

The Issue of Xenophobia in Africa: A Study of Thabile Shange's *In The Midst of it All* and Alex Ageyi-Agyuri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn*

Deborah Ndidiamaka Umeh

Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Xenophobia, the fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners, is a pressing issue that affects individuals and communities across the African continent. This article explores the theme of xenophobia in African literature through a comparative analysis of two novels: *In The Midst of it All* by Thabile Shange and *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* by Alex Ageyi-Agyuri. Drawing upon postcolonial theory and critical race studies, the study examines how these novels illuminate the complexities of xenophobia and its impact on individuals' lives. Through an analysis of character experiences, narrative techniques, and socio-political contexts, the article sheds light on the root causes of xenophobia in Africa and offers insights into potential strategies for addressing this pervasive issue. The key findings of the study are that xenophobia breaks homes, and causes trauma, suffering, pain, frustration and anxiety. It inflicts hatred, and this hatred spreads wide and tramples upon people's welfare and finally leaves them desolate and unhappy.

Introduction

Literature, according to Shalini et.al, reflects society and also plays a corrective function of scanning the society bringing out their ills and making amends (170). This assumption draws from the underpinning that a literary writer has the professional responsibility to make his work relevant to his society and its concern by treating the burning issues of the day and themes relevant to his community's fundamental and long-range interest. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* explored the precolonial and post-colonial societies of Africans and discoursing the differences and how the whiteman played a major role in fracturing our culture. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's work emphasizes the fight for freedom, and feminist writers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta's work are geared towards subjugation, inequality and horrible experiences of women in patriarchal African society. However, recent writers accounting for the post-independent state of African society have also been faced with the new issue of inter-group and intra-racial subjugation and segregation or outcast treatment of foreigners, which occurs between people of the same race but different ethnicities and this led to the new theme of Xenophobia especially in post independent Africa.

Xenophobia, defined as the fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners, is a significant social and political issue that affects countries across Africa. Through a comparative analysis of Thabile Shange's *In The Midst of it All* and Alex Ageyi-Agyuri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn*, this article seeks to explore how African literature engages with the theme of xenophobia and its impact on individuals and communities. By examining how these novels depict the experiences of xenophobia, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of this issue and its implications for African societies.

Conceptual Framework

Ottuh in his work *Xenophobia in Africa*, states that Xenophobia is fast becoming a negative matter on the African continent with recent cases in Zambia and South Africa. He adds that, xenophobic tendency in Africa is based on prejudice and hatred directed towards foreign nationals, specifically fellow black Africans" (29). His discovery is that xenophobic attitude has soiled African soil and is still soiling it. However it is pertinent to look into the definitions of this xenophobia in order to understand the concept. Mabera opines that "Xenophobia results from two Greek words 'xenos' and 'phobos' which mean strange and foreign" respectively (9). Therefore, xenophobia can be seen as the hatred, spite or fear of foreigners. Sunderstorm defines "xenophobia as the strong dislike, fear or hatred of others who are foreign(1). He goes further to explain that xenophobia often incorporates some cultural and ethnolinguistic identities that from the suspicion and distrust of others who are not native (1). Peters sees" xenophobia as an illogical doubt, suspicion and distrust or fear of strangers and foreigners" (18). Xenophobia, in a nutshell, is a discriminatory attitude towards foreigners and is responsible for the

destruction of lives and properties and carving out unbearable life for foreigners. It also accounts for frustration, pain and destruction of inter-national relationships in Africa. Alex Ageyi-Agyuri and Thabile Shange's novels portray the issue of Xenophobia from the perspective of individual lives and not society. Their works reflected the intrusion of Xenophobia in families, love relationships and the well-being of the individuals in this Xenophobic community. Their novels *In The Mist of it All* and *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* paint a vivid picture of the effect of this vice on the personal lives of Africans.

Theoretical Framework

Structural Theory of Violence

Structural Violence Theory is the discourse on how “social structure, economic, political, legal, religious, cultural, stop, hinder or limit individuals, groups, and societies from reaching their full potential” (Galtung 168). Farmer posited some examples of social structures that can be responsible for limiting individual agency, which includes “racism, sexism, political violence, poverty and diseased bodies” (40).

This theory is relevant to this study because it enables us to understand the manifestations of xenophobia on individuals living in this xenophobic society and how it accounts for lowering the level of the actual fulfilment of the inter-personal relationships that help in the achievement of dreams and needs such as human and personal security. As such, the structural violence theory aided in providing a better understanding of why the negative experiences that Nigerians encounter as they strive to make ends meet in the ‘informal sector’ and cohabitate in foreign countries are labelled as a form of insecurity and impairment to their potential.

Social Constructivist Theory

The theory contends that human beings create mental models of the social world that justify their experiences and their reality. An early constructivist, Nicholas Onuf argues that “the world in which we live is a ‘world of our making’, that things are a certain way because that is how we perceive them, we do not live in a world that has been predetermined in advance by non-human forces”. Fox states that, “this theory argues that human knowledge is acquired through a process of active construction” (7). Mutambara opines that the theory aims to identify the different ways of shaping reality present in a culture to understand the implications of culture for human experience and social practice. Social reality is created from the interaction between an individual and societal group whereby the process of social interaction differentiates between what is normal and what is not normal (68-69).

Social constructivism theory is relevant for this study as it enables one to better understand the social aspects of human security. The experience that most Nigerian migrants have of xenophobia is socially constructed, it is acquired from the social encounters that they face through their day-to-day lives. Thus, social constructivism theory is essential for this study for enabling one to understand how societies construct or encourage threats, and how society has influenced immigrant Nigerians to perceive their own experiences. It explains also how badly xenophobia would damage the mindset of ingroups or xenophobic South Africans and Ghanaians, and possibly spread to Nigerians and other hosts resulting in massive hatred amongst individual Africans towards their neighbours.

Xenophobia in Alex Ageyi-Agyuri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* and Thabile Shange's novel, *In The Mist of it All*

Unexpected Joy At Dawn by Alex Ageyi-Agyuri delves into the theme of xenophobia within the context of post-colonial Ghana. Xenophobia, which refers to the fear or hatred of foreigners, is explored through the experiences of immigrants and the tensions that arise between different ethnic groups within the country. The novel follows the journey of a Nigerian immigrant who faces discrimination and hostility upon arriving in Ghana in search of a better life. Through the protagonist's perspective, Ageyi-Agyuri portrays the harsh realities of xenophobia, including verbal abuse, physical violence, and systemic barriers to integration and acceptance. The character and behaviour of Africans are affected by

xenophobia and like the social constructivist theory states, it continues to spread and is transferred by contact with society because society plays a major role in shaping our beliefs and behaviour.

Nii Tackie's boss, the manager while talking about the issue of expulsion and deportation of aliens is discovered to have disregard for non-natives living in Ghana. And this could be a good reason why Nii Tackie is unable to cooperate with his manager in the office. The manager's statement after Nana asks for his opinion about the alien issue confirms his contemptuous feelings about foreigners, especially Nii. Nana asks the manager:

"Have you seen this?..... The alien issue. It's in the papers "

"Yes, yes, it's quite unsettling. The last time I read about it, I felt worried," the manager replied. He turned to her and said, "Ghanaians like travelling don't they ?" (25)

It is observed that initially in the conversation, he tries to hold back his disgust for aliens but no sooner than Nana is done talking, he blows it out:

"This Nigerian fools," he said and while speaking he thrusts his hands towards Nii and Nii senses that the discussion of aliens was deliberately raised up to ridicule him.

"If I had my way, I'd sack all the aliens here" This came out from the manager finally and Nii muttered "Xenopbia". (25)

Even though Nii had been born in Ghana and had a Ghanaian upbringing, he is still regarded as an alien because his parents are Nigerians and Nii ponders on why he should be seen as an alien when he is also black like them and has lived all his life with them.

Also, during Nii Tackie's outpour of his fear to his wife Massa. Nii opens up and tells Massa that the Alien Compliance Order has stirred up xenophobic contempt and agitation in the people. The news in the papers about aliens affects and spreads through the citizens of Ghana and this is causing unrest in them making the foreigners unsafe to stay in Ghana any longer. Nii cries out:

"The news in the papers is bad, Massa. It is stirring xenophobic feelings in the people, even in my office. The government may be thinking about measures. But you see, Massa...my tribal marks...I can't hide them. Oh God!" (44).

Also when Nii travels to Nigeria, he is filled with the illusion that, unlike Ghanaians, Nigerians have regard for foreigners but his experience with the customs officers makes him disillusioned, the customs officer calls him a fool immediately after he mentions his Ghanaian name makes him realizes how deep xenophobia has eaten into the mindset of Africans and how fast xenophobia had spread its wing. The author portrays this in the conversation between Nii Tackie and the customs officer:

Nii stood erect and brushed over the tie hanging on his chest while losing the knot a bit. "You're a Ghanaian, aren't you? Tell the truth". As Nii smiled, the man asked, "What's your name?" Nii Tackie Moses Akrong Na bi "Fool," the officer said, "You're Ghanaian and you smile and pose like oga now". "Look at the tribal marks on my cheeks," replied Nii. "Oho! You speak grammar, now, let's see." He held the waist section of Nii's trousers and pushed him towards the border post. He was not expecting Aaron Larshibi and three others there, but there they were waiting behind a counter. "What's all this ? Nii asked the one holding him "I'm a Nigerian citizen like you. Why all this harassment?" The immigration officer held him tightly. "Look," Nii continued, "what's the difference between two of us, colour? Suddenly the man released his hold on Nii and he fell on the floor. Another official sitting behind the desk was attracted by Nii's fall. He sat erect and asked: "What about this one?". "He says he's a Nigerian," the officer who brought Nii in said. "Oho! Nigerian get up; let's be sure. Can you speak any of the language of our people__Hausa, Igbo , itsekiri, Yoruba, Fulani or any of the thousand and one dialects in Bendel state?"

Nii kept still. "What's your name?". "Nii Tackie Moses Akrong Na bi". "That's Ghanian, now, parfact one" (145)

Thabile Shange's novel, *In The Midst of it All*, offers a compelling exploration of xenophobia within the context of contemporary South Africa. The term "xenophobia" refers to the fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers, and Shange's work vividly portrays the experiences of immigrants and refugees who face discrimination, violence, and marginalization due to their status as outsiders in the country. One of the central themes of *In The Midst of it All* is the pervasive nature of xenophobia in South African society. Through the experiences of its characters, the novel highlights the harsh realities of life for immigrants and refugees who are often viewed with suspicion and hostility by the native population. From verbal abuse and physical assault to systemic barriers in accessing education, employment, and healthcare, Shange's narrative paints a bleak picture of the challenges faced by individuals who are perceived as "foreign" or "other."

Femi always seemed oblivious or maybe he just pretended to be. She was definitely not ashamed of him, but Jika saying that people were talking was cause for concern. She hoped that the rumours would not fall on her father's ears. (p.34). Nandi's father did not only hate Femi, he despises him and Nandi fears that he would murder her lover and he apparently almost did when he sent thugs to attack Femi and her daughter, he avoided as if she had committed an abomination after he discovers that she is pregnant with Femi's baby. She felt like she was dead to him. Femi was gutted when she told him. He pleaded for her to let him speak to her father. She refused for his own safety. She feared her father wouldn't mind spending his last years in a jail cell for killing the man he'd convinced himself was somehow responsible for his only son's death. Her father was now constantly trying to make her feel guilty for 'sleeping with the enemy' as he had put it. But she wasn't going to break off the engagement, she loved Femi so much that she couldn't even imagine life without him. (171)

It was because of what the people would say about their relationship and her family, delayed their marriage and stumbled on their love, but *In The Midst of it All*, they would conquer and be happy.

Role of historical and cultural factors in shaping Xenophobic attitudes and behaviors in Alex Ageyi-Agyiri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* and Thabile Shange's novel, *In The Midst of it All*,

One of the central themes of *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* is the role of historical and cultural factors in shaping xenophobic attitudes and behaviors. Ageyi-Agyiri highlights the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, which have left a lasting impact on inter-ethnic relations and identities in post-colonial Ghana. The novel explores how colonial-era divisions and hierarchies continue to influence social dynamics, contributing to tensions and conflicts between different ethnic groups and immigrant communities. Moreover, *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* sheds light on the economic dimensions of xenophobia, portraying how competition for resources and opportunities can exacerbate feelings of resentment and hostility towards immigrants. Ageyi-Agyiri illustrates how immigrants are often scapegoated for social and economic problems, becoming targets of discrimination and violence as a result.

Shange's portrayal of xenophobia in *In The Midst of it All* extends beyond individual acts of prejudice to encompass broader structural and institutional forms of discrimination. The novel exposes the ways in which xenophobic attitudes are reinforced and perpetuated by socio-economic inequalities, political rhetoric, and historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid. In the Novel, Nandi's father is xenophobic, strong headed and doesn't want any foreigner near his daughter, the society is the worse. Whenever Nandi walks with her Nigerian lover, there's always glares of spite, disgust and contempt from people. She is also observant of what people say about her relationship with a foreigner. This was nothing new, she was used to the insults, both verbal and non-verbal. People staring and shaking their heads in disapproval did not stop her from holding his hand and showing affection towards him in public. Shopping malls were better, people minded their own business. It was in town and around her neighbourhood that people would almost break their necks when turning to look at them as if she wasn't walking with a human being.

Effect of Xenophobia in Alex Ageyi-Agyiri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* and Thabile Shange's novel, *In The Midst of it All*,

Through the experiences of its characters, Alex Ageyi-Agyiri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* also examines the psychological toll of xenophobia, portraying the emotional trauma and mental anguish experienced by individuals who are marginalized and stigmatized due to their status as outsiders. Ageyi-Agyiri captures the feelings of fear, isolation, and alienation that immigrants face as they navigate a hostile environment, highlighting the impact of xenophobia on mental health and well-being. Despite the challenges and obstacles they face, the characters in *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* demonstrate resilience, strength, and determination in the face of adversity. Ageyi-Agyiri portrays moments of solidarity and support among immigrant communities, as well as acts of resistance against xenophobic attitudes and behaviours. Through these narratives of resistance and resilience, the novel offers a message of hope and empowerment, inspiring readers to challenge xenophobia and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society.

In *Unexpected Joy At Dawn*, Nii's tribal marks that made him a non-native in Ghana weren't even able to prove his identity in Nigeria. His name therefore becomes a new problem, hence, xenophobia has dragged Nii into a situation whereby he has no identity and home. He isn't a Nigerian and he isn't a Ghanaian. Thus, xenophobia has affected and is still affecting the character of Africans towards one another so that they see themselves as enemies, as aliens and the result is that these customs officers blinded by hatred of foreigners are unable to accept their brother who has been sent away from another country and strips their own identity (Harris 35). Nii is suddenly a foreigner in his own country of origin Nigeria and Ghana where he lives. Nii sees himself as a hated alien expectantly waiting for the day the immigration would call at his door and he would find himself wandering in the desert homelessly. Although Nii mentions his pain to the officer crying out that he just wants to have a home and citizenship, they are too reluctant and stubborn to give him that:

"I'm not asking to be given citizenship. I am claiming it as a right. Look at my tribal marks. I've told you about my parentage, told you my sad story. How I have been deprived of parental care due to a barbaric un-african, unconscionable law over there...I look at my people thinking they'll do the right thing by me and allow me to live peacefully by right in my own country. My parents are here. I'll search for them, God willing, I'll find them one day." The officer only smiled cynically. "The point is," he scoffed, "we don't allow those who can't prove their citizenship and who, thus, have no rights to roam our country without proper authorization and control. Listen carefully, boy: our flag must be respected. We are a sovereign country. Don't be smart". "What about me? My parents are here!"(151)

Due to xenophobia, the African attitude toward foreigners, the customs officer treats his brother as a slave deprives him of his citizenship and finally makes him a slave.

Also, we note that even Christians who preach oneness of the tribe are exhibiting xenophobic attitudes. The chairman of Amen Kristi when he talks about a serious robbery, expresses that he suspects the aliens. He says:

"They killed and took away precious things. It means the robbery was carefully planned. Those who did that were wicked and callous. I suspect aliens. Only they will do a thing like that. They are dangerous you see". And this made Mama uncomfortable" (242).

Xenophobia has an impact on love relationships and destroys families of Africans (Ottu 30). The love relationship between Joe and Mama Orojo is treated with scorn by the Amen Kristi. The elder of the church spoke after Mama announced his marriage to the church. The chairman first commented:

"You mean he's not one of us?" and the elder shouts, "Olon!" and then he turned full circle, hitting his left palm with his clenched fist "if I'll be permitted to

advise you, I'll say that distance and tribe counts" Mama was already impatient. "Why do we preach about the oneness of tribes, nations, peoples, races ?" "I know we do," he replied, "but I'm an elderly man and know a few things you need to learn....As I said your marriage is a matter that should concern the church and the elders want to discuss it...Let me warn you. Your decision will create a rift in our church and if you cause trouble I'll throw my whole weight against you" (243).

Also, when Joe mentions his love relationship with Mama Orojo, the Nigerian woman he had been with and his decision to spend the rest of his life with her to Tally O, he coughed, and breathed hard and says:

"What do you mean, Joe?" Joe smiled teasingly. "And what do you think I mean ? Today's operation, for me, will be my last. And it's for a purpose:us!". "You mean us...us! Me and you!". "No, no , no, no-o-o-o...! I'm doing it for her and me" And the next thing that came out of Tally O's mouth is the expression of his contempt about the Nigerian woman, "You'd better be careful about the tribe from which you marry" he advised and coughed again "I hope you know what you're doing" (215).

Another impact of xenophobia in the novel is the separation of Mama and Nii Tackie in the book. The two siblings are split and they become unhappy and lonely. Mama is in pain because of the separation from his brother. In chapter one, she tells the story of her family's separation due to the Alien Compliance Order to Ibuk. Her tone is sad and this shows how far xenophobia could go in destroying the lives of Africans. Nii Tackie and Mama Orojo's family is torn apart and the siblings are far away without any trace and snatching the lives of their parent, leaving them orphans:

"Fifteen years ago, "Mama said, starting her story, "I came to Lagos from Ghana. I came to Nigeria because I was considered an alien in that country. The Government of Ghana passed a law asking all aliens without resident permit to regularise their stay in the country. You see, my great, grandparents had migrated to Ghana several years before, and regarded their home, you see. I don't know the details of what happened after the order was given. I was young then.... We were aliens, they said, and we had to regularise our stay, perhaps, others, too complied.. Two of those we buried on our way were my father and mother. I was left on my own, with very little money and no family" (15).

This highlights the emotional and social impact xenophobia has on its victims. Xenophobia undermines social cohesion and inter-group relations, creating divisions and tensions within African communities and families (Tella 150). Thus, Discriminatory attitudes as a result of xenophobia can lead to social exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization, exacerbating feelings of isolation and alienation among affected individuals.

By highlighting the intersecting forces of racism, nationalism, and economic insecurity, Shange's work invites readers to critically examine the root causes of xenophobia and its impact on society as a whole. Moreover, *In The Midst of it All* sheds light on the psychological toll of xenophobia on its victims, portraying the emotional trauma and mental anguish experienced by immigrants and refugees who are forced to navigate a hostile environment. Shange's characters grapple with feelings of fear, isolation, and alienation as they struggle to assert their humanity and dignity in the face of dehumanizing attitudes and behaviours.

Despite the bleakness of its subject matter, *In The Midst of it All* also offers glimpses of hope and resilience amidst adversity. Through acts of solidarity, community support, and individual acts of resistance, Shange's characters demonstrate the power of collective action in challenging xenophobia and advocating for social justice. By highlighting the agency and resilience of marginalized

communities, the novel inspires readers to imagine a more inclusive and equitable society where diversity is celebrated rather than feared.

Shange, in her novel, explores the impact of Xenophobia on the behavior and character of Africans towards one another in the novel. The impact of Xenophobia on the character and behavior of Africans in the novel. The first character who is suffering from this disease is Nandi's father. We find out Nandi's father is xenophobic and hates foreigners. This is because his son died of a drug overdose and he believes foreigners, especially Nigerians, were to blame. In chapter two we see him reading a newspaper headline "Another Drug Bust in Durban CBD" and without going further for more information concludes that the culprit is a Nigerian.

Not only Jika is full of hatred for foreigners but the whole community. Nandi's community is outraged by foreigners and wants nothing to do with them and Bab' Nxumalo's xenophobic attitude doesn't make the situation better. She has to deal with people speaking badly about her and Femi's relationship and speaking badly of them. For instance the waiter at restaurant calls Nandi's boyfriend a kwerekwere and this infuriates her even though Femi seems to be understanding and tolerating (34). David is also affected by the xenophobic society because he suddenly turns from a good Nigerian working to earn a living into a violent person seeking for revenge. Through Femi and his friend David, we are able to see two different types of foreigners, who approach situations differently. While Femi is the calm and laid-back one, and respects South Africans and their reasoning, David is the opposite. David is always ready for a fight, always ready to get back at those who try to hurt him. This may be because of his nature but it is evident that he only fought back because he is influenced by the violence perpetuated on him and he has no option but to retaliate.

Lastly, xenophobia affects the emotions and welfare of Nandi and Femi in the novel. First, by causing sadness, worries and anxiety as a result of the attitude of the society and secondly by causing a setback on Femi's business. Also, Femi found it hard to raise money for the upkeep of the coming baby, he struggles to keep his income steady and the same time is handling another difficult task of dealing with her wife's anxiety. Nandi on the other hand is effortlessly trying to win back her father's love, to make him accept her fiance and approve their marriage and at the same time the uprise of xenophobic attacks in the society makes her sick, frightened, anxious and frustrated.

A comparative analysis of *In The Midst of it All* and *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* reveals common themes and motifs related to xenophobia, as well as differences in narrative approach and socio-political context. Both novels underscore the pervasive nature of xenophobia in African societies and its detrimental effects on individuals' well-being and sense of belonging. However, while Shange's novel focuses primarily on the experiences of xenophobia in contemporary South Africa, Ageyi-Agyiri's novel offers a broader exploration of xenophobia within the context of post-colonial Ghana, highlighting the ways in which historical and structural factors contribute to the perpetuation of xenophobia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Thabile Shange's *In The Midst of it All* and Alex Ageyi-Agyiri's *Unexpected Joy At Dawn* offer valuable insights into the theme of xenophobia in African literature. Through their nuanced portrayal of the experiences of xenophobia, these novels shed light on the root causes and consequences of this pervasive issue in African societies. By examining the ways in which xenophobia is depicted in these novels, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of this issue and its implications for individuals and communities across the African continent.

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