

The South African Woman and the Immigrant Lover: Myths and Dynamics of Cross-Border Love Relationships In a Postapartheid South African Community

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Abstract

Love relationships between black South African women and immigrant men have not been given adequate attention by researchers of migration, refugee studies, and those concerned with anti-immigrant attitudes and violence. In this paper, based on ethnographic research conducted in the Alexandra township of Johannesburg, South Africa in 2009, I argue that cross-border love relationships provoke sexual and racial jealousies between the two sets of manhood: South African and black African immigrant. These are eventually expressed in anti-immigrant violence, such as the events that occurred in May 2008 mainly perpetrated by men, exhibit characteristics of masculinisation, racialisation and sexualisation. Intermittent poverty and unemployment also play a role in this drama. Incidents of hatred based on competition for women and resultant resentment by men who lose out deepen. I contend that in order to fully comprehend this kind of violence, one needs to understand the dynamics of love relationships between black South African women and black African immigrant men and pervasive myths like immigrants stealing jobs and taking women, that are common in the community.

Key Words: immigrant, Alexandra, cross-border, masculinization, sexualization, violence

The Dynamics

One of the most under-theorised and under-researched phenomena in postapartheid township communities is that of love

relationships between black South African women and black African immigrant men. Despite their historically intrinsically embedded and inherent relatedness in South African townships, these love relationships have not received much scholarly attention. Their role in fomenting and agitating attacks against black African immigrants has not been acknowledged either. In June/July 2009 I embarked on a research in Johannesburg's Alexandra township where a year earlier there had been anti-immigrant violence that left sixty-two immigrants dead, hundreds injured and thousands displaced. The study was largely ethnographic and included informal conversations and observations. I talked with a proportionate number of both immigrants and locals, male and female. The responses I obtained initially surprised me and reveal the pervasiveness of myths, and negative stereotypes the social actors have on each other. My research deduces that there are indeed jealousies, sexualisation of hatred and masculinisation of violence towards black African immigrants. I maintain that while there are a myriad of factors causing this kind of violence and influencing the quotidian social relationships in general, sexual jealousies and competition for women is a solid cause of racialised, masculinised and sexualised attacks in Alexandra. Apparently the widespread and ingrained belief that immigrants are "stealing our women" and other perceptions that have come to be taken as truths, are mere functions of myths. All what these groups believe of each other while true at times, remains what they are: myths. Ferguson articulates the social function of myths:

First there is the popular usage, which takes a myth to be a false or factually inaccurate version of things that has come to be widely believed. Second, there is the anthropological use of the term, which focuses on the story's social function: a myth in this sense is not just a mistaken account but a cosmological blueprint that lays down fundamental categories and meanings for the organisation and interpretation of experience (1998:13).

In other articles I have decried the use of the term xenophobia to describe anti-immigrant attitudes in South Africa, rather these attitudes are a reflection and refraction of white anti-black racism inherited from apartheid, which has persisted onto the present (Tafira 2010, 2011). The rise of *black on black*

racism in South Africa, or moreover, violent attitudes towards African immigrants can neither be explained nor analysed with a singular focal lens.¹ Instead there are multiple causes at interplay which converge to give rise to tensions. A prominent feature of black-on-black racism is seen in the fight and competition for women by black African immigrant and black South African men. Also at play are myths, which largely mark social relationships between immigrants and South Africans. Myths and beliefs, and their expressions through everyday language, interactions, and relations are deeply ingrained in the societal psyche.

There is a link between poverty, unemployment, and men's relationship with women. These work closely and influence social relations between immigrants and South Africans in the township. A close analysis of these links gives a deeper understanding of the May 2008 anti-immigrant violence. This analysis reveals the uniqueness and specificity of ethnic and social relations in Alexandra, so different from other instances of violent anti-immigrant incidents seen in other parts of the country, for example, Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Durban, Bothaville, De Doorns, or Balfour. I am aware that each area has its own situation specifics and internal dynamics that are different from the other. This implies that analyses of the so-called xenophobia can neither be generalised nor universalised but must be done in relation to each area and its own sets of social relationships.

The link between poverty, unemployment and competition for women explains how immigrant and South African men "jostle" and compete for women. This is not to say, however, that there is a shortage of women in the township. Instead women are plenty; it depends on whom the woman goes for and whom she leaves.

One consistent response from South African female participants was the prevalence of the masculine nature of the violence which initially emanated from the male Madala hostel in the Beirut area.² Beirut is named by residents after the city in Lebanon, because of its apartheid-era inter-ethnic and sectarian violence. On inquiry I was told by participants that the violence around the area had a long history, beginning during apartheid. Beirut is mainly Zulu dominated and IFP aligned.³ During apartheid there was heightened political violence between the IFP and the ANC, which assumed an ethnic bias.⁴ Father Cairns from

the Roman Catholic church, who has lived in the township for over twenty six years, told me that during that time, Beirut was a separated and a no-go area. With the advent of a new political dispensation in 1994, the violence subsided, except for common criminally motivated incidents. During my numerous sojourns in the area I passed by a sorghum beer outlet and I was struck by an inscription on the wall:

Sicela nisuke ma ses'fikile. By AmaZulu. (We ask you to leave when we arrive. By AmaZulu.)

On further inquiry I was told by patrons that the inscription was written during the May 2008 anti-immigrant violence. The area, of course, shared its own huge amount of violent killings, rapes, and destruction of immigrant property.

When I was walking around asking women what they thought of *xenophobia* and the violence, the first thing they told me was: “Local men are saying immigrant men are taking their women. For sure, South African women are going for immigrants.”⁵ Another younger female participant said: “South African women are having relationships with men from outside. South African men don’t like this. This was the cause of xenophobia. I think it is racism. It is jealousy. Zulu men went around beating immigrants and sometimes those who are not Zulu.”⁶ Father Cairns corroborated: “The thing about stealing our women is racism . . . it is jealousy. The thing that I am a South African and you are a foreigner, is the same as the division between blacks and whites in the past, it is race based, not on colour but on ethnicity.”⁷

Black African immigrants are often excluded from employment opportunities because of the country’s stringent labour laws. Documented and undocumented immigrants are cloistered in this same category as they face barriers in their endeavours to find employment. As a result they end up either trading as street hawkers and vendors or occupying unwanted, low-status, and menial jobs shunned by local workers. There they are employed as cheap labour, earning little or lesser wages than local workers would accept. It is possible for an immigrant to work for R50 a day, but a South African worker would not accept that amount and therefore decide not to go to work:

“You see my brother, when we go to look for work in the firms around here, be it Kew, Marlboro or Wynberg you find all the jobs are taken by AmaKalanga.⁸ All these people are working for little money. I can’t work for that small amount. I find it better to go and stay in the location.”⁹

Consequently most South African men either do not consider looking for work or spend their time sitting in the township doing nothing. While these South African men are accusing immigrants of taking all the jobs for lesser pay, immigrants and South African women generally say South African men are “lazy,” do not like to work, and “kill” their time drinking, sleeping and playing dice, where they may win a couple of Rands and drink the earnings. Given this background, Alexandra women are not keen to have relationships with these kinds of men. Unemployed men are seen as *dom khanda* (thick headed) and *omahlalela* (loafers) who cannot provide and are both inadequate and not real men. Women, rather, are looking for men who are either employed or seen to be making some kind of money. This kind of man happens to be the immigrant.

If the immigrant, as discussed earlier, is underpaid in the relations of productions, does that make him financially stable? One explanation is the widespread perception in the township that immigrants are making money—a lot of it—for that matter, though this is not necessarily true. The second explanation is the *use value* of the money, however little. One of the male South African participants hypothesised that if both sets of men (South African and immigrant) were earning, say, R400 a week, by the end of the week one man’s money would be finished and other would still have some left. The former man might have drunk it all or “wasted it” while the latter, lived frugally during the week, bought some basic necessities and therefore, still had some saved. This scenario is what was presented to me by immigrants. Cognisant that they are in a foreign land, they have to save money to send back home and still have some to spend on their South African girlfriends. Again, on most Fridays and month-ends, non-South African men are seen carrying plastic bags full of groceries from the Pan Africa shopping centre. The perception in the community is that they are making money. Some immigrants, who are

involved in small businesses and trading, attract women because they are seen as “kings.”

Household poverty; depredations of the slum-like conditions, chronic deprivation; and lack of food, money and other necessities compel many women to look for men who can provide.¹⁰ Since most South African men are unemployed, women go for immigrants. In this context, it would appear as if men are competing and fighting for women. The fact that South African women are having love relationships with immigrants is a source of deep resentment by South African men, particularly those who are unemployed. This has led to jealousies in the township.

Intra-class Conflict

The perception that immigrants are depriving locals of jobs and are accepting lower pay is a source of intra-class conflict in the township. Writers like Castles and Kosack (1973), Hylland Eriksen (1993) and Miles (1993), have written on the uneven development of capitalism. This situation has identified immigrant workers with specific socio—economic functions, namely fulfilling undesirable jobs vacated by local workers in the course of the periodic reorganisation of production. Immigrant workers come to constitute a “lower stratum” of the working class which becomes fragmented. However, in Alexandra, the immigrant worker has a double and contradicting status. While he may be occupying an undesirable position at the workplace where he works longer hours for lesser pay, in the township he has a totally different status. There, women desire him, first because, he is working, regardless how little he earns, and second, by working he is perceived to have wealth. The paradoxical status of the immigrant lies in the belief that he is able to get any South African woman, including the township belles who every man is after. However, some local men think immigrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique who are not that wealthy use love charms to get the “hot” women desired by all kinds of men.

The fact that immigrants do not have a green ID book means they are exploited and underpaid by owners of capital.¹¹ This is compounded by COSATU’s reluctance to unionise immigrant workers.¹² Conflicts between immigrant and domestic working classes take the form of racism and rioting and the kind of

pogroms seen in May 2008. Hylland Eriksen (1993) argues that this is “functional” to the system as a whole because these conflicts divert attention from the fundamental contradiction between labour and capital. Race and ethnicity continue to differentiate various sections of the working class with respect to capital, creating specific forms of fracturing and fractioning that intersect class relations and thereby internally divide the working class (Hall 1982).

While the Marxist position is that ethnicity is a false consciousness which would be replaced by a common consciousness of shared and opposed interests, that view remains unattainable. In the present milieu, the unity of the working class as a social movement is incapable of a unified collective behaviour and action (Wieviorka 1997). Decades ago, Wolpe (1976) wrote that racial divisions amount to nothing more than the fractionalisation of the working class, common to all capitalist modes of production, of which the South African social formation is a part. There are consequences to this decline: some workers actions become infiltrated by nationalist agenda and ideologies, where they develop populist discourses and racist attitudes (Wieviorka 1997). The result has been anti-immigrant sentiments and despising of ethnic minorities. National identity has thus been loaded with *xenophobia* and racisms and in Alexandra it has gained impetus with the emergence and presence of other identities. These identities are signified, othered, and represented and defined in racial terms.

The Dynamics of Cross—Border Relationships

From interviews and conversations with participants, apparently South African women in Alexandra are involved in love relationships with immigrant men and many desire an immigrant as a partner. The question one may pose is: why do South African women long for relationships with “strangers”?

Male migration into Alexandra which has been occurring for many decades, has meant that the newly arrived immigrants have had to find female partners to cater for their sexual needs and other comforts. Initially, the immigrants were mainly men who had left their families and even relict wives behind. Immigrant men being involved in love relationships with South African women

in Alexandra is not a new phenomenon. This has been happening ever since the advent of migration, as one elderly woman put it:

Nto yakudala le. Abekoko bethu babeyenza. (This is an old thing, our parents were doing it.)

My conversations with elderly residents revealed that immigrant men from neighbouring countries like Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Nyasaland (now Malawi), and Mozambique, who were recruited under the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) to work in Johannesburg mines, settled in the township permanently, married local women, and set up homes. Some even changed their surnames and adopted Zulu, Sotho and Tswana names and never returned home. Such categories of men in Zimbabwean parlance were called *muchoni* (those who went to Johannesburg and never came back) or *mujubheki* (Johannesburger); they were seen as disconnected from their homes and having been swallowed by the delights of the “Johannesburg lights,” the various entertainments and merriments found abundantly in the city. These entertainments included beautiful women with soporific powers for seduction and attraction; immigrant men would be caught in these satisfactions and “forget” their homes and families.

Most of the cross-border relationships are the *masihlalisane* (let’s live together) or *vat en sit* (snatch and squat) type. One explanation, as I was told, is that the woman has the accommodation and the immigrant stays with her in her domain and it is his duty to provide for the household. The major reason, though, is that *lobola* (bride wealth) is exorbitant, and these alliances are convenient for both parties. The man and the woman just live together as husband and wife, the man providing material needs, and the woman, conjugal duties. Normally, none of the party is known to the other’s respective kin and as they say, it is a “Jo’burg arrangement.” The immigrant usually comes to South Africa alone, is a single man or has left a relict wife back home, and as I was told is “desperate” and needs a woman to provide him with sexual and marital services. On the other hand, the woman is looking for a man to cater for her material needs, and would get involved with the immigrant in this ideal transactional arrangement that satisfies both parties. However, participants told me women in these kinds

of relationships do not like going to the men's countries; for fear that they might never come back. This, in consequence, may lead to tensions in these relationships.

Why Do South African Women Enter Into Cross-Border Relations?

Most love relationships between South African women and immigrant men are understood to be materially based. The latter provide money, pay rent, buy groceries and look after the women's child or children, and do it in a way that the women are well cushioned and comfortable. As seen earlier, immigrant men are perceived to be wealthy and this is a general belief in the township. Again, most South African men are unemployed, and the poverty in the township leads women to look for better "opportunities" by finding men who can provide for their needs and wants. Therefore they are looking for immigrant men because "*baya supporta*" (they provide, literally they support the women with their various needs). This might have emanated from Nigerian men, who among all immigrant men, are seen as the best providers. As a result, all immigrant men are seen to be wealthy like Nigerians. One immigrant man told me:

The moment you start charming a South African girl, the first thing she asks is: Are you Nigerian?

Female participants say Nigerian men are wealthy and have assets. Unlike South African men, Nigerians can easily pay *lobola* of say, R60,000 without hesitation and though *lobola* is expensive, women desire a man who "marries" them. Some women believe that Nigerians come to South Africa, loaded with U.S. dollars, and since U.S. dollars have more value than the South African Rand, they have more money. Most Nigerians do not live in the township and once they marry the woman, they spirit her out of the township, and live with her in the affluent suburbs. The houses where the women live with their Nigerian spouses are a source of envy to those left in the poverty of the township. Not only are they well architected, with well-manicured lawns and gardens, and beautiful interior décors and furniture, the fridges are well stocked with all kind of food and refreshments. Some female participants say

a woman with a Nigerian spouse lives in “heaven.” A Nigerian man does not mind buying a woman, say, R1,000 shoes, expensive designer clothing and giving her R500 to fix her hair, while a South African man would mumble in parting with his R30. Again the Nigerian can take a woman to any supermarket and, ask her to fill up the trolley and pay for all the groceries. When I asked how men proposed to women, I was informed that Nigerians use promises of money and wealth upfront saying: “Come on baby, let’s eat my money.”¹³ Instantly the woman would fall for him. The Nigerians also say to the woman: “What are you doing with that poor man? Come to me I will give you everything.”¹⁴

Some female informants told me that women are naturally born gold-diggers who love material things in life: “Non-South African men have money and women love money, that’s why they go for them. But women are not the same, it’s not that they love money, it’s because they love to be treated well and spoiled.”¹⁵

One other reason women enter into cross border relationships is to escape the physical violence which is perpetrated by South African men. This violence is an internalised norm, sanctioned and substantiated by patriarchal expectations. One female participant told me that South African men are “brought up like that” and are taught to use physical power to show that they are real men, whereas non-South African men show their manhood by providing for the woman with material things. However, some women view physical violence against them by their men as an emotional commitment and expression of love. On the other hand, a majority of women are seeking—“escape”—from this entrapment, hence cross-border romantic relationships. Immigrant men are seen as not culturally socialised to beat women. This is the perception of many women, though one female participant informed me that her mother told her Zimbabwean men have a tendency to beat up their women. Interestingly the fact that immigrants do not beat women may be due to a couple of reasons: the immigrant is in a foreign country where the first thing he is told is: it is a “serious” crime to beat a South African woman. The immigrant is thus governed by fear of the state’s legal and judicial machinery and apparatus, which includes the police, the department of Home Affairs and the courts. The immigrant men generally said that in their home countries there are no perpetual structures of violence that have characterised South African history and configured

perceptions of masculinity. Some immigrants think that although in their societies some men beat women, the practice is not morally sanctioned. The veracity of these latter claims is, however, subject to question.

I learned that women love a man who provides them with security. In fact women put security and material things on a higher pedestal than love, and they are more concerned with welfare and the well-being of their offspring. On the other hand South African men say South African women are *omahotsha* (bitches), who are “materialistic, gold diggers and evil”; who are after money and go for a man who “impresses.” It happens, then, that the immigrant man is the one who “impresses.” This scenario is what bell hooks (1992) refers to as misogyny, in which women are represented as evil, prostitutes who see their sexuality as a commodity to be exchanged for cash, after which they betray the man.

South African participants reported that immigrants have a habit of “showing off,” especially in taverns, where they buy women beer, fill tables with bottles of alcohol, play and bet on snooker tables, and are said to be a noisy and boisterous lot. Women say South African men do not know how to provide for a woman; they are stingy and all they want is sex. What I found contradictory is that while immigrants say South African men are misusing money because of their fondness for alcohol, participants also reported that immigrants love going on drinking sprees. Clearly alcohol is imbibed in huge quantities in the township. This gives rise to the idea that South African men or even immigrants “waste” their money on drink. On one street in Alexandra, I counted seven *shebeens* and taverns, not including many others in adjacent streets.¹⁶ For immigrants, South African men “waste” their money on alcohol. One may pose a question: what is the value attached to “waste” and how is it that there is huge consumption of alcohol in Alexandra?¹⁷ Given this background, it is of little surprise then, that alcohol is imbibed in great quantities in Alexandra. Wherever there is partaking of alcohol, it is common to see groups of men who are friends, each taking turns to buy rounds of drink or gathered around a *shisa nyama* (braai/ barbecue). Each man’s obligation is to his male friends (referred to as *omagang*, *izinja*, *tsotsis*, and *impinsthi*, which is the lexicon of township masculine gang culture) and each drinks until his pockets are empty. I think the “waste” comes when women see

their men coming home drunk and penniless, while they have not attended to basic priorities and necessities like rent, school fees and clothes for the children. The typical black South African male is constructed as one fond of alcohol, and the merriments and entertainments that come with it. He is seen as irresponsible, and moreover after a drinking session is prone to violence. It became apparent to me the extent of apartheid's role in producing pervasive alcoholism and the fracturing of social and family relations.

While immigrants—“*baya supporta*”—South African men are said not to provide for their women and spend money on alcohol and their friends (as discussed above):

“Immigrant men are much better. They give you money without squabbling. When you ask South African man money, he starts mumbling and says he will get a *skolodo* (credit) somewhere and then give you the money. He never does. They just want to drink their money. It's not that we love material things, we love being spoiled.”¹⁸

When he buys, say, relish today, tomorrow he says it is her turn, since yesterday it was he who bought. Or when he pays rent this month, the next, he asks the woman to pay. South African female participants reported that South African men demand taking turns in providing necessities for the home. The general feeling among South African men is that they have to go “fifty-fifty” and share obligations, because of women's rights, enshrined in the post 1994 South African constitution which guarantees gender equality. They also say the new constitution has “destroyed everything” by implying that everybody is equal and that both men and women are “fifty-fifty.” The men also feel that the women want to control everything, including the man, and men are not keen on this.

Contestations of the Masculinities

The allegation by South African men that immigrants are “stealing our women” is pervasive in the country's townships. In this sense, as I indicated earlier, it seems both sets of men are in a sexual competition for women. The ultimate winner apparently is not only the one with a big, long penis but the one who can provide

for the woman, family and dependants. This is the point of distinction between immigrant and South African men. Certainly there are some “things”—qualities and values—that women are looking for. Despite being labelled gold-diggers, for Alexandra women, the man is not just a penis symbol but must come as a “complete package.” He must not only meet her sexual and material expectations but her emotional needs as well. It seems to me it is the latter that forms the crux of South African women’s dissatisfaction with South African men. Again, it is this factor that emerged prominently in my extensive conversations with female participants. This also leads to other outlying forces at play in love relationships in Alexandra: sexism, gender violence and abuse. Women are not only after money, but are escaping these oppressions. Immigrant men are seen as better lovers and the consequences are: bitter contestations between the two sets of manhood, which are manifested in racisms and their corollary violent forms.

Being a man in Alexandra encompasses the big penis which many in the community, including men and women, believe the immigrant is endowed with, and being employed and able to provide for the woman, therefore rendering one lovable. South African female participants say South African men are afraid of independent and competitive women who are superior to them. They would prefer “dumb blondes,” who stay at home and do not argue or oppose them and just do whatever they say without question or resistance.¹⁹ Such a woman would run his bath, cook and do laundry for him while he sits and watches television. South African men, female participants also reported, demand absolute conformity in a woman—that she performs traditional roles and make babies. Some men look for a trophy woman they can display in public and thus boost their manly egos and masculinities. Certainly women are dismayed by this kind of arrangement. Female participants told me that women go for immigrants because of unpleasant experiences they have or have had with South African men. They say the latter want to dominate women, abuse and isolate them from their families. Non—South African men are said to have more love, that is, they spend more time and money on the women and buy them material things.

However, some women said a real woman must provide for her family, clean the house, wash and cook for her man. One female participant argued that though she is a working woman,

she still finds time to do household chores. Nowadays people employ nannies and “house girls,” but she does not like the idea of another woman cooking for her man or washing his underwear. She feels a man must eat food his woman has prepared.

The definitive essence of being a man in Alexandra also means being able to get a *cheri* (girlfriend) and concomitantly, the ability to sex her, *ukunyoba*. The sexual experience is associated with initiation into manhood, which is socially recognised among the man’s peers. In addition, it means having concurrent, multiple partners, with all of whom sex is a major factor. For this reason, an unemployed Alexandra man who cannot access women because of his social position suffers a deep injury to his manhood. The broader connection between unemployment, poverty and masculinity means two things: one, as seen earlier, the contestation between the two sets of manhood: that is immigrant and South African. Second, it would seem men are involved in sexual competition for women and the one able to provide for her becomes the ultimate winner.

What Do Women Look for in a Man?

One consistent response from female participants was that women look for respect, honesty, communication and love. These women love long-lasting relationships and *bafun’ umuzi* (they desire a home and a family). Apparently South African men do not provide that, according to local women. I was told all they want is to fool around, “gallivant” and *bayajola* (they cheat) and are not serious. The female participants believe all men in Alexandra are *jolling* (cheating and having multiple partners). However, some men say that if men are cheating it means something is seriously wrong with South African women, mainly because they are materialistic and they do not love the man but his money. The implication was that South African women need to be taught to love somebody for who they are and not their material resources.

An elderly woman told me that what makes a woman is her bearing a child. Only once she has had a child can she call herself a woman. That explains why most women would first have a baby before a long-term relationship. Similarly for men: only after giving a woman a baby can he call himself a man and after that he can be involved in a serious relationship. However, it seems men

only use the woman, give her a baby, and dump her. In response to the question of what a relationship should be like, the same elderly woman said that love must be balanced and should not be just about sex. Some South African men were critical of these behaviours; as one man said:

“A man must face his responsibilities. If you damage you must fix it. He must take his woman and kids as a first priority before anything else. Some men in South Africa, as old as fifty are taken to maintenance court by women because they don’t look after their kids.”²⁰

The same man said a man who does not work is the one who mostly creates problems in the house. When some men are out of employment, they start thinking that the woman no longer respects them, so they leave her and get another *cheri* (girl). He said men are charmers and use their tongue to get their way into the new woman’s heart. They give her a baby and run away. For immigrant men it is different because *bayabheja* (they freely give out money; *ukubheja* in township lingo is akin to betting) and are seen as “portable ATMs” and “easy come easy go.” This man further said that if South African men do not take responsibility, immigrant men will come and takeover. Women say the dismay and disapproval of South African men over cross—border relationship emanates from jealousy:

“South African men must do a soul searching and ask themselves why they are failing to please their women. If South African men knew how to treat a woman nobody would be complaining. South African men are jealous, they beat up women and they don’t trust them.”²¹

When I posed the question of whether non—South African men were “taking South African women,” Nomxolisi, who has an immigrant lover said:

“I think they (South African men) deserve it. They are full of nonsense. The rate of cheating among them is higher. They just say to you: come on don’t expect to be the only one. But a non—South African man would think twice before he cheats and if he does and his partner finds out, he goes down on his knees

apologising. But South African men just say ah dammit and they beat you up and get violent. I think South African men should learn from these guys (non-South African) and what make women go for them.”²²

Are Women Complicit in their Domination?

The material compulsion for women to be complicit in their own exploitation and abuse is reduced, but not eliminated by the opportunity to develop relationships with immigrant men. While gender violence and abuse of women is common in societies like Alexandra, women themselves partake in activities which lead to objectification of their bodies.

Two-Rand Sly²³

The chronic poverty and widespread unemployment means women go around looking for money and food and a man who can buy a *two-rand sly*. This is a common food in Alexandra which is made of slices of bread, with potato chips, fried eggs, cheese, Vienna sausage and polony inside. The cost ranges from R5 to R14 depending on the items included (it’s called two-rand sly because for some time it used to cost R2). The *sly* is a corruption of the English word slice. It is highly coveted by women. Anyone seen holding or eating it has a certain prestige or status. Any man who can buy a woman the *sly* or ice cream which is also widely consumed in the township can win her heart and consequently sleep with her. Men also propose to have sex with women based on the promises of buying her a *two-rand sly*. Apparently, the *sly* has assumed a more intrinsic value than the normal staple diet of pap (thick maize meal porridge) and it has become a centre of love relationships and abuses. A man can get a woman by buying her the *sly*. At the same time, he can abuse her based on that.

Patriarchy and Abuse

Female participants believe men in general have an ingrained perception of an infallible sexual right to women’s bodies. When their advances are turned down, men would use coercion and this has led to many instances of rape. Rape is a major concern

in Alexandra.²⁴ Some female participants like Nikezwa from the community radio station, Alex FM, told me that many women are abused and they do not report to the police because either the man is the breadwinner or the relationship is a coercive one, and she is afraid of leaving him because he might assault or even kill her. However, some women think that a man who beats her loves her and the beating is an expression of that love even if he is *snaaks* (nasty). This phenomenon is also exacerbated by huge consumption of alcohol and its abuse.

In many societies, men are the primary agents of violence (Beinart 1992). This is a gender identity construction, determined by social norms, and influenced by historical factors (Morell 2001). Further, masculinities like femininities, are not only historical but multiple, relational and contradictory as well (Hodgson 2001). Domestic violence in Alexandra is pervasive and a daily reality. Often the distribution of power in intimate relationships is disproportionate. Men are not keen on women who talk back or challenge them. They do so at the risk of a physical assault.

An unemployed man feels shame because the normative expectations of the community are that he should provide for the family. His failure to meet these expectations is a source of stress and is compounded by alcohol abuse. Thapelo from ADAPT, a community organisation working on domestic abuse, believes that because men are unemployed, they are derided and abused by their women who tell them: “You don’t want to go and look for work. All you want to do is sleep and drink.” The result is that they vent their anger through physical violence, not only on women but on other men as well. Of course for a long time women have been single mothers and providing for their families and raising their children by themselves. That independence ends, and oppression begins when she gets into a love relationship. He starts saying, “Baby, don’t work, I will provide for you.” But when he becomes unemployed, problems set in, often related to the man’s inability to provide for his family. Men’s use of physical violence to hurt vulnerable people like women and children who have less power, is a frequent and daily occurrence in the township. In fact, for the man to be a “real man” he has to use violence. Women resent the fact that men want to dominate, abuse and give them babies which the men do not support. Far from being inured to the apartheid structures, black men are still caught up in and support the

oppressive discourses those structures created, as Ratele (2004) argues. Manliness as a sexual and social reproductive capacity, and capacity to fight and exercise violence, is a first and foremost duty for a man in many societies (Bourdieu 2001) and Alexandra is no exception. As a result the genderization of male and female bodies reflects relations of domination which become naturalised.

Conclusion

Migration into Alexandra has been going on for over a century. Initially it was mainly men who left behind wives and families in their home countries. Many did not return home and set up permanent family structures in the township. That trend continues in the contemporary society, albeit in changing social and economic conditions. The ingrained belief that immigrants are “stealing our women” is an important reflection of social relational and mundane interactions in South African townships. It needs further interrogation and research. The challenge is to find out what it really means to “steal our women”? What moral and social implications does it have in the moral universe of black communities and finally, what ramifications does it have for attitudes and violent attacks on black African immigrants? One cannot have conclusive answers to these questions, some of which I have attempted to answer in this paper. Most importantly the study dealt with and revealed the operation and functions of myths in Alexandra, and illuminates the neglected case of cross-border love relationships in contemporary South African townships. They do help us understand township social relationships and it is from myths that social actors develop perceptions, prejudices and at times outright resentment.

Endnotes

¹ Some might be inclined to call this xenophobia. I have discussed this term in depth elsewhere. See Tafira, Kenneth (2010) “Black Racism in Alexandra: Cross-Border Love Relationships and Negotiation of Difference in a post-Apartheid South African Community”, MA Thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, and Tafira, Kenneth (2011) “Is Xenophobia Racism?” *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 2011, 34 (3&4) pp 114-121.

² The 2008 violence first emanated from the male Madala hostel and spread throughout the township. The hostel is one of many apartheid creations which housed single-sex migrants.

³ IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) is/was a major political party in South Africa.

⁴ African National Congress (ANC) is a liberation movement which is now the ruling party in South Africa.

⁵ Conversation Mrs Dlomo, 09 June 2009

⁶ Conversation with a female South African woman, 25 June 2009

⁷ Conversation with Father Cairns, 10 June 2009

⁸ AmaKalanga is one of many insulting terms used by South Africans to refer to non-nationals.

⁹ Conversation with an unemployed South African young man, 26 June 2009. Kew, Marlboro, and Wynberg are industrial areas surrounding Alexandra.

¹⁰ There are of course women who are employed in various occupations. It seems to me that doesn't displace the need for their security and comfort

¹¹ In the past two years the South African government has offered a special dispensation for Zimbabwean nationals to acquire legal status in the country. I am not sure if this has had any significant impact on the relations of production. The ID book has a social life that determine exclusion and inclusion and is reminiscent of the apartheid era. Alexandra residents continue to refer to the ID book with apartheid lexicon as pass. It is significant in the construction of citizenship at both local community and governmental levels.

¹² Confederation of South African Trade Unions, South Africa's major trade union

¹³ Conversation with a female South African, Nosizwe, 11 July 2009

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Conversation with a female South African, 13 July 2009

¹⁶ Shebeens are homes converted into drinking places. They have their history in colonial injunctions against black Africans drinking alcohol. Enterprising turned their homes into drinking places. Shebeens were, however, illegal and were subject to police raids.

¹⁷ By the turn of the twentieth century the colonial administration was prohibiting Africans consumption of alcohol because owners of capital were concerned about reduced productivity due to "drunkenness"; while ministers of religion moralised about the effects of alcohol and felt it led to violence and wasted lives. A 1928 law prohibited Africans from drinking "European beer" and restricted them to *kaffir* beer (sorghum beer), which became monopolised by municipalities, that realised huge profits from it. Traditionally, African brew had a social and religious value: it was nutritious, had low alcohol content and was refreshing, good for relaxation and conversation. However, prohibitions on alcohol facilitated the trade of illicit liquor and the establishment of *shebeens* in towns. Although municipal beer halls existed, they were not preferred because they did not have a social environment patrons desired. Town beer began to change its nature and became stronger

because brewers found out that they could charge more for a drink with a “kick” in it. They were also quick to prepare, and since alcohol was criminalised, it lessened chances of being discovered by police. The traditional brew used to take up to two weeks to prepare, therefore brewers had to be creative and inventive in an urban setting. Beer soon lost its social and religious value. Town brewing began to create a new black culture and women’s houses were turned into shebeens. Oppressed and exploited workers, who worked for long hours and for lesser wages, found drinking beer a form of escape from daily drudgery. Criminalisation of alcohol led to, and encouraged drunkenness in urban centres because Africans would swallow whatever quantities they had before being discovered by police.

After 1962, prohibitions on “European beer” were lifted. The motivation was both political and economic: the apartheid state realised it could generate revenue from taxes (in addition to sorghum beer); the apartheid state constructed Africans as “naturally heavy drinkers” and believed that access to European liquor would increase alcohol consumption and thus create more gains and profits. Again liberalising liquor would draw attention away from repressive political controls (the Bantu Authorities Act, 1959; the Republic of South Africa Act, 1961 and the banning of African nationalist organisations in the aftermath of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre). Lifting of prohibitions also meant the state would look forward to an inebriated African population and thus minimise potential political opposition to apartheid. The South African Breweries (SAB) purveying of clear beer to an African market meant there was booming trade in liquor. The changing African consumer patterns were seen in excessive drinking and as Mager (1999) has noted, Africans were drinking themselves deeper into apartheid and urban squalor.

¹⁸ Conversation with a South African woman, 13 July 2009

¹⁹ I heard the term “stupid blondes” from one middle class female participant i conversed with, who grew up in Alexandra but has since moved up the social ladder and now lives in the suburbs. I have not heard this term used in the township, though.

²⁰ Conversation with a South African man, 30 June 2009

²¹ Conversation with a female participant, 07 July 2009

²² Conversation with Nomxolisi, 04 July 2009

²³ In different townships it’s known by different names – for example *kota* (quarter) and *spatlo* and there is also a variant of this meal called *spykos*.

²⁴ One can draw also on Bourdieu’s (2001) study of the Kabyle in Algeria where he observes that women are socially prepared to see sexuality as an intimate and emotionally charged experience which doesn’t necessarily include penetration. Instead it contains things like talking, caressing, embracing and other communications and understandings. Men, however, compartmentalise sexuality which is seen as an aggressive and physical act of conquest oriented towards penetration and orgasm.

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