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Cartographies of difference: Race, gender and dis-eased humanity in Mphuthumi Ntabeni's *The Wanderers*

Author:
Esther Mavengano[1,2,3]

Affiliations:
[1]The Research Institute for Theology and Religion, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

[2]Department of English, Faculty of Linguistics, Literature and Cultural Studies, English and American Studies, Technische Universitat Dresden, Dresden, Germany

[3]Department of English and Media Studies, Faculty of Arts, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author:
Esther Mavengano,
esthermavengano@gmail.com

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The treatment of space in Mphuthumi Ntabeni's novel *The Wanderers* provides important prisms through which the interlocking issues of race, gender and human frailties can be investigated. In this study, I bring together Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey's perceptive formulations of spatiality and power to interrogate how Ntabeni's representation of space intersects with the troubling tropes of racialised, gendered and dis-eased bodies in post-apartheid South Africa. I argue that the analogues of the frail human body and sickness are compelling symbolic figurations of dis-eased and broken people in South Africa's post-apartheid literary narrative. The disquieting imageries are also extended to reflect teething challenges faced by Africa's post-colonies in general. The novel's portrayal of segregated bodies is entwined with spatial dimensions of power that influence characters' sense of exclusion and fragility. This study explores and illustrates the various ways in which spatial landscapes are mapped to function as Foucault's heterotopias – sites of both control and agency. Together, the allegories of pandemics and the frail body in *The Wanderers* create a striking portrayal of societal dis-ease – underlining the excruciating effects of historic and modern-day malaises and injustices. Lastly, this study contends that Ntabeni's novel does not only analyse historical and existing power structures, but it also envisions alternative ways of promoting mutual well-being and recovery from past wounds in the current era.

Contribution: Mphuthumi Ntabeni's novel, *The Wanderers* is yet to receive ample scholarly attention, and this study intends to stimulate such interest in the context of both post-apartheid literature and transnational African literature. Bringing together Foucault and Massey's theorisation of space and power in reading race, gender and politics of difference, it is intended to offer a refreshing interpretation concerning the human condition as portrayed in the text.

Keywords: dis-eased humanity; gender; heterotopias; post-apartheid literature; power; race; spatial politics; spatiality.

Introduction

In an elaborate archive of post-apartheid South African literature, the attention to space is knotted with conspicuous politics of difference and contestation. Mphuthumi Ntabeni's novel *The Wanderers* stands out in its reflective and complex treatment of space tied to power struggles and tense race relations in post-apartheid South African context. In addition, the novel's representations of pandemics and the frail human body serve as powerful allegories revealing societal ills not only in South Africa but also prevalent in other African post-colonies such as Rwanda and Tanzania – bringing to the fore the transnational sensibility in Ntabeni's writing. Just like his contemporaries, Ntabeni in his work suggests that the edifices of colonial and throbbing apartheid injustices and biased classifications of bodies are still deeply entrenched in present-day South African society. Becker and Smet's (2013) critical reading of the post-apartheid literary archive points out similar concerns addressed by South African writers. In this study, I explore how the novel's depiction of space intersects with struggles against race and gender discrimination, human frailty and power subtleties. I purposely attempt to avoid predominant analyses where space is only understood from binary outlooks to claim that Ntabeni depicts space as a sphere of encounter where domineering power structures are obstructed and resisted. I propose that we need to consider the prevalence of conflict as evidence of incompatible diversities and contested domineering power structures in post-apartheid spaces.

Mphuthumi Ntabeni's *The Wanderers:* A brief synopsis

Mphuthumi Ntabeni's novel *The Wanderers,* published in 2021, is a powerful examination of the nodes between space, race, gender and dis-eased humanity within post-apartheid South African

literature. The plot follows Ruru, a daughter of the late liberation fighter Phakamile, whose relegation and othered status during the apartheid era compelled him and others to join the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* – a liberation movement that fought against apartheid rule. His ill-fated circumstances kept him from returning to his homeland, South Africa, when the African National Congress (ANC) came to power at the end of apartheid rule. Phakamile remained in Tanzania, where he lived with his wife, Efuoa, a refugee from Rwanda who narrowly escaped death during the Rwandan genocide. Phakamile's daughter Ruru, after the death of her mother in South Africa, embarks on a journey in search of her long-lost father and ends up finding his grave in Tanzania. *The Wanderers* intricately maps the physical and symbolic landscapes of post-apartheid South Africa and African post-colonies, including Tanzania, focusing on the harmful impacts of the colonial and apartheid era as well as the noticeable ills that define the post-independence epoch. Through the novel's vivid images of contested spaces, Ntabeni examines how segregated and gendered black bodies navigate and confront oppressive milieus spanning the different historical times. The narrative conveys the frailties of human existence in diverse periods and geographies, using influential metaphors of dis-eased bodies, pandemics and spatial mapping. Ntabeni's nomadic protagonists, Phakamile, Ruru and Efuoa, are powerful embodiments of subversive mobilities that defy discrimination in constricted spaces. The title of the novel also symbolically foregrounds the nomadic nature of the central characters and their deep sense of displacement. Ntabeni offers thought-provoking accounts of the physical and figurative cartographies examined through discernible nuances of troubled power structures.

Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey's theorisations of space and power

In pursuit of the objectives of this study, I draw analytical frames from Michel Foucault and Doreen Massey's conceptualisations of space and power to interrogate the representation of space and its interplay with race and gender complicities in the novel *The Wanderers*. Massey (1994), in her book titled *Space, Place and Gender*, discusses power geometries and elaborates that space is not a neutral notion; rather, it is charged with power relations. Her work sheds light on how space concurrently conveys various forms of disparities, as well as resistance, by the downgraded subjects of power. Whereas traditional views treat space as static, Massey (1994, 2005) contends that space is dynamic and complicated because it is socially produced. Earlier on, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault (1976) boldly demands a rethinking of power and its complex manifestations in society. He focuses on power relations that are lopsided according to his theorisation, but power can also be resisted by those occupying the lower social strata in any society. I find Foucault's (1978:95) argument that 'where there is power, there are resistances' illuminating, especially in discussing post-apartheid city and township cartographies, which I interpret as Foucauldian heterotopia spaces. This brings to light the fundamental connections of Foucault and Massey's formulations as important analytical axes explored in this study. This connection is intended to contribute to the wider discourse on the spatial politics of race and gender, stressing the need for a nuanced scrutiny of how power operates across diverse scales and contexts in post-apartheid epochs. Foucault's (1978) heterotopias, or other spaces, provide a critical framework for understanding how Ntabeni constructs spaces of exclusion and resistance. These imagined physical and metaphorical spaces reflect contested societal structures that sideline and oppress racialised, gendered and dis-eased bodies. Essentially, Massey's (2005) engagement with space as a product of social relations prompts us to interpret it as a site of struggle where subversive narratives emerge to disrupt oppressive power structures. Such a conception of space compels us to reflect on myriad ways in which the post-apartheid spaces are (re)produced in problematic and challenged power relations. In other words, it is imperative to shift from a binary view of space to discuss its nuanced multiplicities and schisms embedded in contending discourses of othering and agency. Space and power permeate each other in thorny ways (Massey 2005) because the former is produced through the creation or negation of relations. Reading spatial and representation vis-à-vis articulations of race and gender in *The Wanderers* guided by Massey and Foucault's frameworks is a productive endeavour that offers a convincing critique. Essentially, the novel also envisions alternative cartographies of belonging, resistance and recovery. Through its effective images of pandemics and the ill body, the novel figuratively casts light on dis-eased humanity that urgently needs healing.

Cartographies and regimes of difference

In South African literature, the city cartography provides an essential lens through which we can analyse the politics of difference. Space, as Wrede (2015) perceives, is a disputed and dynamic concept laden with polysemic meanings in a specific historic age. In Foucault's (1976) assessment, there are certain spatialised apparatuses that regulate the way humans experience and navigate space. What, then, are the implications of these submissions? Schensul and Heller (2010) remark that,

> … it is now widely acknowledged in urban sociology that space reflects and reinforces inequality. Nowhere is this more obviously true and trenchant than in South Africa, where the social, economic and racial divisions of apartheid were spatially constructed. (p. 1)

In one of the most forceful passages in *The Wanderers*, readers are taken back to the apartheid era through a flashback, when Phakamile (also shortened to Phaks) was still a young boy struggling to grasp the circumstances of black people living in a racially structured society. His first encounter with police brutality takes place during a visit to the city to buy groceries

for the family. We are told that during those days, it was almost impossible to get into Queenstown – barely 15 km away from the black township of Ezibeleni – without meeting either black comrades or the government police (Ntabeni 2021):

> The police liked to pick on black people on one pretext or the other. They were supposedly employed in this thing they termed 'protecting the state,' which mostly meant being a nuisance and a menace to black people whenever they wished to be. (p. 157)

The control of black people's urban mobility during apartheid qualifies what Foucault (1977, 1995) calls the panoptic gaze, which refers to a form of surveillance that is both inescapable and invisible, producing a sense of relentless observation that disciplines and controls behaviour. The novel mirrors the success of a panoptic mechanism of control in apartheid society when it is eventually internalised by subjugated black people. As a young black boy, Phaks spends his time studying the shops where black customers are allowed or forbidden, showing further classification of bodies within the urban space. Phaks's dread of the apartheid law is reasonable because racialised black bodies were not only subjected to constant monitoring but were also 'disciplined' for disregarding segregatory regulations. According to Massey (1994), societal relationships are conveyors of power; therefore, the city is a geography of racialised power. The state surveillance and power extend from the physical to the psychological realm, where black people are compelled to embrace their otherness or face the consequences of 'crossing the boundary fence,' to borrow from Charter's (1988) memorable title. This also invokes Fanon's (1952) explanation of racialised relations in his influential work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), which offers a fundamental outline for understanding the related notion of *nervous conditions* or mental turmoil suffered by the racial other.

Ntabeni (2021) notes that the complication of apartheid spatial representation is further sustained by the fact that black people,

> … had to carry travelling documents to town because Queenstown fell under the Republic of South Africa, so whoever came from the township (designated under Bantustan) was from another republic and another world, and needed a passport. Apartheid geography was complicated. (p. 157)

The sarcasm in this passage serves as a piercing indictment of the projected geography of difference – apartheid spatial mapping meant to create racial hierarchy. Phaks turns out to be a victim of racial tension. He gets injured when the police fire live bullets against the black protestors. This incident and the police killing of Rondo, a young black boy from the Ezibeleni township, cast light on how the rigid and militarised urban space, especially the black township during the apartheid era, becomes a deathscape – the spatial and social organisation of death and dying within a society, as Foucault (1977) puts it – and a site of political agency. Later in the novel, Phaks pens in his pillow books the painful memory of apartheid, how the 'badgering perplexities of township life' (Ntabeni 2021:71) forced him to become 'a man of the liberation movement.'

The mandatory carrying of passes by black people and the razor wire that cuts into Phaks's flesh when he tries to jump over to the other side are telling symbols of the rigid racial contours. The unequal power profiles and discriminatory borders were upheld within the cityscapes because '[w]hite shop owners would call the police the minute a black person dared to step inside their shops' (Ntabeni 2021:155). The binary model of spatial configuration was bolstered and perpetuated by numerous repressive 'power geometries of everyday life' (Massey 1994:15), especially projected in apartheid laws. The National Party announced a set of infamous discriminatory laws, including the *Group Areas Act of 1950*, the *Immorality Act of 1950* and the *Black Education Act of 1953*, which was co-opted to enforce the geography of power intended to isolate othered races (Worden 2012). The novel also reveals that violence was the modus operandi, because the apartheid police used 'vicious dogs, teargas and live bullets' (Ntabeni 2021:60) as disciplinary mechanisms to disperse demonstrators or any gatherings of black people who were unfairly labelled criminals. We are further told that 'the apartheid police were like hunting dogs' (Ntabeni 2021:248). The use of canine metaphor, zoomorphism and simile stress their cruelty. The following extract highlights what Foucault (1977) considers to be the sovereign rights over life and death: 'It was the time when white rulers policed every habit of black people, had it in their hearts to put their boot heels on their necks' (Ntabeni 2021:145). Readers note the resentment embedded in the use of territorial and racialised registers in phrases like 'disallowed darkies in the swimming pool' located in a coloured area and 'white only hospitals' (Ntabeni 2021:242). The employed racialised diction conveys the pathetic situation of living as black others. Black people had limited or no access to public facilities like the libraries, parks and certain universities reserved for white people only. Nonetheless, they engaged in protests or *toyi-toying* registering their discontent. Foucault (1977) explicates that power is exercised rather than possessed. In basic principle, the exercise of power does not always manifest in a unidirectional way or in binary opposition. Foucault's assertion shifts our interpretation of power dynamics because, clearly, power is not a commodity that individuals or specific groups hold onto. This perspective underscores the fluid and dynamic nature of power, which is repetitively being negotiated and questioned. Furthermore, power, in Foucault's formulation, is omnipresent. It functions at all levels of society, from the macro structures of government and law to the micro interactions of everyday life. This implies that power is not simply a matter of domination and subservience, but the sphere of power also comprises the capacity for confrontation and intervention. Ntabeni's deployment of the mobility trope in the cultural term *amaMfengu* [the wanderers] foregrounds the (im) permeability of spatial regulatory systems and bordered post-apartheid landscapes. The totality of this paradox is shown when black workers, such as nurses from the township (including Phaks's mother), are instructed to report at work despite the banishment and curfews. It is within these troubled structures of power and ironies that spaces are made inhabitable for privileged white people while black

people assume Agamben's (1998) description of bare life and the *homo sacer* figure, a sacred man whose death is not considered a violation of human ethics. It is quite telling that the narrator compares South Africa in the 1970s to Golgotha, a biblical allusion that evokes the horrific images of human carcasses while at the same time making insinuations about the desired redemption of humanity in post-apartheid society.

Another dimension of spatial politics is also expressed through separate development. Readers are told that the '[b]lack township had no telephones at that time' (Ntabeni 2021:162). The unhygienic conditions in the townships, such as Mlungisi where Phaks grew up, speak about the level of the black population's socio-economic, racial and political marginalisation. Forster (2005:498) explicates that '[s]pace is highly significant for human interaction [*because*] they have specific meanings for people.' Forster's remark reverberates a shared view that space is intricately permeated by systematic social ordering established through geographies of separation and deeply influences our sense of being. Phaks's childhood memories of the township landscape include a sickening ever-presence of 'a dirty, stinking streamlet referred to as Voyisana. Because of that the boy's street was notoriously known as Kaka [*Shit*] Street' (Ntabeni 2021:225). An onomastic strategy is deployed to underline the presence of the forbidding filthiness of the township that endangered black lives. It is more shocking to witness similar conditions of black urban precariousness in a township where Ruru resides, years after the demise of apartheid rule. An epistolary mode is used to suggest the pathetic fallacies in the notion of post-coloniality. Ruru writes letters to her dead mother telling her about the existence of 'a dirty streamlet with scavenging rats as big as puppies seeking something to devour' (Ntabeni 2021:65). Equally, the township space in both contemporary South Africa and Tanzania has intermittent electricity supply, poor amenities and shacks with no water. 'Kihonda township [*in modern-day Tanzania*], like most black townships across Africa, is strangled by a tight, clawing poverty that is concealed by the exuberant energy of its people' (Ntabeni 2021:22 *author's emphasis*). This parallelism conveys the lack of meaningful change in terms of the living conditions of black people during and after the demise of previous regimes. Despite these jarring imageries of suffering in the township, we also note how this space, across different epochs and in both South Africa and Tanzania, serves as a site for new alliances and humanness. When Ruru's mother dies, the neighbours render profound support and care. Such competing representations of the black township space bring out the relevance of Foucault's notion of heterotopia – a space that fosters alternative potentials or counter-hegemonic places from which subversive acts against stubborn fixities take place. Considering that according to Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005), human interaction and relationships are fundamental aspects in the production of space, the township in this regard nurtures African communal ethics and human contact.

Throughout the narration of Phaks's experience of apartheid, the narrator constantly alludes to the black township, heightening its equivocal presence in black people's lives. The depiction of the inner part of the city in different historical eras is associated with recurrent images of a corrupt capitalist culture by the elite (previously white elites and a black ruling class in the modern day), power obscenities and social stratification. The juxtaposed images of the city and the black township endorse the idea that the city retains an image of foreign culture that threatens Africans' oral consciousness and survival. The fact that in post-apartheid society, black students like Hlumelo and Ruru do not have access to Rhodes University or Cape Town University because of their poor socio-economic standing is also telling evidence of arrested post-colonial transition. Their desperate situation is further expressed when these black young people contemplate working at the white people's mansions as cleaners, gardeners, dog-walkers or apple-pickers on white-owned farms. The types of jobs speak about the absence of opportunities for black South Africans in the post-apartheid era. The white master and black servant scenario projected in Athol Fugard's (1984) *Master Harold and the Boys* and other colonial narratives is reinstated. Palpably, the racial hierarchy is unbroken; white people remain in control of economic resources in South Africa. While Schensul and Heller (2010) claim that socio-economic class divisions in the post-apartheid era are not solely based on race, it could be an error of interpretation to disregard the complicated legacies of racial apartness in South Africa. Elsewhere, Bonilla-Silva (2014:30) warns us about the danger of attempting to impose silence on the effects of historical injustices and reasons that we are living in an era of 'racism without racists,' where injustices are preserved through the promulgation of colour-blindness. Undoubtedly, in South Africa the previously advantaged racial groups were set apart to enjoy long-lasting privileges. Indeed, it cannot be refuted that we should move away from crude binary oppositions that cloud our reason in favour of expansive analytical vocabulary and progressive perspectives. At the same time, overlooking the continuing structural racism and concealing the privileges of whiteness in current conversations about justice and equity is a dangerous pitfall, because this attitude preserves historical racial tension. In fact, space from Massey and Foucault's perspectives is enunciated as a locale of diversity where divergence is an essential part of its endless (re)production.

Reading gender through *Umkhonto we Sizwe* and *abafazi bomlindo*

Two terms, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* and *abafazi bomlindo*, are critical in my analysis of gender representation in the text *The Wanderers*. My primary attention here is on how *Umkonto we Sizwe* and *abafazi bomlindo* are deployed to highlight symbolic geographies in the re-scripting of gender relations. In this regard, I examine inherently mapped gendered structures of power, exclusions and contestation proffered in the novel. Writers like Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Sindiwe Magona, Kopano Matlwa and Zakes Mda, among others, explicitly explore the gender question in the context of post-apartheid

South African literature. Elsewhere, I have highlighted that one of the critical concerns that has been brought forward in contemporary gender and feminist conversations relates to how women are often sidelined in Africa's liberation narratives (Mavengano 2023). South African writers are not vindicated in this regard. Historically, women played indispensable roles in liberation movements across Africa. Nevertheless, their contributions are frequently made trivial or invisible. This situation is commonly perceptible in patriarchal societies on the continent to privilege and validate man's rule in political spheres.

In *The Wanderers*, Ruru's mother, Nosipho Biko, belongs to *abafazi bomlindo*, which refers to women who painfully waited for their long-lost partners until 'seasons have multiplied and shadows have lengthened' (Ntabeni 2021:10). This character is abandoned by her partner, Phaks, who joins the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* [Spear of the Nation] which was an armed wing of the ANC that actively participated in the liberation struggle against the apartheid regime. Living in the black township as a black woman during apartheid, Nosipho endures pain both as a racialised and gendered other. She single-handedly carries the weight of the pregnancy and looking after the couple's daughter, Ruru, defying numerous challenges related to her condition of otherness. Considering that in African society, women personify the nation, Nosipho's agony, pregnancy and birth of a child significantly parallel with the phases of a collective liberation struggle and resilience. She resembles Winnie Mandela, the wife of the veteran leader Nelson Mandela, and many of her kind. Ruru shares with the readers that there were many children in the township who were like her, 'haunted by the memory of an absent father' (Ntabeni 2021:10). The township topography is infused with entangled inscriptions of both race and gender exclusions. Like his other male precursors, Ntabeni in his enunciation of the township in liberation narrative offers a limiting presentation of women in the context of the armed struggle, which does not transcend the traditional gender perceptions. The writer casts dynamic male characters who are consciously involved in subversive politics in contrast with the female inert wives – *abafazi bomlindo* waiting for the absent men. The forced separation prohibited familial contact and promoted gender stereotypes. In Ntabeni's writing, black women were left to take care of the home (domesticated), and their men were shoved into the public domain, defending national interests. In this sense, the township is a gendered space where black women's vulnerability is amplified by an acute sense of abandonment, racism, violence and anxiety. Ntabeni's work is silent about women's political activism and resilience. Yet history shows that black South African women heroically defied the segregatory system, such as the cases of Charlotte Maxeke and the Pass Protests in 1913. In 1956 about 20,000 women marched to Pretoria in protest against the *Pass Law* - a historical event that is commemorated on 9 August in South Africa. Dorothy Nyembe's radical activism and her arrest in 1963, Nondwe Mankahla, Rita Ndzanga, Shanthie Naidoo, Joyce Sikhakhane Rankin and Winnie Mandela are some of the outstanding heroines whose memory should be celebrated in liberation narratives. It is unfortunate that herstory is muffled to privilege his-story (*Umkhonto we Sizwe*) in male-centric historical accounts, including in the male-dominated literary landscape (Etim 2020; Kolodny 1996; Mavengano and Nkamta, 2024). The novel's liberation narrative omits women's contributions to independence. Despite the placement of black women – *abafazi bomlindo* – in the township space, the novel only projects them as sufferers under the oppressive system. It is thus appropriate to say *abafazi bomlindo* is a dysphemistic concept which denigrates black women. In this regard, female characters are overshadowed by men like Phaks and Rondo who are positioned in the front line, fighting against apartheid police and soldiers. The superseding trope of waiting for the absent partner in the novel is associated with sullenness and agony; such images reinscribe hooks's (2015) notion of living on the margins of space.

One more problematic representation of gender in *The Wanderers* is brought forward through Efuoa, a victim of the Rwanda genocide. When the United Nations (UN) officials keep on pestering her to share her story, it is Phaks, her husband, who speaks out under the pretext of protecting her. What Ntabeni shows is a society that is yet to come to terms with the ethics of gender equity. Could it be that woman like Efuoa exaggerate their reliance on men for protection, in keeping with gendered scripts in male-dominated cultures in Africa, to validate male ego? Phaks confides, 'I'm no longer trusting Efuoa's innocence. I'm flattered by her need of me' (Ntabeni 2021:190). Phaks's comment here hints at the complex ways in which gender is performed by subjects in social contexts. Ntabeni's construction of gender problematises simplistic evaluations of gender informed by dualistic models of power. Arguably, Efuoa's voice in the Rwandan genocide narrative is strikingly gagged by both patriarchy and global power (the UN). Phaks's claim about protecting his wife from reviving the painful memory signifies a shift to less explicit forms of patriarchal domination – an anti-totalising power in Foucault's framework. He even wonders how Efuoa will cope without him after his death, which reveals Phaks's masculine ego. Ironically, it is Phaks who cannot do without the help of his wife because of his illness. After Phaks's death, Efuoa can narrate her genocide ordeal to Ruru and Sandi. Efuoa's act of speaking of her own accord, without the coercion of the male UN officials or Phaks, suggests the process of reclaiming her hushed voice and a total rejection of male-mediated language.

It is important to note how the novel appraises female collaboration through a peaceful relation that develops between Ruru and her stepmother, Efuoa. Ruru respectfully calls her stepmother *Maman*, a French term that means mother. In the excerpt below Ntabeni (2021) conveys how Ruru and her late father's wife develop a strong and productive bond:

> You have moved in with Maman in the house of your late father in Kihonda township. The two of you decided to extend the house, add an extra bedroom, bathroom and study room with proper shelves for Phaks' books. (p. 335)

The novel here casts Efuoa and Ruru as the embodiments of hope for individual and collective healing and reconciliation. It celebrates women's elevation and their rewarding reinvention of filial and communal spaces. Evidently, Ntabeni's female characters reposition themselves as active storytellers of their life experiences. They also rewrite their stories, changing the direction of the plot, a shift from misogynist standards and male-controlled lingo. Efuoa's reappropriated status from being a Rwandan immigrant in Tanzania, or a *kwerekwere* in contemporary Afrophobic discourses, exemplifies the reverence of women and inclusivity enshrined in the concept of the Rainbow Nation. She is also compared to the illustrious Winnie Mandela in the novel. Hence, the post-colonial Kihonda township serves as a Foucauldian heterotopian space that enables women's capacity to dismantle androcentric and global domineering powers and gender stratification. In other words, space is not a fixed entity – it is imagined as a domain of possibilities that mutates in its complexities, multiplicities and relationality. Space is permanently in the process of being (re)constructed (Massey 2005). This formulation of space resonates with post-structuralist thought that interjects any forms of essentialism. Ruru, Efuoa and Sandi's strong bond also defies national, sociocultural and linguistic frontiers. This is in line with Massey's (2005) description of space as a sphere of coexisting heterogeneity. Significantly, the writer locates these female characters in urban space to foreground the increasing visibility of women in previously male-dominated sites. This reflects Massey's (2005) description of space as a nuanced creation of liaisons and contradictions. It also resonates with hooks's (2015) argument that the margin space (in this case, the township) is a site of metamorphosis, subversion and enablement. The post-colonial township is transformed through warm social interrelations by Ntabeni's female characters. By doing this, Ntabeni's writing reprimands dogmatic gender undertones ubiquitous in African cultures and stresses the significant contribution of women towards common survival in line with the dreams of making rainbowism a lived reality and achievement of decolonisation.

Poetics of dis-eased body, triple pandemics and mist

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) are a forceful motif in post-apartheid works like Eben Venter's *My Beautiful Death*, (with the original Afrikaans title *Ek Stamel, Ek Sterwe*), Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, Mpe Phaswane's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Niq Mhlongo's *After Tears* and Masande Ntshanga's *The Reactive*, among others. My focus here is on the tropes of Phaks's frail body, triple pandemics and mist, which together provide a conspicuous locus to read societal ills. The three pandemics, HIV and AIDS, Ebola and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), are potent metaphors that illuminate broader and complex post-apartheid and post-colonial struggles and the deep yearning for rejuvenation. The explicit details about how Phaks was infected with HIV are not provided in the novel, perhaps to avoid repeating earlier flawed connotations which professed HIV and other viruses like Ebola to be defining characteristics of African life, sanctioning the macabre stories about the continent and (re) creating European othering narratives resembling the colonial archives. Foucault (1977) designates such misrepresentation of a war of races. Phaks as a war liberator was exposed to a depressive situation. Sex became a form of diversion from the unsettling reality that defined the soldier's life, as Phaks writes in his pillow books. It is incredibly difficult to trace the geography from which Phaks became infected, because he lived and worked in different countries across the globe, including France and Russia. By not linking Phaks's infection to a specific spatial location, race or sex partner, the writer evades the narratives of blame to deconstruct othering of Africans, as Eurocentric narratives of pandemics frequently do. Cameron (2005) observes that,

> in Africa, the collision of epidemiology with race and politics has led to a bizarre deviation from rational debate on the causes of – and possible treatments for – AIDS. The cost to the continent – in lives and in public truth – has been very high. … This has led to a distinctive African form of AIDS denialism. This is premised on a belief in conspiracy. But in Africa it has racial overtones: the conspiracy is racially inspired. (p. 92)

In his work *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe (2001:2) has also queried how the African subjects have been associated with negativity to reinforce a perpetual condition of 'the absolute other' and the West as the desired standard of being. Ntabeni subverts this binary logic by locating the virus in transnational space, where societies are in contact. The modern-day challenges are shared by all humanity across boundaries of race, culture, language, class and gender to escape the politics of difference that cast Africa as a geography of public threat. In addition, African modernity is produced in a globalised context; hence, it is misleading to retain an image of the continent as an isolated entity. Phaks's exoneration, which could be extended to African humanity in the context of the novel, finds its full countenance in Efuoa's absolute love. She also describes him as an honest, loving and faithful husband.

Ntabeni's novel (2021) announces Phaks's HIV-positive status through his writing, named the pillow books. Phaks tells readers that,

> I have esophageal thrush, complication of cryptococcal meningitis which no longer responds to any kind of treatment. Being fully blown with AIDS will do that to you. I started my ARV [*antiretroviral*] treatment late. Is that not just how it is with us African men? One is not really sick until one is dying. They can't afford to hand ARVs at public hospitals here, so you hold out as long as you can before you have to dig deep from your own pocket for them in private hospitals. There are countless ways for you to die from poverty in Africa. (p. 27)

Phaks's body is a figure of wounds inflicted by the brutal colonial and post-apartheid regimes and post-colonial rulers. While HIV attacks the human immune system, colonialism and apartheid have weakened African communities. The uncanny resemblance emanates from the idea that pandemics like colonialism and apartheid left lasting stigmas and scars on individuals and communities. Thus, the triple pandemics

stated in the novel become a symbolic figure representing the colonial, apartheid and post-independence phases.

Phaks's waning health is rather unsettling as it suggests the uninterrupted presence of malady or decay in the social and political bodies of the post-apartheid and post-colonial African humanities. The idiomatic expression that there are 'myriad ways for you to die from poverty in Africa' (Ntabeni 2021:27) becomes an arresting idiom and political critique directed at incompetent politicians on the continent. Phaks is not just HIV-positive but also poor because he cannot even afford to buy life-saving ARV treatment. As hinted by the text, his abject state is augmented by the fact that the post-colonial government in Tanzania, where he lives, fails to fulfil its public duty to provide essential healthcare. This critique creates empathy for Phaks and other victims of HIV and AIDS. The metaphor of a dis-eased body in the context of post-apartheid South African literature could also be interpreted as a reflection of ailing democracy, fraught with unresolved issues. Certainly, there is a need to prioritise the availability and accessibility of ARV drugs and early treatment to reduce HIV-related death cases. If we read this as a symbolic analogy highlighting the post-independence teething problem, then the novel stresses an urgent need for interventions that will restore the well-being of African people.

It is also possible to read Phaks's frailty as a symbolic expression of the ineptness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that pardoned those who committed crimes against humanity during apartheid. The wounded people find it hard to heal, even several years after attainment of independence (Steyn 2012). The state of woundedness is not confined to the southern African contexts, but it is projected as an enduring problem across the globe. This reading is further reinforced by the fact that in the epilogue, when readers anticipate a lasting relief for both Ruru and Efuoa, the arrival of COVID-19 is announced. Notably, whereas Ebola was falsely alleged by the Western media as an African problem (University of Missouri-Columbia 2018), HIV, AIDS and coronavirus incontrovertibly pose a global health crisis (Fowler 2014). Thus, Ntabeni's writing efficaciously disproves the geopolitics which creates a ghoulish single story about Africa and overlooks humanity's interdependence. It is therefore apt to claim that the novel recommends the notion of a collective ecosystem whose well-being is a common obligation.

Notably, the writer (Ntabeni 2021) also employs the mist metaphor and genocide to express the characters' experiences of space. The following excerpts are essential for my interpretation here:

> I'm sitting at my desk at the window outside. Thick mist mizzles on deepening twilight. In truth, it is not even a window, just an open slit in the wattle-and-mud-wall enough to let the light in while keeping the evil spirits out. (p. 23)

In his pillow books, Phaks shares his views about the significance of memory that is extremely threatened by his failing health – the mist (Ntabeni 2021):

> The doctors told me the fungal yeast – the cause of the excruciating headaches – began in my lungs and quickly spread to my brain. Soon, they said, you shall lose the use of your mental faculties. That scares me. … When you are left with nothing much to show for your life it feels like cruel fate to be robbed of your mind also, your memory, your last refuge, the solace for your ebbing vitality. (p. 28)

The above-cited passages have strong metaphorical undertones whose primary function is to raise awareness about how the sociocultural and historical truths are masked in post-colonial and apartheid distortions and propaganda disseminated by those in power. Such understanding is endorsed by Phaks, who also doubles as the narrator, when he remarks, '[t]hat's the major crime I place against the apartheid system, that of robbing us of our memories' (Ntabeni 2021:58). The personification of the mist serves to underscore its presence and threaten the health and survival of the narrator and his community. Ntabeni follows his literary predecessors like Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Wizard of the Crow*, Mhlongo's *Way Back Home* and Moele's *Room 207*, among others, who condemn falsehoods spread by ruling elites. Ntabeni's (2021) quote makes a telling contrast between the Nationalist Party during the apartheid era and the black-led ANC in post-apartheid society:

> Isn't it ironic that when our Organisation was banned in SA [*South Africa*], we were better informed than now that it is in government? We got left behind in every sense of the word. … Efuoa and I have been drained of every penny we had by this disease. (p. 30)

Phaks adds that 'the irony is too tragic' (Ntabeni 2021:311) to further express the inadequacies of the independent South African state. Phaks dies in exile as a wanderer or vagabond, like the biblical Cain. The mist also denotes the troubled psyche of the comrades who fought during the liberation struggle. Phaks admits that 'the soldier's mind never comes back from the battlefield' (Ntabeni 2021:31). His revelation reminds us of Alexander Kanengoni's protagonist – a former liberation soldier named Munashe – in the novel *Echoing Silences*. Similarly, in *The Wanderers* the narrator bemoans the fate of liberation heroes, reduced to nonentities in the post-independence era, because the national and political spaces were highjacked by selfish criminals. A few genuine war heroes like 'the Mandelas were later co-opted into the system they were supposed to have overthrown' (Ntabeni 2021:235). A prominent intertextual reference to *Animal Farm* is further used to condemn the bizarre resemblance – we are told by Phaks that the pigs (current black African leaders) are gradually developing human faces (former white rulers). This biting comparison is validated by further reference to ANC government corruption – the mentioning of the Zondo Commission, state capture and Jacob Zuma's alleged corruption saga together with the greased hands of the Tanzanian authorities by a criminal pastor. These cases expose baffling levels of a corrupt culture located in corridors of power within the post-independence African national spaces. Phaks regrets the wasted years he spent learning to hate capitalism in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). He later comes to the sad conclusion that 'we are all capitalists at heart' (Ntabeni 2021:43).

Rwanda genocide as a metaphor of sickness in post-colonial space

The representation of Rwandan genocide (a violent historic memory of the civil war) in *The Wanderers* engenders a gripping symbol for post-colonial sickness or tragedy, showing the inherent traumas, indelible scars on the collective psyche and unsettled atrocities that continue to plague Africa's post-colonies. Massey's notion of power geometries is useful in understanding the unequal power relations that shape post-colonial spatial interactions and access to resources in Rwanda, as enunciated in the text. The post-colonial power dynamics and ethnic enclaves emerged from German and Belgian rules that influenced the spatial compartmentalisation of the Rwandan society, leading to the relegation and oppression of certain ethnic groups. The genocide, as described in *The Wanderers*, is a destructive manifestation of the colonial spatial and power disparities, where the physical and social spaces of the Tutsi population were systematically targeted and destroyed. The Tutsis in this society occupy Foucault's heterotopias, or other spaces that exist outside of the normative social order, often serving as sites of both control and subversion; hence, they are targeted by the Hutu militia for extermination. The heterotopic spaces emerged through the refugee camps, hiding places and memorial sites. The tribal wars speak about the failure to reimagine and transform the post-colonial national space into a sphere of connectivity in plurality. The conflict is evidence of coloniality of post-colonial African subjects – a lack of rupture from colonial divisions and animosity. The genocide, with its horrifying violence and mass carnage, denotes the extreme moments of ethnic divisions and historical conflicts that were exacerbated by colonial rule. The metaphor of dis-eased post-colonial African humanity is highlighted through the chilling descriptions of gruesome slaughter of the Tutsis in post-colonial Kibungo province in Rwanda by 'the militia men or Akuzu, the wind of destruction' (Ntabeni 2021:62) – a euphemistic statement that expresses the injuries suffered by post-colonial subjects.

The novel probes into the effects of this violence, such as displacement and trauma, illustrating the ineffable ordeal suffered by victims of the genocide. Efuoa is haunted by the raw memory of dismembered bodies, many years after the genocide. The genocidal account redeploys colonial menace and differentiation politics in Africa's post-colonies. Sadly, the *mwami* [the Rwandan king] betrays his own people for his personal gain – a situation that ridicules African leadership. The phrase 'Hutu power' speaks about the divisive tribal politics. The hyperbolic imagery of the Nyabarongo River full of floating dead bodies speaks about the extent of sickness – civil war, pandemics, corruption, deceit – that torments Africans in the current era. This focus on the violated and amputated bodies of the victims serves as arresting imagery for the dis-eased state of post-colonial African nations, where the remnants of imperialism continue to inflict pain and grief. By knitting the narrative of the Rwandan genocide into the wider context of post-apartheid South Africa, Ntabeni indicates his transnational imaginary that underscores the interconnection of African struggles and the urgent need for a joint reckoning with the past to reimagine a more just and equitable future. To make matters worse, the genocide is more tear-jerking because the indigenous Rwandan people turn against each other – what the writer describes as the biblical mark of Cain – an insinuation that suggests a spiritual rebuke for the bloodshed. Some post-colonial African countries that have witnessed mass killings related to tribal politics include the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The current ruling classes have easily forgotten about the huge sacrifices that ushered in the post-colonial states. It is evident that the continent needs to first deal with these senseless self-harm acts to command respect on the global stage.

Concluding remarks

The deepest difficulties faced by African societies today do not only lie in historical wrongs but in debilitating disillusionment caused by a visible absence of change in the post-independence era. The narrator in *The Wanderers* laments a hollow transition flawed by the continuity of the marginalisation and othering of the majority by those in power. This scenario shows a sad recurrence of colonial and apartheid injustices. Phaks's death takes place on the eve of the new millennium on 31 December 1999. This chronotope in the plot is richly symbolic because it marks the advent of a new season, despite the failures or challenges faced in the previous period. This is a polysemic metaphor whose ambiguity demands further interpretation. The death of this uncelebrated hero at the beginning of a new era is a biting critique of the post-colonial failures, and at the same time, it is a metaphor of possible renewal. It also signifies continuous attempts at (re)making the post-apartheid or post-colonial space – transforming it into a new site fit for human habitation. In the African context, death is just a transition to an ancestral world, and his memory is kept alive by Ruru, Efuoa and the pillow books, all serving to foreground the idea of a fresh beginning sprouting from his death. This is an envisioned rebirth of his family and the post-colonial African states. The novel seems to propose that despite the historical and present-day injuries, Africans have the capacity to overcome prevalent flaws and resolve differences to embrace a new social order. Ruru and Efuoa exemplify such hope for attaining post-colonial recovery.

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