh explains that the South African state is “weakened by too many concessions to neoliberalism,” and is unable or unwilling to deal with the “growing expectations that it will redistribute the cake to newly enfranchised citizens, not allow others in to take an undeserved slice” (37). This means that South African citizens expected economic and not only legal equality after the apartheid. As this has failed to materialize, they are searching for an explanation, and someone to blame. Instead of working to improve the conditions of the poorest South Africans the government has chosen to support the idea that it is other “black Africans

most likely to compete for the pieces or crumbs of cake that come the way of the majority black population” and has vowed to protect only the South African peoples’ rights to the resources (Nyamnjoh 37). The issue of what is happening to the structure and integrity of the cake itself is conveniently ignored. It is the middle class, still predominantly white, that has retained control over land and resources; however, anger is more commonly directed towards immigrant communities.

Forgiveness is only reachable when the injustice that made forgiveness necessary has been righted or is on the way to reform. In South Africa, both economically and socially, it has not. Those who should be implementing reforms for the poorest South Africans have not done so. The xenophobia that Masechaba witnesses, and to some degree tolerates, is presented by Matlwa as misdirected anger at the lack of change following the end of the apartheid. As in many other countries, poor South Africans in this novel blame the even poorer immigrants for continuing poverty rather than the wealthy white communities or the powerful government ministers. Structural inequalities remain from the apartheid period; most of the people attending the poorly funded public hospital are black. Masechaba describes with horror the state of the hospital, the filthy conditions and “the soap dispenser that only worked once, the day the minister came to visit” (Matlwa 29). The hospital only functioned fully as part of a performance, the falsity of reliable equality of access to services, which does not reflect the day-to-day reality. There are “hundreds of people crammed into a ward designed for a couple of dozen” (Matlwa 29). The nursing staff at the hospital pool their wages in order to provide patients with care that the state has failed to provision. They collaborate together for things like medicine. However, patients still die due to lack of care. Their desperation and that of their patients leads to the anger which is directed towards the immigrant communities in South Africa. As Khair explains, xenophobia is not really “to do with people” but instead about underlying economic factors which cause one group to react against another (Khair 9).

The economic inequalities are a shocking reality. Sister Palesa tells Masechaba that “People here are really suffering, and foreigners are largely to blame” (Matlwa 81). She does not explain how the immigrants are to blame for this. Resources are seen as finite: there is enough food for South Africans as long as the foreigners do not eat. Sister Palesa complains: “People can’t feed their families. These foreigners are eating everything” (Matlwa 82). Rather than blaming the state for not redistributing resources, other poor and hungry people are blamed for the South Africans’ hunger, for their poverty. The proof the South African constitution for education and healthcare for all are not being kept. Those responsible for this lack of change are remote and unreachable, so instead anger turns on those even more disadvantaged than the poorest South Africans. The targets of xenophobic hatred are not random; they are targeted because of a perception that they are taking jobs from the rightful citizens by undercutting wages. In fact, the equation works the other way, with nations demanding cheap labour from abroad then rely on xenophobia to pacify their understandably outraged citizens. Nyamnjoh explains that “... xenophobia or obsession with belonging currently evident in South Africa is a global phenomenon” (55). Xenophobia is not caused by the end of apartheid but rather it is part of “the increasing celebration of global consumer capitalism” (Nyamnjoh 55). Matlwa’s novel explores the failure to redistribute and the link between this failure and xenophobia.

Conclusion

Matlwa appears to be wrestling with the problem that postcolonial nationalism, although meant to unite, is by its nature divisive and xenophobic. The question remains: can unity be fostered without nationalism? In this novel even supposedly positive articulations of nationalism, such as the rainbow nation, can lead to a lack of action for the poorest in society. Matlwa insists that the trauma of apartheid cannot remain the principle referent which South Africans use to understand their identity. She writes: “it’s always been easy to be the victim of apartheid, to blame everything on apartheid, but now we have to ask ourselves hard questions on what we are doing as a country” (NPR Staff). Matlwa’s novel looks unflinchingly at the failure of the hopes which followed the apartheid and the inability of postcolonial nationalisms to provide the answers to entrenched problems of poverty and disenfranchisement. Her portrayal of xenophobia is an exploration of its rationale and roots rather than a condemnation of those who hold such views. These reasons, as Khair explains, are not to do with people but instead to do with the systems in which people are forced to exist (9).

Matlwa’s novel ends on a note of hope. Masechaba recovers greatly from her ordeal and comes to value herself and the contribution she can make to South Africa.² Through the courage of Masechaba, Matlwa continues to be hopeful and allows herself to continue her professed belief in the “South African dream.” For, as she writes, “without hope what remains really?” (JRB). The question which troubles this novel, and all the memory work which has taken place in South Africa since the end of apartheid, is—hope for whom? Matlwa removes the referent of apartheid to allow for recovery, instead replacing it with the state—the nation as a central aim, rather than the human. It is not only Masechaba’s recovery but South Africa’s as well, which is important here. Masechaba claims that “we all know this xenophobia thing will blow over. It won’t last. Yes, from time to time there’s an incident here and there, but it’s definitely on the decline. Things are getting better” (Matlwa 153). Yet, the contradictory events and inconclusive outcome of the novel give little reason to incline towards the hope that Masechaba refers to above. Nyasha flees South Africa, exactly where she goes remains unclear due to the breakdown of her and Masechaba’s relationship. The novel’s hopeful new start is troubled by Nyasha’s disappearance and doubts regarding who will be able to become part of a future South Africa.

Matlwa’s novel considers the possible means of forming a new South Africa, avoiding the de-personalisation that occurs in nationalist metanarratives. She sees being South African as a mutable and developing identity, rather than something fixed to which its citizens have to conform. When her narrative ends however, this new South Africa is still a far-off aspiration, and to some extent regresses to the idea of nationalism as a means of achieving it. Masechaba is reunited with her family and community only by buying into the idea of South African exceptionalism. Nyasha’s arguments against South African meta-narratives are silenced. Nyasha leaves, without saying goodbye, and no one knows exactly where she has gone. The unity which is achieved in the novel is cosmetic, and Matlwa forces the readers to see that true community is achieved in spite of, and never because of, nationalism.

² Masechaba is violently sexually assaulted by a group of men. They are motivated, or so they claim, by her campaigning against xenophobic violence. They accuse her of “running around” with immigrants (Matlwa 113).

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