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Writing AIDS, Deconstructing Politicized Discourses on the Body: AIDS in Post-apartheid South African Novels by Mpe and Mhlongo*

SHI Juhong, HAO Wenxuan
Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, China

HIV/AIDS has been one of the most serious health concerns in South Africa over the past 30 years. Novels such as *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Dog Eat Dog*, and *After Tears* are literary responses to the profound shame and fear inflicted by the epidemic on individuals and society. These AIDS narratives serve as a means to deconstruct politicized discourses about the disease. They scrutinize the stereotype that the voracious sexuality of black men is the primary cause of AIDS and challenges the xenophobic notion of contagious foreigners prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa. Additionally, the novels critically examine and satirize the denialist discourse propagated by incompetent politicians who have failed to contain the virus in post-apartheid South Africa. By representing the conflicting voices surrounding HIV/AIDS, these writings vividly depict the social and political landscape of the era.

Keywords: AIDS, body, politicized discourses, deconstruct

Introduction

HIV/AIDS has been one of the most serious health concerns in South Africa since it hit this country in the 1990s, the times when the nation was starting to build a new society out of the ruins of apartheid. In 1990, the first national antenatal survey to test for HIV found that 0.8% of pregnant women were HIV-positive. It was estimated that there were between 74,000 and 6,500,135 people in South Africa living with HIV in the 1990s: "As late as 1990 the estimated prevalence of AIDS in South Africa was less than 1 per cent; by 1998 this had risen to 22.8 per cent with the prevalence as high as 32.5 per cent in antenatal clinics in KwaZulu-Natal" (Marks, 2002, p. 16).

Given the overwhelming scale of AIDS infection and mortality in South Africa, literary responses to HIV/AIDS in the country have been surprisingly limited and even "rare" (Attree, 2010, p. 5). It is speculated that the denialist discourse propagated in the political arena may have inhibited public discussion about HIV/AIDS more broadly within South Africa and across the continent. Despite this, some literary works have sought to address the profound shame and fear inflicted by the epidemic on individuals and society. Notable examples include *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswane Mpe and Niq Mhlongo's first two novels, *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), which focus on the suffering, disillusion, and bleakness caused by AIDS. These

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SHI Juhong, Ph.D., Professor of English literature, School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, China.
HAO Wenxuan, postgraduate student of English literature, School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, China.

novels depict a bleak reality where the suffering body becomes a battlefield for competing discourses while the suffering per se is coldly ignored. The AIDS narratives in the novels serve as a trope to deconstruct dominant ideologies about the disease. They scrutinize the stereotype that the voracious sexuality of black people, particularly black men, is the primary cause of AIDS. Additionally, the xenophobic notion of "contagious foreigners" prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa is challenged. The novels also reveal the harsh reality that incompetent politicians ignored the rapid spread of the virus and attempted to convince the public that AIDS in South Africa was a fabrication by Western countries to "stigmatize" post-apartheid South Africa. These novels also examine how local authorities appropriate aspects of black culture, particularly regarding the treatment of diseases, to evade their responsibility for improving the country's healthcare services.

Deconstructing the Racialized Discourse on Black Men's Sexuality

A diseased body is traditionally considered as something to be feared and shamed. It is especially true with AIDS patients, since "AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity" (Sontag, 1978, p. 114). The sexual transmission of AIDS leads most people to harshly judge AIDS patients and regard that illness as a calamity one brings on oneself. The much higher rates of HIV in African countries relative to other areas further strengthened panics about black men as sexual predators and attributed the infection to sexual immorality of the black (cf. Treichler, 1991, pp. 86-87). The racialized discourse surrounding black men's sexuality has deep historical roots and profound implications for contemporary society. Contrary to the racialized discourse on the sexuality of black men, the male AIDS patients in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are absolutely not sexual predators. The protagonist of the novel, Refentše, actually leads a rather self-disciplined life. He is tortured by a strong sense of guilty for the only time he had sex with a girl who is not his girlfriend. He criticized himself in this way:

> You had learnt that you were as vulnerable as the drunks and womanizers that you used to criticise for their carelessness; as vulnerable as the prostitutes populating Quartz and other streets, pasted against the walls of the concrete towers of Hillbrow. (Phaswane, 2001, p. 59)

In this novel, people who suffer from AIDS are Refilwe, a girl who dreamed to be a writer, and her Nigerian boyfriend whom she meets at Oxford Brookes University in England, both of them were diagnosed AIDS in England. Furthermore, it is discovered that Refilwe actually contracted HIV at a young age. This vignette, to certain degree, proves the innocence of Refilwe's Nigerian boyfriend, indicating that the Nigerian boy is not the cause of Refilwe's AIDS. The only male character that leads a wanton life in this novel is Sammy, Refentše's friend who is addicted to drugs and alcohol and brings prostitutes to his flat. AIDS as an infectious disease whose principal means of transmission is sexual necessarily makes it easy to view as a punishment for that activity. Ironically, it is not stated in the novel whether Sammy has contracted AIDS. Of course, Sammy's depraved life is disapproved. The triple level narrative of the novel definitely presents the reader a negative image of Sammy. His abnormal life is criticized by Bohlale, his girlfriend, Refentše, and Refilwe, the narrator of the novel, from different perspectives.

Another prejudiced discourse concerning AIDS that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* challenges is the myth that AIDS is primarily caused by homosexual behavior and that heterosexual transmission is extremely rare. In the novel, it is widely believed among the villagers that "AIDS was caused by the bizarre sexual behavior of Hillbrowans" (Phaswane, 2001, p. 4), with "bizarre sexual behavior" being a euphemism for homosexuality. The villagers think that "it was the shit that the greedy and careless penises sucked out of the equally eager anuses

that could only lead to such dreadful illnesses" (Phaswane, 2001, p. 4). However, characters like Refilwe, her Nigerian boyfriend, and a man in Tiragalong who died of AIDS, all contracted the disease through heterosexual relationships, thereby debunking this harmful myth.

Writing AIDS, Writing Against Xenophobia

The intersection of AIDS and xenophobia presents a unique challenge that demands a nuanced and compassionate response. The stigmatization associated with AIDS and the prejudices stemming from xenophobia often exacerbate each other, leading to severe social and health inequities. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, prejudice against AIDS is used as a trope to reveal the absurdity of xenophobia. Immigrants faced discrimination in apartheid South Africa, and contrary to expectations, the incidence of xenophobia did not decline in post-apartheid democratic South Africa. The novel challenges the mythical stories about South African migrants perpetuated by sensational media reports. Foreign nationals are derogatorily called *makwerekwere*, a slur laden with hostility, and are stigmatized as HIV carriers: "This AIDS, according to popular understanding, was caused by foreign germs that travelled down from the central and western parts of Africa" (Phaswane, 2001, p. 4). Swayed by sensational reports that HIV consists of "foreign germs", villagers harbor prejudice and hostility towards city dwellers. The racial segregation of apartheid days has been replaced by new divisions between cities and villages, and between the healthy and the unhealthy. Large cities like Johannesburg, home to many foreigners, are stigmatized as hubs of AIDS: "People deduced from such media report that AIDS's travel route into Johannesburg was through *Makwerewere*; and Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerewere* basked" (Phaswane, 2001, p. 4). The novel dismantles the binary division between healthy locals and contagious *Makwerewere* by revealing that Tshepo, a well-behaved village youth held up as a model by the villagers, and Lerato, Refentše's girlfriend who grew up in Johannesburg and was labeled as an "open-thighed" Makwerewere (Phaswane, 2001, p. 71), are actually brother and sister. This blood connection exposes the baselessness of the villagers' stereotypes. The novel emphasizes the absurdity of labeling people based on their locations: "Indeed, men do spread like pumpkin plants" (Phaswane, 2001, p. 70).

Deconstructing Political Discourses on AIDS

The political discourses surrounding AIDS have been marked by controversy, misinformation, and stigma since the epidemic emerged in the early 1980s. These discourses have profound implications for public health policy, social attitudes, and the lived experiences of those affected by HIV/AIDS. By deconstructing the political rhetoric, we can better understand its impact and work towards more effective and compassionate responses. Much like the bleak situations described in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, AIDS is one of the significant problems confronting everyone in South Africa in *Dog Eat Dog*. The novel voices its resistance to the denialism conducted by the South African government that holds a deep suspicion of Western medical science.

The South African government's policies on containing the rapid spread of AIDS have faced strong criticism. Thabo Mbeki, South African President from 1999 to 2008, failed to confront the grim reality of AIDS, rejecting medical advice regarding its prevention and treatment. Many of his statements contained misleading information that encouraged unscientific approaches to AIDS. He claimed that HIV does not cause AIDS and that AIDS is primarily a socio-economic disease, implying that poverty causes AIDS. It is reported that Mbeki was suspicious of Western medical science, viewing AIDS as a politicized discourse rather than a serious disease. He argued that Western pharmaceutical companies exploited HIV/AIDS to justify selling overpriced and potentially harmful

antiretrovirals to impoverished populations and that the epidemic was used by Western powers to perpetuate racist stereotypes about Black African, particularly male, sexuality (cf. Butler, 2005, p. 603).

In a 2000 *South African Sunday Times* article, Mbeki wrote about Black male sexuality,

> The hysterical estimates of the incidence of HIV in our country and sub-Saharan Africa made by some international organizations, coupled with the wild and insulting claims about the African and Haitian origins of HIV, powerfully reinforce these dangerous and firmly entrenched [sic] prejudices. (Posel, 2005, p. 143)

Despite Mbeki's rhetoric about the African Renaissance and the goal of "the provision of a better life for those masses of the people whom we say must enjoy and exercise the right to determine their future" ("Prologue" xvi), he conspicuously omitted HIV/AIDS from his agenda. Nevertheless, Butler argues that Mbeki's suspicion of Western medicine is not entirely groundless or "irrational", as is often claimed. The orthodox biomedical characterization of the epidemic has been widely interpreted as an instrument of ongoing racist supremacy.

Instead of acknowledging the alarming increase in the number of HIV carriers, people avoided discussing AIDS directly, resorting to euphemisms. This avoidance, according to Jane Poyner, has led to the "re-politicization" (Poyner, 2020, p. 132) of euphemisms, permeating both government and public discourse. Black nationalism, under the guise of the African Renaissance, was used as an ideological tool to further this denialism, with serious consequences. For instance, in townships, AIDS is often referred to as lo gawulayo (the chopper). Across Africa, the disease has acquired various euphemisms, such as "worms" in Mhlongo's *After Tears* (2007, p. 106), "slim" in Uganda, and "standing on a nail" in Tanzania.

Sindiwe Magona, a South African novelist, argues that the terms "HIV" and "AIDS" need to become part of everyday language to reduce fear and stigma (qtd. in Attree, 2010, p. 35). Magona suggests that fear is a significant reason why people avoid getting tested. From this perspective, euphemisms obscure the true understanding of HIV/AIDS among Africans and risk further alienating its victims. The fear of AIDS, exacerbated by the widespread use of euphemisms, is addressed in novels like *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Dog Eat Dog*, and *After Tears*.

The post-apartheid government's various forms of denialism are parodied in *Dog Eat Dog*. While drinking at a bar, a friend of Dingz, the protagonist of the novel, asks, "Do you even know what AIDS stands for?" Someone gives the correct answer, but is then told he is wrong. They soon learn it supposedly stands for "American Invention for Discouraging Sex" or, more humorously, "Academic Imaginary Death Sentence". Later, a preacher on a crowded commuter train warns, "If you cheat on your wife, a condom will burst and you will contract AIDS. Hallelujah!" (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 131). Another character asserts that America is directly responsible for AIDS, claiming, "It is not that AIDS is incurable, but that the Americans are making money out of this disease by making you believe that it is" (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 131). He further criticizes Americans for making it difficult for poor South Africans to obtain necessary drugs by keeping prices high, arguing,

> It was fabricated to marginalize the illiterate and the poor. […] The rich and the arrogant are conniving with the academics against the poor and the ignorant so that they will be the only ones able to enjoy the worldly paradise of sex. (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 121)

This critique intertwines anti-intellectual sentiment with a condemnation of global capitalism, suggesting that economic and intellectual elites conspire to control the poor through the knowledge they produce about HIV/AIDS. According to Edward Said, academia does not always align with intellectualism; academics often serve the interests of universities, funding bodies, and sponsors, lacking the impartiality of public intellectuals

(Mhlongo, 2004, pp. 67-68). Dingz's friend encapsulates this critique by asking whether "sex has become the social activity of the rich while AIDS is a discriminatory disease of the poor." (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 121).

While it may not be as extreme as claiming that "sex has become the social activity of the rich" (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 121), it's undeniable that the rapid spread of AIDS is closely tied to poverty. The AIDS narratives within the three novels vividly portray the harsh realities faced by impoverished black individuals, especially those originating from rural villages. These protagonists all come from the most economically disadvantaged villages in South Africa, striving to better their circumstances through higher education, as Christopher Warnes suggests, seeking to "fulfill the promises of the post-apartheid era by escaping poverty" (Warnes, 2011, p. 549). However, their experiences with higher education often fall short of their aspirations. Their substandard primary and secondary education leaves them ill-prepared for the challenges of higher learning. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive sex education in rural villages or black townships leaves them ill-equipped to navigate the complex sexual dynamics of urban areas.

The AIDS narratives in the three novels also delve into the treatment of AIDS in South Africa. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, villagers repeatedly tout "quack" remedies like beetroot, garlic, and the African potato as effective treatments for the disease. *Dog Eat Dog* portrays a comical situation regarding ordinary people's beliefs about AIDS treatment. When Dingz and his friends encounter a traditional healer selling his wares at the market, they observe the healer listing off a range of medical conditions for which he sells remedies: "This will help you pass your exam... Which one do you want, boys? I've got everything; muti for impotency, low libido, weak erections, early ejaculations, AIDS-prevention medicine, headaches, stomach-aches, cancer, malaria, pregnancy; everything, boys" (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 189)! These narratives about the quack treatment of AIDS in the novels serve as ironic parodies of the governmental discourse on AIDS treatment.

In line with Mbeki's denialism, successive health ministers within the South African government, such as Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (the first health minister under Nelson Mandela) and Manto Tshabalala-Msimang (under Mbeki), responded with rhetoric that hindered efforts to treat HIV/AIDS victims and curb the spread of the disease. While Dlamini-Zuma played a crucial role in pressuring pharmaceutical companies to lower the prices of ARVs, she also prohibited government hospitals from prescribing well-known ARVs like AZT (zidovudine) and from using Nevirapine, which effectively prevent mother-to-child transmission. She was eventually compelled to reverse this decision by a court order (Thornton, 2008, p. 162). Instead, Dlamini-Zuma supported Virodene, an unproven remedy for AIDS, and heavily invested in an educational play, Sarafina II, which was canceled after its first performance due to a corruption scandal (Butler, 2005, p. 594; cf. Thornton, 2008, p. 164). Tshabalala-Msimang rejected biomedical research on AIDS in favor of "traditional" remedies promoted by so-called "healers", earning nicknames like Dr. Beetroot or Auntie Beetroot for advocating natural treatments such as beetroot, garlic, and the African potato over ARVs. She infamously showcased these remedies at the 2006 International HIV/AIDS Conference in Toronto (Thornton, 2008, p. 174). Under the leadership of Mbeki and Tshabalala-Msimang, the government in the early 2000s avoided analyzing ARV options (Butler, 2005, p. 595). However, by late 2002, the government revised its stance, expanding ARV provision in 2003 (Butler, 2005, p. 595), making South Africa home to the largest ARV treatment program in the world today.

Conclusion

The AIDS narratives in the three novels serve as mirrors reflecting the broader social structures that impeded the effective treatment of AIDS in post-apartheid South Africa. By representing the conflicting voices

surrounding HIV/AIDS, these writings vividly depict the social and political landscape of the era. Centering on the bodies affected by AIDS, the novels delve deeply into the serious social issues confronting post-apartheid South Africa, such as uneven development and the profound conflicts between local culture and modernity. Moreover, the dialogic nature of the novels has the potential to normalize discussions about AIDS, as advocated by Magona, thereby reducing people's fear of HIV/AIDS, which is the crucial first step toward effectively combating it.

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