Commodifying the Female Body: Xenophobic Violence in South Africa

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

1. Introduction
In the months of May and June 2008, a wave of xenophobic violence launched against immigrants in South Africa caused a stir in the media, both nationally and internationally. When the inhabitants of Alexandra township, where the violence started, were asked why they turned against foreigners, their response, as it appeared in almost all media coverage of the incident, was that the foreigners had infiltrated their community in great numbers and were engaging in criminal activities such as house breaking and drug trafficking. Reading through the opinions page of several Johannesburg based newspapers such as The Star, The Citizen, Mail & Guardian and The Sowetan, I came across many letters by some great and not-so great minds, all of whom, like myself, were trying to make sense of the events of May 11 and beyond. Among the many reasons given as possible causes of the xenophobic attacks were housing shortage sparked by the influx of illegal immigrants, the competition for scarce jobs, the growing rate of crime in the townships, the failure of the South African government to implement stricter immigration laws, and, ultimately, the non-realization of dreams in the democratic New South Africa. No doubt, these opinions were greatly influenced by police and journalistic reports. It then struck me that something seemed to be missing in these so-called official reports; a general sentiment by the
Black South African male population of the lower class, something which I had encountered many times, had not yet been publicly acknowledged. And then finally an article in the *Mail & Guardian* on 16 May put it in black and white. The said article reported that on 10 May the Alexandra Residents Association (ARA) held a meeting in which the members discussed their growing concern about foreigners who were gradually taking over the taxi industry. The article quoted Sox Chikowero, Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Diaspora Forum, who attended the meeting of the ARA as saying that the people (that is members of the ARA) ‘accused Zimbabweans of driving crime in the area and “taking away our jobs and our women”’ and they thus resolved that the foreigners must ‘leave or die’ (Nosimilo Ndlovu, *Mail & Guardian*, May 16 2008). There at last was my missing link!

The sentiment that the foreigners were taking “our jobs and our women” was as common in the Johannesburg region as the knowledge that Jacob Zuma was on trial for fraud and corruption charges. I have spoken to many black South African men around the Wits University campus, mainly gardeners, security guards and cleaners, and on many occasions when I asked them why they want to “marry” me instead of their fellow country women they often said “the Nigerians had taken all the beautiful women”. Now coming back to the claim that foreigners were taking all the jobs, I would say that this response was not something unexpected. I say it was not unexpected because it is common knowledge that immigrants from neighbouring South African countries quickly get employed in jobs that require manual skills, either because they present themselves as cheap labour or because they tend to be extremely hardworking in order to please their bosses and thus keep their jobs. That part of the argument one could pretend to understand, although it can hardly be seen as justifying the attack on immigrants. As many intellectuals showed in a xenophobia colloquium organized by the Faculty of Humanities at Wits University on 28 May 2008, the causes of such gross hatred for “the other” go beyond poverty, unemployment and housing shortage to encompass more significant issues such as economic inequality and democratic inconsistencies.

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1 I am deeply aware of recent debates on whether the Black people (as opposed to White, Coloured or Indian people) of South Africa should be referred to as Black South Africans or Africans in South Africa. I choose to use the former expression in this paper mainly to avoid ambiguities of reference.
Having listened to many people – journalists, politicians, political analysts, humanitarians, human rights advocates, etc – give their views on the situation, it occurred to me that not many seemed to be particularly concerned about the fact that the perpetrators of this violence were using the existing relationships between South African women and foreign men as a just cause for eliminating the latter. The claim that foreigners were taking “our women” implied that the women were unwilling partners in the relationships; it is as if they were pulled into them by force, much like a mother drags her six-year old to a dentist’s consultation rooms. The manner in which language was used to name the experience indicates an underlying current of male aggressiveness towards other males on the basis of “who owns the women”. What is inexcusable about this kind of thinking is not just the sexist ideology that it underscores but also the way in which it reduces women to the level of commodities. The purpose of this paper is to show the gender implications of situating xenophobic violence within the framework of masculinities in conflict.

2. Contextualizing the xenophobic attack

The xenophobic attack on immigrants started in Alexandra and it is with the alacrity of a bushfire that it spread to other parts of the country. Alexandra is a township in the Johannesburg district of South Africa. It is located near Sandton, a suburb for the wealthy and an economic hub of the Gauteng province. The stark contrast between Alexandra and Sandton is evident not only in the standard of living of the peoples but also in the degree of accessibility into each territory. While only the very rich can afford to own property in Sandton, almost anyone can own a shack in Alexandra. This inequality in accessibility to proper housing already points to a fundamental reason why the xenophobic attacks on immigrants could only have started in a place like Alexandra. But rather than finding ways of bridging the gap between themselves and the Sandtonians, the Alexandra residents acted much like the xenophobic community in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow* which, according to Marius Crous (2007: 26), blames all its problems on foreigners.

Media reports and police investigations revealed that the incident started on the night of May 11 when a group of local people armed with pangas, sticks and golf clubs combed Extension 7 house by house, beating anyone whom they suspected to be a foreigner (*The Star*, May 14). Many who
were identified by the attackers to be illegal immigrants were assaulted and kicked out of their homes. Some were told outrightly to leave the country and return to their homelands. As in many cases of violent attack, the looting of property and raping of women were an integral part of this “cleansing” project. The May 13 issue of *The Star* reported the case of a Zimbabwean woman who was raped four times by four different men in two separate attacks in one night, during which attacks the men also robbed her of her belongings. This is just one of the many cases of rape that characterized the xenophobic attacks. It is true that the media has a propensity for stretching the truth to its elastic limits in the hope of appealing to a sentimental reading public, but we have learned from history that in situations of conflict, such as in civil strife, guerilla wars and racial encounters, women are often vulnerable to sexual assaults (see Wambugu, 2001: 17), thus ending up as the emotional and psychological casualties of violent movements.

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

It must also be noted that this was not the first time xenophobic violence on immigrants was making headline news. *The Star* issue of May 13 contained a brief record of xenophobic incidences that had taken place in various townships around Pretoria and Johannesburg between January and April 2008. There had also been news reports on SABC about Somalis in the
Like many others, my initial reaction to the Alexandra incident was to cry wolf, but an e-mail correspondence forced me to reflect deeply on the situation. After a few days of following news reports on TV and radio, I decided to write to friends in other provinces to find out how they were coping with the situation. A friend of mine in the Western Cape wrote back and said: ‘As you know, this is what we live with all the time; it just went up a notch’ (personal correspondence, May 27 2008). Thinking about her response, I could not have agreed more. But what struck me about the situation was not so much the speed with which the violence spread across the country as the underlying notion of masculinities in conflict that seemed to be part of the key that ignited it in the first place. As if someone was reading my thoughts, less than two months later another friend of mine forwarded me an e-mail from an anonymous source (personal correspondence, July 19 2008), which I would like to analyze at this stage both in terms of its stereotyping of African male sexuality and its placing of the xenophobic violence within the context of heterosexual masculinities in conflict.

3. Telling it like it is?: A telling visual representation of male sexuality
The e-mail just referred to had been well designed by someone who apparently felt compelled to call a spade a spade. It had the following caption:

**Why South Africans sack and kill other fellow Africans such as TANZANIANS, MOZAMBICANS, NIGERIANS AND ZIMBABWEANS!**

This is the untold true reason for their anger:
After the colon comes three photos of African men from different cultural backgrounds, which photos are arranged in order of impact, I presume.
The first one features a Duala Cameronian on the Wouri estuary, standing with hands akimbo and looking at something on his left with obvious concentration. He is stark naked, with an erect penis bigger in size than the average cucumber.

The second photograph portrays an Ibo Nigerian sitting in front of a kiosk on a busy Johannesburg street. He is dressed in casual clothing, sports shoes and a bandana around his head, and presents the image of an American hip hop star. From his face, one could guess that he is in his late thirties or early forties. Unlike the Duala young man who looks skinny, this Ibo man is huge, with big hefty arms and an intimidating body. What is immediately noticeable in this photograph is not the fact he is talking on a cell phone with apparent confidence in himself but the manner in which his large penis protrudes through his trousers.

The third photograph presents a Zulu man dancing to some kind of rhythm at a social event. He seems to have been quite excited, if not drunk, to the extent that he has taken off his clothes, whereas everyone else around him is still well covered. His hands are raised to the air as he moves to the rhythm of the music and the crowd around him is obviously entertained by his moves. Now this Zulu man, like the Duala man in the first photograph, is stark naked, but the difference is that although he has a big body his penis is embarrassingly small.

We could easily dismiss this as the artistic invention of a man who revels in his own perceived notion of a “superior” manhood. But then the underlying gender implications of the xenophobic violence which this e-mail captures cannot be ignored. The manner in which it contextualizes the incident within the discourse of phallic power demands that we explore the range of possible conceptualizations of masculinity embedded in it.

Firstly, these photos imply that the female body is a commodity that can easily be acquired by any man who possesses a six-inch penis or stands at street corners waving a Samsung D900i cell phone. Secondly, they appear to me as the outward manifestation of an internal turmoil, what Kopano Ratele refers to as ‘hetero-masculine anxieties about penis size’ (2004: 151). The most noticeable aspect of all three photos is the penis size of the characters. And in this context size means sexual power, or the lack of it. Penis discourses are specifically linked to economic and
cultural histories associated with power relations, and these histories of domination continue to affect the ordinary moments of everyday life and relationships between individual Africans and members of other social groups in South Africa (Ratele, 2004: 150).

In the context of the xenophobic violence as captured by the anonymous e-mail, power relations between Black South African men and foreign nationals are battled out in a sexualized space in which the penis size becomes the sole determinant of who gets to keep the women. What coded messages for the South African woman do I read in these three photographs? They are as follows:

- Photo 1: She will get plenty of satisfactory sex from him.
- Photo 2: She will get plenty of money from him, and good sex too.
- Photo 3: She will get nothing from him because he possesses neither the sexual nor monetary paraphernalia to attract the female sex.

The stereotyping of African male sexualities is easily discernable in migrant discourses which are replete with generalizations such as “West African men are good in bed” and “South African men cannot perform”. Sad to say, women are often the agency through which these notions are dispatched in the public sphere, as evident in the case of popular model, Babalwa Mneno, whose declaration in the media that she will pursue romantic relationships only with men from other African countries (Gqola, 2008: 4) underpins an acceptance of stereotyped masculinities as fact.

The author of the e-mail discussed above claims that this visual representation of the male sexual organ in different sizes is the ‘untold true reason’ behind the xenophobic attacks on foreigners. What truth can we possibly ascribe to a theory that is so clearly sexualized? Or perhaps there is some degree of truth in it, but this truth begs interrogation as to whether it is not merely a convenient way of dismissing other fundamental factors that affect relations between South Africans and African migrants.

Among such fundamental factors is the question of class, for to some extent xenophobia is more an issue of class than of race whereby the working class feels more threatened by the presence of African migrants than the middle and upper classes do (Ticha, 2003: 20). In addition, xenophobic
violence in South Africa is particularly negrophobic in character, to use Pumla Gqola’s words, because although there is a huge migrant population in South Africa ‘no one is attacking wealthy German, British or French foreigners in Camps Bay or anywhere else in South Africa’ (2008: 2). I would add that in the two months of intensive ransacking of the businesses of foreigners, hardly did we get reports of Indian or Chinese shops in the Johannesburg area being ransacked by angry mobs. This scenario points to a subtle suggestion that only African migrants constitute “surplus bodies” or “excess baggage” that should be disposed of, while the rest of the foreign nationals are given passports of belonging.

As sexualized and class marked as our anonymous e-mail stands out to be, it forces one to think about the ways in which gender plays into conflict situations and particularly how theories of masculinities are linked to what Sasha Gear (2007: 219) calls ‘the commodification of sex’ – where the body is ‘exchanged for any number of necessities or luxuries’.

4. Xenophobic violence and the commodification of the female body
Let me begin by quoting generously from Pumla Gqola’s article on the xenophobic violence in South Africa. The following is her succinct analysis of the incident:

Negrophobic xenophobic sentiment is often couched as a battle between two sets of men. This is very evident in the oft-heard retort, “These guys come here and steal our women and jobs”. Only the sexual, intimate and romantic preferences of some “foreigners” matter in this way. … Specific masculine entitlement and “threat” are clearly encoded in this resentful articulation: Black South African women and jobs are the entitlement of Black South African men. Historically as well as in the contemporary moment, dominant Black masculinities index access to finance as linked to sexual attractiveness and virility. Therefore, the loss of both a means of income and the opposite sex is a threat to such patriarchal and heteronormative masculinities. The ideological baggage of such assertions comes from assumptions about women’s availability for sale. If “foreign” Africans have all the “money”, then South African men cannot compete, and this becomes the historic rumour which is much touted.
I totally agree with Gqola’s reading of masculine behaviour in the face of threats of
disempowerment. The link between sex and violence has been acknowledged in the scholarship
on masculinities in South Africa (Crous, 2007; Gear, 2007). Although the two cannot be
conflated, practices of violent sex point to power as the overriding driving force behind it –
power as domineering, controlling and oppressive. In the context of the xenophobic violence,
Black South African females are seen to exchange their bodies for the luxuries offered by the
foreign men, whether this is in terms of satisfactory sex, beautiful clothes or pocket money. Thus,
the competition for Black women is intensified in a scenario where virility is defined by the
weight of one’s pocket and the size of one’s penis. In this competitive space, the female body
becomes simply a commodity to be secured by the highest bidder.

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

In this scenario, the female body becomes the battleground on which phallic power is established
or challenged: ‘a woman is a mere object to be conquered and the penis is the ultimate weapon
with which to dominate women and make them submissive’ (Crous, 2007: 24). Where penis size
becomes the ultimate determinant of power, then it is presupposed that a lack of the desired size
impacts on one’s self esteem, hence the need to get rid of the enemy in possession of what one does not have, assuming that there can be no other solution to one’s problem.

6. Conclusion

If we were to accept that part of the reason for the explosion of xenophobic violence in Alexandra has to do with the foreign men taking “our women”, then we would no doubt accept that the action taken against these foreigners was intended as an affirmation of a masculinity that had been deemed belittled by two parties – the Black South African woman and the Black foreign man. The “Zulu” man in Alexandra who took up arms against his Zimbabwean neighbour across the street may have felt indignant that the South African Black woman who slept with a Zimbabwean had not only defeated him in the job market where she was given first place by the rules of Affirmative Action but had also rejected and shamed him for his inability to provide for her economically. He may also have been indignant that the Zimbabwean had not only succeeded in finding a way out of the unemployment situation by being self-employed – be it by legitimate or illegal means – but had also managed to entice his country woman with a few items of luxury.

In their study of conflicts between locals and Namibian immigrants in the Mizamoyethu community in the Western Cape, Belinda Dodson and Catherine Oelofse (2002: 134) noted that one of the complaints launched against the immigrant community in the area, as reported by local politician Dickie Meter, is that the immigrants were better off than locals because they dressed smartly and “flashed money around”, thereby “corrupting” local womenfolk, both young girls and married women, and encouraging prostitution. This perception by the Mizamoyethu indigenes resonates with that of the Alexandra residents.

As in many encounters of opposing forces, the female body becomes the playground for contesting masculine power. The Alexandra crisis illustrates the extent to which the commodification of the female body plays into the human psyche and becomes the basis for civil strife and conflicts that not only spread across the national terrain but also dominate and will continue to dominate public discourses on leadership in South Africa.
Bibliography


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