

OUR NAME IS NOT KWEREKWERE: TRUE LIFE STORY BY MIGRANT STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

South Africa is popular country in Africa. It is commonly known as ‘rainbow nation.’ The name was coined because the country serves as a home to diverse people from different countries in the world. In fact, the country was known for her hospitality to foreigners. Recently, the country which hitherto accommodates diverse people from diverse culture, suddenly becomes a theatre in which foreigners are massacred. In light of the above, this study explores the various attacks foreign migrant students are subjected to by South Africans. Qualitative approach is adopted. Interpretive paradigm is used to understand the migrant students’ narrative. Purposive sampling technique was used to select ten migrant students from ten universities in South Africa. Narrative analysis was used to tease migrant students’ life stories. Findings among others have shown that migrant students were subjected to all manners of attack and names calling. Therefore, it is recommended that South African government should enact a law making it a criminal offence to attack migrants from any country.

Keywords: Kwerekwere, migrant students, South Africa, narratives, attacks

Introduction

Globalization, political crisis, environmental disaster, socio-economic challenges and strong desire to obtain an enhanced standard of living has compelled people to migrate to various countries around the world (Manik & Sigh, 2013). At a continental level, people in the sub-Sahara and war affected areas like Southern Sudan, Ethiopia, among others regard migration as common solution to their poverty challenge. In Southern African region, South Africa is perceived by most migrants as the country where their dreams can be actualized given legislative and policy advancements of the post-apartheid government. This perception necessitated hundreds and thousands of migrants from all over the continent to migrate to South Africa for better living opportunities. However, hitherto high hopes by migrants were turned to perpetual fear which was occasioned by xenophobic attacks (Akpan & Ohadiugha, 2024). In recent times, xenophobic attack has emerged as one of the major contributing factors to violence in South Africa (Hiropoulos, 2020). From all indications, the phenomenon has become a challenge in achieving social and economic stability (Tevera, 2013). Xenophobic attack and its various forms of intolerance and violence is a source of concern to all migrants, because it provides for societal justification for the exclusion of migrants from accessing basic social services, which naturally they are entitled to, such as public health, education, shelter, potable water and sanitation (Abraham, 2010).

Aside from various forms of violence meted on migrants, South Africans have coined hideous and unspeakable names on foreign migrants such as Malawi, Zimbabwe, Congo Republic etc (Akpan & Ohadiugha, 2024). The name given to all foreign migrants was purposely coined to degrade migrants whose social identity has already battered. Various studies Gordon (2020), Murenje (2020), Dube and Setlalentoa (2024) on xenophobic attack conducted during the past five years indicated two disturbing findings. According to Olofinbiyi (2022), South Africa exhibits high levels of intolerance and hostility that is occasionally reflected on xenophobic attacks on migrant communities which resulted in the

destruction of their livelihoods and properties. In other vein, Masenya (2017) held that South African leaderships have diplomatically reduced xenophobia to human rights struggle for national entitlement and repossession of economic resources, which the foreign migrants have dispossessed of the indigenous citizens. Two disturbing questions in our mind are, how does poor service delivery and competition for resources cause violence attack on innocent migrants, when South African political class are the ones distributing the resources.

Purpose of the Study

Black African migrants have been subjected to unwarranted violent attack by South African nationals for no justifiable reason. In fact, their known social identity has been tainted and negatively rebranded. On this ground, the study explores ways in which migrant students are treated in South African universities.

Research Questions

The following research questions will act as a guide in conducting the study.

How do migrant students have been treated in South African universities?

What are the effects of migrant students' maltreatment on South African universities?

Rationale for the Study

The quest for the study was a personal one and it began as one of the researcher's arrival at University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa for the higher degrees. While in South Africa, the researcher noticed that there were migrant students from all over the world. Area of interest was that the majority of the migrant students were from African countries such as Cameroun, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho, among others. On closer observation, the researcher discovered that these migrant students are living in fear occasioned by frequent violent attack. Aside from the above, unspeakable names were given to migrant students as a form of social identity. Furthermore, on little provocation, the migrant students were beaten, maimed and even killed by South African nationals for just no cause. From the above discourse, this study seeks to understand the migrant students' stories on ways in which they are treated in South African universities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which underpins the study is known as dehumanization theory. This theory was propounded by Herbert Chanoch Kelman in 1973. Dehumanization is a way or ways human beings treat others or even consider others in a manner which negates others as being less human. In fact, dehumanization is used pejoratively along with a disruption of social norms, with the former applying to the actor(s) of behavioral dehumanization and the latter applying to the action(s) or processes of dehumanization. Similarly, this theory held that the dehumanizers lose the capacity to care for dehumanizees, the dehumanizers do not have compassion for the dehumanizees, the (dehumanisers) often treat them (dehumanizees) as inhuman, hence the dehumanisers make the dehumanizees feel irrelevance in the scheme of things in the community. The institutionalization of xenophobic attack by South Africans is the manifestation of dehumanization of migrant students in the country (de Ruiter, 2024). Practically, migrant students went through terrible time in the hands of South Africans. At slighted provocation, they are beaten, raped, maimed and even killed by the South Africans. Often their properties are forcefully seized or destroyed which compelled them to feel unwanted and frustrated in the country (Ani & Chidi, 2024). Based on the above conversation, this theory is relevance in the study because it would unpack ways in which migrant students are treated in universities in South Africa.

Review of the literature

Xenophobia: Define

The word 'xenophobia' derived from the Greek words 'xenos' and 'phobos' which correspondingly

mean 'strange or foreign and fear'. Various scholars such as Duncan (2012); Chiumbu and Moyo (2018) conceptualise xenophobia as the fear of difference embodied in persons or groups. Nyamnjoh (2006) sees xenophobia as 'the intense dislike, hatred. Crush and Ramachandran (2017) look at xenophobia fear of others. Akpan (2022) held that xenophobia is the dislike for other minor racial groups by the dominant one. Similarly, Rydgren (2004) held that xenophobia involves negative social representations and practices that discriminate against immigrants, refugees and migrants. Despite the little variations in the definitions, it is pertinent note to that the main issue or focus is the violent actions against foreigners, as well as negative social representations of immigrants, refugees and migrants by the locals.

Xenophobic violence in South Africa

Various studies conducted on xenophobia in South Africa provided important information about South Africans' attitudes towards migrants and refugees. For instance, McDonald and Jacobs (2005) who worked on media coverage of migration issues have shown that xenophobia was pervasive, deep-rooted and structural. Between 2001 and 2006, the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) embarked on national surveys of the attitudes of South Africans towards foreign nationals who reside in the country. Findings from the study indicated that that black foreigners are decisively subjected to all manners of hatred by South Africans and the xenophobia was widespread among diverse communities across South Africa. Furthermore, within May, 2008, a study was conducted on mass xenophobic attacks that mostly targeted on the migrants of African origin (Crush et al. 2008). These authors reported that the resultant effect of the attack is that more than 500 shops were either looted or burned down, and about 100,000 African migrants, refugees and citizens were displaced, while many were hospitalized due to physical injuries sustained during the attack.

Misago (2009); Rusinga et al. (2012), Akpan (2022), Ani and Chidi (2024) stated in their studies that the causes of xenophobic attacks by South Africans are multidimensional such as poverty, struggle for available resources, migrants' romance with South African girls and the spread of various form of diseases. Similarly, Tevera (2013) averred that the most obvious causes of xenophobia are unemployment, poverty and inadequate or lack of service delivery to South Africans by the government. He went on to state that the mere fact of being unemployed, breed poverty which resulted to the dissatisfaction of nationals which lead to hostilities towards the migrants. Aside from economic issue which is regarded as the cause of the attack, Steenkamp (2009) reported that it is falsely perceived that incurable diseases such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and some Sexual Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and Ebola, among others are mostly transmitted by the migrants hence the attack. Besides the above assertion, Crush and Peberdy (2018) brought another dimension into the cause of the attack. They contended that crime statistics from the South African Police Service is extremely high and the locals are of the view that the high-rate criminality in the country is caused by the migrants. In concurring the above assertion, Everatt (2011), Choane et al (2016), Tella (2016) held that in recent times, the issue of high rate of criminality reported in all the provinces has been linked to the illegal migrants, therefore, their presence in the country should be negatively reviewed.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research method which revolves around narrative approach. According to Bhangu, Provost and Caduff (2023); Hatch (2023); Lichtman (2023), qualitative method focuses on the process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of the informants, and conducted in a natural setting. Additionally, Dehalwar and Sharma (2024) argued that the major strength of qualitative method lies in its ability to provide rich and detailed insights into complex social phenomena. It was based on this

assertion that the researcher adopts the method to tease the study. In line with the adoption of qualitative method, interpretive paradigm was used to understand the true story as narrated by the migrant students on ways they are treated by the South Africans. William (2024) had already stated that the essence of using interpretive paradigm in qualitative study is to understand the meanings that people attach to certain behaviours and lived experiences. Here, the researcher wants to understand the migrant students' ill-treatment in the hands of South Africans.

Sample size

In this study, twelve migrant students from six universities were purposively selected. In fact, due to the sensitive nature of the study, the social identity of the participants was hidden. In other words, the names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms for security reason. However, the researcher further developed a Consent Form (CF) for the participants to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Furthermore, the instrument for gathering information for the study is known as photovoice. The reason for the choice of photovoice is to ensure that each participant is able to visually and verbally share his/her experience on the manner he/she was treated in South Africa. Plunkett et al., (2013) asserted that the essence of photovoice in qualitative research is to capture the meaningful lived experiences of the participants regarding a phenomenon, therefore, its application in the study. After the collation of data, it was subsequently transcribed, and subjected to open coding. The adoption of open coding in this study is to ensure a flexible, inductive approach to making sense of qualitative data obtained (Onwuegbuzie, Frels & Hwang, 2016; Saldaña, 2021). After subjecting the data for open coding and crystalization of concepts, the emerging themes were analyzed using narrative analysis.

Findings

Question 1: How do migrant students have been treated in South African universities?

The main theme that emerged from the first research question is that migrant students ill-treated and the social identity was changed to unpalatable name such as Kwerekwere and this is explained below.

Violent attacks

All the migrant students interviewed were in unionism in their response that they were not well treated by the South Africans. In fact, one of the migrant students named Meda from Zimbabwe who study at the University of Free State reported that there was a day he went to purchase some food items in a nearby shopping mall. On his way back from the mall, he was attacked violently by three young South Africans. He went on to inform the researchers that all the food items he bought were collected. Furthermore, Meda opined that he was extremely grateful to God that the knives in their possession were not used on him, but he thoroughly beaten by the assailants. When he was asked whether he reported the matter to the police, he replied, thus;

I did not report this ugly incident to the police due to police intimidation of foreigners. Most police officers in the country often arrest foreigner who complained of such incident to them. They may even lock the complainant in the cell. Therefore, I was compelled by fellow foreigners to allow the incident to rest.

Kwerekweres

Dare and Odeyemi who were postgraduate students at the Nelson Mandela University narrated their experiences in the hands of South Africans. These participants reported that they had a terrible experience with some boys at the stadium when Super Eagles of Nigeria played with Bafana Bafana of South Africa. Odeyemi stated that immediately the boys discovered that they were Nigerians, their countenance towards them changed. At this juncture, the researcher asked hm what happened thereafter. He answered:

Immediately these South Africans discovered that they were Nigerians and our support are for Super Eagles, they began to say that these Kwerekweres.

At this point, they were asked of their response to poor social identity accorded them by the South Africans who were watching football match. Dare was quick to state that his response to them was that their name is not Kwerekweres, rather Dare and Odeyemi. He further warned them to stop giving them unspeakable name. Notwithstanding the positions held by Dare and Odeyemi, Peter who is a master degree at the university of Eastern Cape added that he was often called Kwerekwere, kutshukutshu and Isilwanyana (literally meaning 'I don't understand you language') by the South African's students who are his classmates. Aside from his classmates, some non-academic staffs refer to them as kwerekweres either at the laboratories or in the library. He went further to state that the name Kwerekwere was even used to describe all foreign nationals by few black lecturers of South Africa extraction. He concluded that though the name 'kwerekwere' is hurtful, but there is absolutely nothing he or any foreigners residing in the University or South African can do, therefore, they have to lives with it.

In the same vein, Sella who was a Ph.D student at University of KwaZulu-Natal from Kenya was of the view that a topical name an average South African gives to foreigners is Kwerekweres. She went further to narrate that she was often compelled to explain to these South Africans that her name is not Kwerekwere, instead Sella. Most times, the unacceptable social identification often resulted in violence augment between/among South Africans and foreign nationals, Sella concluded.

Question 2: What are the effects of migrant students' maltreatment on South African universities?

The participants interviewed narrated that they are often psychologically traumatized and emotionally stressed occasioned by their maltreatment of the South Africans.

Psychologically traumatized

Fru who came from Cameroun, and he was doing Ph.D programme at the University of Pretoria was quick to explain that due to his maltreatment by South Africans, he is always afraid to move out of the university environment. He went to say that he was psychologically traumatized due to the maltreatment he is subjected to by the South Africans. Similarly, Akufo who is from Ghana studying at the University of Venda narrated that when he saw how a Law student from Zimbabwe was killed with broken bottles and knives, he is psychologically traumatized by the scene till today. Additionally, Doh from Liberia who was doing a Ph.D programme in the University of Johannesburg said:

"During civil war period in Liberia which lasted for almost twelve years, I did not see how a student was brutally maimed and eventually killed. In South Africa, killing of foreigners is very common. In fact, it is everyday occurrence, therefore, one is compelled to live with the ugly scene throughout one's life time.

Emotional Stressed

Participants interviewed reported that the ill-treatment they have been subjected to in hands of the locals cannot be explained. Kasmel who come from Democratic Republic of Congo (DCR) was a Ph.D student in Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University held that it is very unspeakable and unimaginable to witness how one's brother is killed in a broad daylight and the policemen whose primary duty is to protect lives and property are just watching without any attempt to serve the victim. He went further to say that this ugly scene alone is not only traumatized, but emotionally stressful. In a similar manner, Maposa from Zimbabwe was very emotional as he reluctantly declared:

Sir, I cannot imagine that my brother would be killed for not committing any crime, but simple because he came to South Africa to seek further education. I want to know whether it is a crime to attend university in another country. In fact, it is better to live in hell than to live in South Africa. Going through this alone everyday in one's life is emotionally stressful.

Aside from Kasmel and Maposa's narratives, Rafeal from Malawi who is doing a Master degree programme at University of Cape Town was very categorical with his story as he reported that South Africans often made foreigners feel unwanted and inhuman in their country. They often subject foreigners to outright hatred, uncomplimentary remarks and discriminatory disposition. Rafeal went on to say that the issue of changing our social identify to Kwerekwere is very common and unfortunate. Rafeal, therefore, concluded that outright hatred, uncomplimentary remark and discriminatory disposition towards foreigners create emotional stress in our minds.

Discussion

Findings indicated that migrant students living in South Africa were very often subjected to series of maltreatments such as maiming, destruction of their properties and even outright killing. It was further established that the migrant students were attacked at slighted provocation. Furthermore, it was discovered that they (foreigners) were often attacked, not because they committed any crime to warrant the violent attack. Rather, it was based on mere dislike they (South Africans) exhibited towards foreigners. In fact, based on the narrative of all the participants, South Africans easily changed foreigners' social identity to Kwerekwere. This 'name' was provocatively rejected by the foreigners and they see it as derogatory and insulting. One may be compelled to ask whether it is right or acceptable to refer to every person who come from another country or land as Kwerekwere irrespective of his/her social identification.

It may be argued that since South Africans gives the name 'Kwerekwere' to every foreigner as social identification, assuming there are four Kwerekweres in a particular environment, and they (South Africans) want to talk to one of them, how would they be able to identify the person they (South Africans) want to talk to, since everyone is referred to as Kwerekwere. In light of the above assertion, it is improper to identify any foreigner as Kwerekwere. The above findings are supported by Kruger and Osman (2010), Gordon (2020), Massay and Susan (2023) who submitted that migrant students are subjected to human rights abuse, exclusions based on stereotypical behaviour and often face a long struggle towards gaining social acceptance. Additionally, this goes to support the theory that underpinned the study which says dehumanizers treat others or even consider foreigners in a manner which negates them as inhuman (Markowitz & Slovic, 2021).

Findings from the analysis indicated that the effects of maltreatment of migrant students in the hands of South Africans were psychologically traumatized and emotionally stressful. From all indications, it was discovered that migrant students were living in constant fear due to unexpected violent attack often launched by South Africans on the slightest provocation. It was reported that a mere sense of migrant students seeing their loved ones being maimed, raped, their belongings destroyed and even killed in dastardly act or manner is very disturbing. The migrant students felt psychologically traumatized and emotional stressed. From the foregoing, it is believed that migrant students may experience poor academic achievement. The finding is in agreement with the position held by Aileen O'Reilly, Tina Hickey, and Dermot Ryan (2013) who averred that migrant students experience sociocultural and psychological difficulties such as isolation and low self-esteem and lack of interest in internationalization. Recently, Nwokedi and Khanare (2020) argued that migrant students experienced several psychological issues such as lack of sense of belonging, feelings of alienation, low self-esteem and anxiety occasioned by their maltreatment in the hands of South Africa, hence their academic performance often jeopardised.

Conclusion

Political crisis, environmental disaster, socio-economic challenges and the desire to improve one's standard of living through education has necessitated or compelled most migrant students to migrate to

South Africa. However, instead of the country creating avenue or opportunity for the attainment of migrants' anticipated desire, the South African often visited the migrants with series of violent attacks. This study explored ways in which South African nationals treated migrant students and the effects of ill-treatment on the migrant students. Findings have shown that migrant students in South Africa were subjected to various forms of ill-treatment such as apportioning unacceptable slang like Kwerekwere to them in which they refuted.

Recommendations

Based on the findings reached, it is, therefore, recommended that South African government should enact laws making it a criminal offence to violently attack migrants in the country. However, if any migrant is attacked, maimed or killed, the person(s) who committed the act should face capital punishment. Furthermore, migrant students should avoid unnecessary travel especially to the 'hot spots' so that they would not be attacked by South Africans. Additionally, migrants should adopted self adaptive strategy in order maneuver or avoid certain hostile city spots in South Africa.

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