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Commodifying the Female Body: Xenophobic Violence in South Africa

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Abstract

The competition for scarce resources within a multi-ethnic community often results in conflicts between ‘indigenous’ peoples and ‘foreign’ migrants, or, to use Francis Nyamnjoh’s expression, between ‘insiders and outsiders’ (Nyamnjoh 2006). Such conflicts are manifested in various ways, ranging from verbal abuse to physical assault. This expression of hostility, in both word and deed, towards immigrants is what has been termed xenophobia. In May 2008, xenophobic violence against African immigrants broke out in the South African township of Alexandra, and thereafter the violence spread to most parts of the country. Several reasons were put forward in the media in an attempt to explain the cause of the violence, inclusive of which was the claim that foreigners were taking ‘our jobs and our women’. Using this statement as a starting point, this article looks at ways in which conceptualisations of masculinities within a racialized South African public sphere are played out in the xenophobic attacks directed towards immigrants in Alexandra. It looks at cyberspace as a ‘public sphere’ and interrogates the gender implications of using this medium to frame xenophobic violence within the context of contesting masculinities.

Résumé

La concurrence autour de ressources rares au sein d’une communauté multiethnique entraîne souvent des conflits entre populations « autochtones » et immigrants « étrangers » ou, pour reprendre l’expression de Francis Nyamnjoh (Nyamnjoh 2006), entre « insiders et outsiders ». De tels conflits se manifestent de diverses façons, allant de la violence verbale à l’agression physique. Cette expression d’hostilité envers les immigrants, dans les actes comme dans les paroles, est-ce que l’on a appelé la xénophobie ? En mai 2008, la violence xénophobe contre les immigrants africains a éclaté dans le township sud-africain

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d'Alexandra, puis a gagné presque tout le pays. Plusieurs raisons ont été avancées dans les médias pour tenter d'expliquer la cause de la violence, notamment que les étrangers prennent « nos emplois et nos femmes ». Partant de cette déclaration, cet article étudie comment les conceptualisations des masculinités dans une sphère publique sud-africaine racialisée se jouent dans les attaques xénophobes dirigées contre les immigrants à Alexandra. Il examine le cyberspace en tant que « sphère publique » et interroge les implications sexospécifiques de l'utilisation de ce moyen pour concevoir la violence xénophobe dans le contexte de la contestation des masculinités.

Introduction

In the months of May and June 2008, a wave of xenophobic violence launched against immigrants in South Africa caused a stir in the media, both nationally and internationally. When the inhabitants of Alexandra township, where the violence started, were asked why they turned against foreigners, their response, as it appeared in almost all media coverage of the incident, was that the foreigners had infiltrated their community in great numbers and were engaging in criminal activities such as house-breaking and drug-trafficking. Reading through the opinion pages of several Johannesburg-based newspapers such as *The Star*, *The Citizen*, *Mail & Guardian* and *The Sowetan*, I came across many letters by some great and not-so-great minds, all of whom, like myself, were trying to make sense of the events of May 11 and beyond. Among the many reasons given as possible causes of the xenophobic attacks were housing shortage sparked by the influx of illegal immigrants, the competition for scarce jobs, the growing rate of crime in the townships, the failure of the South African government to implement stricter immigration laws, and, ultimately, the non-realization of dreams in the democratic New South Africa. No doubt, these opinions were greatly influenced by police and journalistic reports which, for the most part, simply glossed over the issues.

Another reason given for the eruption of the violence, which I have decided to treat in isolation here for the purpose of this argument, is one that tends to be a general sentiment by the black South African male population of the lower class.¹ An article in the *Mail & Guardian* on 16 May 2008 puts it quite succinctly. The said article reported that on 10 May, the Alexandra Residents Association (ARA) held a meeting in which the members discussed their growing concern about foreigners who were gradually taking over the taxi industry. The article quoted Sox Chikowero, Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Diaspora Forum, who attended the meeting of the ARA as saying that the

people (that is, members of the ARA) ‘accused Zimbabweans of driving crime in the area and “taking away our jobs and our women”’ and they thus resolved that the foreigners must ‘leave or die’ (Nosimilo Ndlovu, *Mail & Guardian*, 16 May 2008).

The sentiment that the foreigners were taking ‘our jobs and our women’ was as common in the Johannesburg region as the knowledge that Jacob Zuma was on trial for fraud and corruption charges. I have spoken to many black South African men around the Wits University campus, mainly gardeners, security guards and cleaners, and on many occasions when I asked them why they want to ‘marry’ me instead of their fellow country women, they often said ‘*the Nigerians had taken all the beautiful women*’. In their study of conflicts between locals and Namibian immigrants in the Mizamoyethu community in the Western Cape, Belinda Dodson and Catherine Oelofse (2002:134) noted that one of the complaints launched against the immigrant community in the area, as reported by local politician Dickie Meter, was that the immigrants were better off than locals because they dressed smartly and ‘flashed money around’, thereby ‘corrupting’ local womenfolk, both young girls and married women, and encouraging prostitution. This perception by the Mizamoyethu indigenes resonates with that of the Alexandra residents.

Coming back to the claim that foreigners were taking all the jobs, I would say that this response was not unexpected, because it is common knowledge that immigrants from neighbouring South African countries quickly get employed in jobs that require manual skills, either because they present themselves as cheap labour or because they tend to be extremely hardworking in order to please their bosses and thus keep their jobs. That part of the argument one could pretend to understand, although it can hardly be seen as justifying the attack on immigrants. The other part that claims that foreigners had taken the women as well is a totally different issue.

Having listened to many people – journalists, politicians, political analysts, humanitarians, human rights advocates, etc. – give their views on the situation, it occurred to me that not many seemed to be particularly concerned about the fact that the perpetrators of this violence were using the existing relationships between South African women and foreign men as a just cause for eliminating the latter. The claim that foreigners were taking ‘our women’ implied that the women were unwilling partners in the relationships; it is as if they were pulled into them by force, much like a mother drags her six-year-old to a dentist’s consultation room. The manner in which language was used to name the experience indicates an underlying current of male aggressiveness towards other males on the basis of ‘who owns the women’. What is inexcusable about this kind of thinking is not just the sexist ideology

that it underscores in terms of how it reduces women to the level of commodities, but also the manner in which it stereotypes African masculinities and perpetuates popular notions of male sexualities. The question that therefore arises is: what are the gender implications of situating xenophobic violence within the framework of masculinities in conflict? Before delving into a discussion of that, however, it is imperative to put the xenophobic attack in context.

Contextualizing the Xenophobic Attack

The xenophobic attack on immigrants started in Alexandra and it is with the speed of a bushfire that it spread to other parts of the country, such as Durban and Cape Town. Alexandra is a township in the Johannesburg district of South Africa. It is located near Sandton, a suburb for the wealthy and an economic hub of the Gauteng province. The stark contrast between Alexandra and Sandton is evident not only in the standard of living of the people resident in both areas but also in the degree of accessibility into each territory. While only the very rich can afford to own property in Sandton, almost anyone can own a shack in Alexandra. This inequality in access to proper housing already points to a fundamental reason why it was not unexpected that the xenophobic attack on immigrants started in a place like Alexandra. Beyond the absence of proper housing in Alexandra lies an even bigger problem: the growing shortage of any kind of housing owing to a high immigrant population. Accepting that there is a link between poverty, inequality and the struggle for economic survival in South Africa (Pillay 2008:7), one then has to admit that the competition for scarce resources in Alexandra is a strong force that fuelled the outbreak of the xenophobic violence.

Media reports and police investigations revealed that the incident started on the night of 11 May when a group of local people armed with pangas, sticks and golf clubs combed Extension 7 house by house, beating anyone whom they suspected to be a foreigner (*The Star*, 14 May). Many who were identified by the attackers to be illegal immigrants were assaulted and kicked out of their homes. Some were told outrightly to leave the country and return to their home countries. As in many cases of violent attack, the looting of property and raping of women were an integral part of this 'cleansing' project. The 13 May issue of *The Star* reported the case of a Zimbabwean woman who was raped four times by four different men in two separate attacks in one night, during which attacks the men also robbed her of her belongings (Solly Maphumulo, *The Star*, 13 May). This is just one of the many cases of rape that characterized the xenophobic attacks. It is true that the media has a propensity for stretching the truth to its elastic limits in the hope of appealing

to a sentimental reading public, but we have learned from history that in situations of conflict, such as in civil strife, guerilla wars and racial encounters, women are often vulnerable to sexual assaults (see Wambugu 2001:17),² thus ending up as the emotional and psychological casualties of violent movements.

It should be noted that the foreigners who live in Alexandra are mainly from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique and other Southern African countries. The recent humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe has especially created room for a huge Zimbabwean population to take refuge in South Africa, and since housing is more expensive in the city centre, many of these ones move into the townships where accommodation is less costly. Another reason for their moving into such areas is perhaps the fact that they can speak and understand Zulu to some extent, since their home languages share similarities in syntax and semantics with some indigenous South African languages. The Ntshona people of Zimbabwe, for example, are able to understand and speak isiTsonga and to some extent isiNdebele, which are the languages of the people from the Limpopo province in South Africa. With this platform of commonality having been established, such immigrants no doubt expect that the spirit of social integration (call it *Ubuntu*, if you like) would triumph over the knowledge of their illegal status in South Africa. But this was not the case when the competition for scarce jobs, adequate housing and other basic facilities became too strong.

It must also be noted that this was not the first time xenophobic violence on immigrants was making headline news. *The Star* issue of 13 May contained a brief record of xenophobic incidences that had taken place in various townships around Pretoria and Johannesburg between January and April 2008. There had also been news reports on SABC about Somalis in the KwaZulu-Natal region who had been targets of violence from locals who claimed they had taken over the small business sector of their communities. In the Alexandra township itself, serious attacks on non-South Africans in December 1994 and January 1995 had been recorded by Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 1998:135; see also Adegoke 1999:16).

Like many others, my initial reaction to the Alexandra incident was to cry wolf, but an e-mail correspondence forced me to reflect deeply on the situation. After a few days of following news reports on TV and radio, I decided to write to friends in other provinces to find out how they were coping with the situation. A friend of mine in the Western Cape wrote back and said: 'As you know, this is what we live with all the time; it just went up a notch' (personal correspondence, 27 May 2008). Thinking about her response, I could not have agreed more. But what struck me about the situation was not so much the speed with which the violence spread across the country as the underlying notion of masculinities in conflict that seemed

to be part of the key that ignited it in the first place. As if someone was reading my thoughts, less than two months later another friend of mine forwarded me an e-mail from an anonymous source (personal correspondence, 19 July 2008), which I would like to analyze at this stage both in terms of its stereotyping of African male sexualities and its placing of the xenophobic violence within the context of heterosexual masculinities in conflict, thereby obliterating all other fundamental factors relating to xenophobia.

Telling it like it is? A 'Telling' Visual Representation of Male Sexuality

The e-mail just referred to had been well designed by someone who apparently felt compelled to call things the way he/she saw them.³ It had the following caption:

Why South Africans sack and kill other fellow Africans such as
TANZANIANS, MOZAMBICANS, NIGERIANS AND ZIMBABWEANS!
This is the untold true reason for their anger:

After the colon comes three photographs of African men from different cultural backgrounds and nationalities, which photos are arranged, presumably, in order of impact. The nationality of each person is stated at the top of each photograph.

The first photograph features a Duala Cameronian⁴ on the Wouri estuary, standing with hands akimbo and looking at something on his left with obvious concentration. He has a lean body but looks quite muscular. His hair is bushy and there seems to be sweat or water running down his face and chest. He is stark naked, with an erect penis bigger in size than the average cucumber.⁵

The second photograph portrays a Nigerian sitting in front of what looks like a kiosk or public telephone booth. The background is peopled with white faces, some walking and others sitting around tables in a place that looks like a coffee shop. The subject of the photo is dressed in casual clothes: he is wearing a sleeveless top, sweat pants and sports shoes. There is a bandana around his head, and with this he cuts the image of an American hip hop star. He looks quite self-confident as he speaks on a mobile phone and his general demeanour is that of someone who has achieved considerable success in life. From his face, one could guess that he is in his late thirties or early forties. Unlike the Duala young man who looks skinny, this Nigerian is huge, with big hefty arms and an intimidating body. Although fully dressed, what is immediately noticeable about him is the manner in which his large penis bulges under his pants.

The third photograph presents a South African dancing to some kind of rhythm at a social event.⁶ There are lots of people in the background, some

have bottles of beer in their hands, and there are cool boxes and platters of food lying around on the lawn. The atmosphere is one of conviviality and merry-making but everyone's attention is turned towards a man in the centre of the crowd. He seems to have been quite excited, if not drunk, to the extent that he has taken off his clothes. His hands are raised in the air as he moves his body to the rhythm of the music and the crowd around him is obviously entertained by his moves. This man, like the Duala in the first photograph, is stark naked, but the difference is that although he has a bigger body his penis is much smaller.

Can this e-mail simply be dismissed as the artistic invention of someone who revels in what he/she perceives as a 'superior' manhood? The manner in which it contextualizes the xenophobic incident within the discourse of phallic power, however, demands that we explore the range of possible conceptualizations of masculinity embedded in it.

Firstly, the caption obliterates all other possible reasons for the xenophobic attacks and presents one as the pivotal reason – the sexual superiority of African immigrants over black South African men. The claim that what follows is the 'untold true story' implies that the issue of contesting masculinities supersedes issues of house shortage or increasing crime rates. It places the fear of a dominating male sexuality as the principal force that moved the inhabitants of Alexandra to attack foreigners living in their community. The photos themselves imply that the female body is a commodity that can easily be acquired by any man who possesses a penis as big as that of the Cameroonian or the Nigerian. In fact, it is intended to show that the foreigners were attacked because they were more successful in getting and keeping South African women simply because they exuded a more 'attractive' sexuality.

Such is the kind of stereotyping that is perpetuated through daily verbal intercourses between South Africans and foreigners and through web pages. Serious concerns about factors affecting relationships between foreigners and South Africans in the townships are reduced to one trivial 'theory' that is projected as the overriding factor. As many intellectuals showed in a xenophobia colloquium organized by the Faculty of Humanities at Wits University on 28 May 2008, the causes of xenophobia go beyond poverty, unemployment and housing shortage to encompass other significant issues such as economic inequality and democratic inconsistencies.⁷ Michael Neocosmos (2008) also argues that beyond poverty and other inequalities in South Africa, the cause of xenophobia is fundamentally the 'politics of fear' which finds its origins within the apparatuses of power and has been complemented by a 'fear of politics' – the unwillingness or inability of popular politics to break away systematically from a state politics of fear.

Secondly, the photographs presented in this e-mail appear to be the outward manifestation of an internal turmoil, what Kopano Ratele refers to as 'hetero-masculine anxieties about penis size' (2004:151). The most noticeable aspect of all three photographs is the penis size of the characters. In this context, size means sexual power, or the lack of it thereof. Penis discourses are specifically linked to economic and cultural histories associated with power relations, and these histories of domination continue to affect the ordinary moments of everyday life and relationships between individual Africans and members of other social groups in South Africa (Ratele 2004:150). The centralization of penis size in these photographs projects the possession of a bigger size by foreigners as the hallmark of a 'superior' sexuality and therefore a lack of the desired size presumably ignites xenophobic tendencies in black South African men in a case where they have to compete with their immigrant counterparts for women's affection.

In the context of the xenophobic violence as captured by the anonymous e-mail, power relations between black South African men and foreign nationals are battled out in a sexualized space in which penis size becomes the sole determinant of who gets to keep the women. The following coded messages for the South African woman can be deduced from the three photographs:

Photo 1: She will get plenty of satisfying sex from him.

Photo 2: She will get plenty of money from him, and good sex too.

Photo 3: She will get *nothing* from him because he possesses neither the sexual nor monetary paraphernalia to attract the female sex.

The stereotyping of African male sexualities is often discernable in migrant discourses which are replete with generalizations such as '*West African men are good in bed*' and '*South African men cannot perform*'. Sad to say, women are often the agency through which these notions are dispatched in the public sphere, as is evident in the case of popular model, Babalwa Mneni, whose declaration in the media that she will pursue romantic relationships only with men from other African countries (Gqola 2008:219) underpins an acceptance of stereotyped masculinities as a norm. Moreover, the immigrant male population, particularly from West Africa, has become notorious for perpetuating these stereotypes as a way of boosting its own image in the eyes of South African women.

Amongst many other media, the internet has been misused and abused through the spread of e-mails containing sexist and offensive notions about women and men alike. On what basis would one accept that the e-mail discussed above is the 'untold true reason behind the xenophobic attacks on foreigners? What truth can one possibly ascribe to a theory that is so clearly prejudiced in its depiction of black South African men as 'sexually

disadvantaged’? Such a truth begs interrogation as to whether it is not merely a convenient way of dismissing other fundamental factors that affect relations between South Africans and African immigrants or a ploy to assert the sexuality of one group of people over another.

Among other fundamental factors relating to xenophobia in South Africa is the question of class, for to some extent xenophobia is more an issue of class than of race, whereby the working class feels more threatened by the presence of African migrants than the middle and upper classes do (Ticha 2003:20).⁸ In addition, xenophobic violence in South Africa is particularly negrophobic in character, to use Pumla Gqola’s words, because although there is a huge migrant population in South Africa ‘no one is attacking wealthy German, British or French foreigners in Camps Bay or anywhere else in South Africa’ (2008:213, see also Neocosmos 2008). In the two months of intensive ransacking of the businesses of foreigners, hardly did one get reports of Pakistani or Chinese shops in the Johannesburg area being ransacked by angry mobs. This scenario points to a subtle suggestion that only African immigrants constitute ‘surplus bodies’ or ‘excess baggage’ that should be disposed of, while the rest of the foreign nationals are given passports of *belonging*.⁹

As sexist and insulting as our anonymous e-mail stands out to be, it forces one to think about the ways in which gender plays into conflict situations, and particularly how theories of masculinities are linked to what Sasha Gear calls the ‘commodification of sex’ – where the body is ‘exchanged for any number of necessities or luxuries’ (2007:219). The e-mail seems to suggest that women trade their bodies for the ‘luxuries’ offered by foreign men.

Xenophobic violence and the commodification of the female body

In a paper presented to the Wits University community in the wake of the xenophobic violence, which paper was subsequently published as part of a collection of essays arising from the colloquium, Gqola noted that the sexualization of xenophobia is intrinsically linked to the commodification of women’s bodies. The following is her succinct analysis of the incident:

Negrophobic xenophobic sentiment is often couched as a battle between two sets of men. This is very evident in the oft-heard retort, “*These guys come here and steal our women and jobs*”. Only the sexual, intimate and romantic preferences of *some* “foreigners” matter in this way. ... Specific masculine entitlement and “threat” are clearly encoded in this resentful articulation: black South African women and jobs are the entitlement of black South African men. Historically as well as in the contemporary moment, dominant black masculinities index access to finance as linked to sexual attractiveness and virility. Therefore, the loss of both a means of income and

the opposite sex is a threat to such patriarchal and heteronormative masculinities. The ideological baggage of such assertions comes from assumptions about women's availability for sale. If "foreign" Africans have all the "money", then South African men cannot compete, and this becomes the historic rumour which is much touted (Gqola 2008:218-219)

One cannot help but agree with Gqola's reading of masculine behaviour in the face of threats of disempowerment. The link between sex and violence has been acknowledged in some scholarship on masculinities in South Africa (Crous 2007; Gear 2007). Although the two cannot be conflated, practices of violent sex point to power as the overriding driving force behind it – power as domineering, controlling and oppressive. In the context of the xenophobic violence, black South African females are seen to exchange their bodies for the luxuries offered by the foreign men, whether this is in terms of satisfying sex, beautiful clothes or pocket money. Thus, the competition for black women is intensified in a scenario where virility is defined by the weight of one's pocket and the size of one's penis. In this competitive space, the female body becomes simply a commodity to be secured by the highest bidder.

The manner in which the female body is inextricably linked to the display of masculine power is particularly relevant in this context. The term masculinity here is used in the contemporary sense in which it is often associated with violent, domineering behaviour by men (Crous 2007:19). Going back to the photos of the three 'sexually (dis)endowed' African males discussed above, can it be said that the conflict captured therein is one of heterosexual masculinities in conflict with each other? The centralization of the penis, which represents phallic power, points to this conclusion. Granted, the penis is also central to homosexual discourses, but what is clearly discernible in the anonymous e-mail is not a case of heterosexual masculinity in conflict with its homosexual counterpart, but rather a case of black South African heterosexual masculinity in conflict with non-South African black masculinity, because both have been placed in an ideological space in which the one is defined as *belonging* and the other as *intruding*. From the perspective of the author of the e-mail, the violence should be read as a case of black South African heterosexual masculinity on the defensive; the social threat of 'the other' dominating the sexual space is so overpowering that it pushes rationality to the fringes.

In this scenario, the female body becomes the battleground on which phallic power is established or challenged: 'a woman is a mere object to be conquered and the penis is the ultimate weapon with which to dominate women and make them submissive' (Crous 2007:24). Where penis size

becomes the ultimate determinant of power, then it is presupposed that a lack of the desired size impacts on one's self-esteem, hence the need to get rid of the enemy in possession of what one does not have, assuming that there can be no other solution to one's problem. Having acknowledged that the e-mail foregrounds a relevant discourse within the South African social space – that of contesting masculinities – the question still remains: what lies beneath negrophobic xenophobia? Is it simply masculinities in conflict? I think not. As noted earlier, there are many other fundamental factors that explain the rise of such gross hatred for the 'other' and a reduction of such into simply a question of masculinities in conflict, as portrayed in the e-mail, is something that should not be embraced at all.

Conclusion

In response to demands from political bodies and human rights groups, the South African government had set up a commission to look into the causes of the xenophobic violence in May 2008. The findings of this commission, if they were published, were not impressed on the minds of the ordinary people on the streets who in their daily struggles for survival often have to contend with feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Even after the events of 11 May, xenophobic sentiments have continued to be expressed by different segments of the South African population, both elite and proletariat. The internet seems to provide an open space for people to spurt out their views on the matter and often such views are couched within power discourses that demand critical responses. Cyberspace is a public space and the propagation of gendered notions of male and female sexualities should be interrogated in this media as much as it is interrogated in the printed media.

Notes

1. I am deeply aware of recent debates on whether the black people (as opposed to White, Coloured or Indian people) of South Africa should be referred to as black South Africans or Africans in South Africa. I choose to use the former expression in this paper mainly to avoid ambiguities of reference.
2. Speaking about the May xenophobic crisis in South Africa, Neocosmos (2008) notes that poverty could be one of the factors that led to the attack on foreigners, because it creates a sense of powerlessness in people, and often the powerless take out their frustrations on the weakest around them, namely, women, children, the elderly and outsiders. Thus, the raping of women in this context could be seen as only one of the manifestations of the frustrations that culminated in xenophobic violence.
3. The possibility that the author of this e-mail could be female cannot be ruled out.

4. The photo itself states: 'Cameroonian (from Duala)'. Probably in a haste to put this on cyberspace, the author did not take time to learn that the term 'Duala' is only used in reference to the language and people of the Littoral Province in Cameroon. The city of Douala itself is home to people from various ethnic groups around the country.
5. I found out later that this photo had been cut from a dating website. This goes to show how extensively the internet has been used to proliferate images of 'ideal sexualities'.
6. The introduction to the photograph states: 'Then, South African!' and the apparent intention is to draw attention to the contrast between this photograph and the previous two.
7. A book has been published out of the papers presented at this colloquium. *Go Home or Die Here: Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa* was published by Wits University Press in 2008.
8. In my six years of living in South Africa, I have come to realise that hostility towards foreigners comes mainly from the poor working class population (gardeners, security guards, domestic workers, taxi drivers, sales personnel etc) while those of the middle and upper classes tend to be more tolerant of their presence.
9. In her article entitled 'Woman as Sign in the South African Colonial Enterprise', Dorothy Driver shows how women were shipped to South Africa as a way of getting rid of what was considered 'surplus women' in England. Thus, the idea of eliminating 'surplus bodies' has a long association with South African history.

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