

Stereotypical Representations of Foreign Nationals in South Africa: The Portrayal of Spaza Shop Operators in Local Television Drama

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Abstract: The paper examines the stereotypical portrayal of spaza shop operators, particularly, Pakistani foreign nationals in the South African television drama *Uncle Malume*, highlighting how such representations raise societal awareness about the dynamics of social relations among people of diverse identities coexisting with the same space. Pakistani nationals are one group of foreigners who are popularly known for operating small shops called spazas in South Africa, a fact also reflected in *Uncle Malume*. Nevertheless, the business success of Pakistani nationals in South Africa is viewed with ambivalence by both South Africans and other foreign residents. Prevalent criticisms include accusations that they undermine local enterprises, engage in paternity abandonment with local women, conduct unlicensed trading, distribute expired and counterfeit products and enter into marriages of convenience with South African women for citizenship purposes. The paper concludes that the while some of the negative stereotypes attached to Pakistani nationals in *Uncle Malume* are coming from realistic experiences, some have no basis and have been observed to contribute to an environment that normalises xenophobia. Ethnic slurs have also emerged as prominent identity markers in contexts where nationalities from diverse backgrounds coexist, often becoming more common and widely used than individuals' actual identities.

Keywords: Amakwerekwere, foreign nationals, Pakistani nationals, spaza shops, Uncle Malume, xenophobia

Résumé : Cet article examine la représentation stéréotypée des gérants d'épicerie de quartier (spaza shops), et plus particulièrement des ressortissants pakistanais, dans la série télévisée sud-africaine « Uncle Malume ». Il met en lumière comment ces représentations sensibilisent le public aux dynamiques des relations sociales entre personnes d'identités diverses partageant un même espace. Les Pakistanais sont un groupe d'étrangers connus pour tenir de petites épicerie en Afrique du Sud, un fait également reflété dans « Uncle Malume ». Cependant, la réussite commerciale des Pakistanais en Afrique du Sud suscite l'ambivalence, tant chez les Sud-Africains que chez les autres résidents étrangers. Parmi les critiques les plus fréquentes, on trouve les accusations de concurrence déloyale, d'abandon d'enfants, de commerce illégal, de distribution de produits périmés ou contrefaits et de mariages blancs avec des Sud-Africaines dans le but d'obtenir la nationalité. L'article conclut que si certains stéréotypes négatifs associés aux Pakistanais dans « Uncle Malume » s'appuient sur des expériences réalistes, d'autres sont infondés et contribuent à banaliser la xénophobie. Les insultes ethniques sont également devenues des marqueurs identitaires importants dans les contextes de coexistence de nationalités et d'origines diverses, devenant souvent plus courantes et plus répandues que l'identité réelle des individus.

Mots-clés : Amakwerekwere, ressortissants étrangers, ressortissants pakistanais, épicerie de quartier, Uncle Malume, xénophobie

Introduction

South Africa as a country has a diversified population comprising people of multiracial and multi-ethnic origins, including both local and foreign nationals. Its strong economy, efficiency in the health sector and best higher education in Africa has attracted people from all over the continent and beyond. Although foreign nationals are welcome in South Africa, they have however, faced varied hostility from other sections of the society which has led to repeated xenophobic attacks in recent years. The foreign nationals are referred

to as *Amakwerekwere* in South Africa, a slur that indicates that they are not appreciated. The figure of *Makwerekwere* has been constructed and deployed in South Africa to render Africans from outside the borders orderable as the nation's bogeyman (Matsinhe, 2011; Nenjerama, 2021; Segatti, 2011). The foreign nationals in South Africa are from countries that include Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zambia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan and some other countries (Nenjerama, 2021). People from these different countries are stereotyped according to particular characteristics which become associated with their identity. The central argument advanced here is that stereotypical labels and images, just like ethnic slurs, result from social interaction and those stereotypes become common identity markers. The paper reflects on the stereotypes that are associated with Pakistanis in South Africa as they are portrayed in the television drama, *Uncle Malume*.

The discussion of stereotypes that are associated with Pakistanis is centered on a drama entitled *Uncle Malume* which was directed by Thabo T. Mahlangu and performed in South Africa by South African artists. *Uncle Malume*, as a work of art which mirrors the realities of Pakistanis and their relationship with South African nationals through comedy. This drama was chosen as a primary source because it was perceived to be a fair representation of reality, although punctuated with a lot of humour, unlike the interviews that could have been influenced by biases since the subject under discussion is a sensitive one. The paper reveals that the conducive environment for small-scale retail businesses in South Africa's residential areas attracts Pakistani migrants. Their businesses are distinctive because they sell essential commodities, readily accessible in the suburbs, from their small shops, commonly referred to as *spaza* shops or *spazas*. Their flexibility sets Pakistani business owners apart from the proprietors of large, established retail outlets as they are willing to accommodate customers of varying financial capacities by breaking packages and selling small quantities of goods, such as a single tea bag. A segment of South African society expresses negative sentiments towards these Pakistanis, contending that *spaza* shops should be run by locals (Nenjerama, 2021). Thus, to fully grasp the stereotypical depictions of Pakistanis in *Uncle Malume*, an initial examination of the broader context of foreign nationals in South Africa is essential. The following section presents a review of literature on the pull factors of immigrants in South Africa, identity formation in foreign nations, stereotypical images, perceptions about foreign nationals, behaviours of foreign nationals in host countries, responses of immigration by locals and the realities faced by foreign nationals in their bid to coexist.

1. An overview of foreign nationals in South Africa

To develop a detailed and balanced analysis of the portrayal and the stereotypical representations of Pakistanis, it is prudent to engage with existing research on foreign national in South Africa. A review of research on foreign nationals in South Africa reveals that much of the focus has been on the legality and illegality of immigration, social relations between local South Africans and immigrants, xenophobia, and the politics of belonging.

The influx of immigrants in South Africa is a result of improved economic opportunities and efficient health facilities as compared to their home countries. Statistics show that "South Africa is ranked among the top 20 nations hosting the largest population of international migrants" (Zinatsa and Saurombe, 2022: 3). In 2017, the proportion of international immigrants in South Africa stood at 7.1% which translates to approximately 2.9 million people (Zinatsa and Saurombe, 2022). However, it is important to note the

statistics may not reflect an accurate record since some of the immigrants are in South Africa illegally and accounting for them remains difficult. This data confirms that “Post-apartheid South Africa, the second largest economy in Africa, instituted a liberal policy which was an opening for thousands of migrants who were in search of protection and better opportunities to come to South Africa” (Kanayo, et al. 2019: 219). The immigrants come mainly from countries that include Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Nigeria, Malawi, Namibia, Somalia and Pakistan among others. According to Dinbabo and Nyasulu (2015), immigrants are attracted to South Africa because the country can provide better public health medical facilities. Similarly, Kanayo, Anjofui and Stieger (2019) note that migration into South Africa is because of economic, social and political challenges in the home countries of immigrants. South Africa’s democratic transition improved economy have attracted people fleeing hunger, poverty, unemployment, conflict and economic hardship in their home countries, with seeking refuge by assuming refugee status (Isike and Isike, 2012; Crush and McDonald, 2013; Dinabo and Nyasulu, 2015; Kanayo and Anjofui, 2021). The liberal policy of South Africa that allows immigration and the improved economy and health sector in the country has resulted in in the influx of immigrants. However, the increased migration into South Africa has resulted in challenges that are associated with economic and social factors on both immigrants and locals.

Singh (2015) notes that the influx of Pakistanis into the South Africa is caused by perceived business opportunities, and financial and political stability. Singh (2015) wanted to find out why there was growing prominence in Pakistani controlled businesses in Verulam, a town in the North Coast of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa. In carrying out the study Singh (2015) wanted to know what attracted the Pakistanis, the reasons for their migration, how they identified South Africa as a preferred destination, who they migrated with and how, the skills and social capital they brought, the manner in which they integrated into the local community, how they have adapted and settled in the new environment, and ways in which they maintain contact back home. Singh (2015) concluded that South African immigrants leave their families with the expectation of a more prosperous life for both themselves and their families back in Pakistan. To achieve this, they are compelled to work long hours, live under difficult conditions, visit home rarely, and stand locals’ xenophobia. The South African informal business landscape in general has been infiltrated by informal immigrant entrepreneurs of Pakistani, Somalian and Bangladesh origins (Ntema, 2016). It is important to note that although the slur ‘*My Friend*’, is used to refer not only to Pakistanis but also to Somalis and Bangladeshis who run spaza shops in general. Pakistanis who run spaza shops in South African can be viewed as immigrant entrepreneurs. This is because “immigrant entrepreneurs are people who have established a business in their host country as a source of income” (Fubah and Moos, 2022: 2). However, although they are entrepreneurs, the challenge is that their businesses are informal and they hardly employ local South Africans. Migration has also resulted in the construction of new identities in host countries.

It has been argued that when people migrate to other countries, they create social identities within a new context of relations with other nationalities (Murray, 2003; Sonn and Lewis, 2009). Sonn et al. (2017) conducted a study on experiences of South African nationals who lived in Australia with the main idea of exploring the implication for identity construction, identity disruption and belonging. The findings indicated that settling in Australia involved negotiation of identity and by South Africans with nostalgia taking centre stage (Sonn et al., 2017). This resonates with the observation that immigrants create “new transnational communities that are often isolated, both physically and socially, from other populations (Murray, 2003: 458). Vratsanos (2023) conducted a study on how the Greek community in Johannesburg, South Africa, forge their identity. Vratsanos (2023)

observed that the Greek community who migrated from Greece have created an indelible trace of Greekness through establishing their own cultural identity in Johannesburg. The traces of Greekness in the semiotic landscape of the city of Johannesburg are visible through the Greek food outlets, restaurants and supermarkets (Vratsanos, 2023). These infrastructures have forged the visibility of Greek identity and according to Cheifitz (2009), within the elite supermarkets of Johannesburg, there are distinct shelves where specifically Greek food is placed. Given that the Greeks in South Africa forge their identity through their food, then this paper delves into establishing how the Pakistanis claim their identity. Klandermans (2014) argues that immigrants would construct their identities in a foreign country where there is competition for resources. Ethnic groups create social identities to safeguard an economic niche (Murray, 2003). This idea is employed in this paper to illustrate how Pakistanis both forge their own identity and are identified by South African and other foreign ethnic groups during their pursuit of economic stability.

The endeavours of foreign nationals to construct their identity, their interpersonal dynamics with local communities, and the varied survival strategies they utilise within South Africa all culminate in the formation of identity stereotypes. These stereotypes are “assumptions that are made about a person or a group’s character or attributes, based on a general image of what a particular group of people is like” (Mwepu, 2005:140). The foreign nationals have generally been identified as Amakwerekwere (Muzondiya, 2010; Matsinhe, 2011.) and of late as *Amagweja* with the Pakistanis and Somalis running spaza shops being singled out as *Amagrigamba* and the Nigerians generally referred to as *Amangongongo*. Muzondiya (2010: 37) argues that identity stereotypes are constructed through the “intersection between external discourses and practices and the internal psychic processes that produce subjectivities about self and others”. Foreign nationals in South Africa are associated with unpleasant stereotypes that include inferiority, vileness and worthlessness (Murray, 2003). Neocosmos (2006: 1) notes that Nigerians and Mozambicans are singled out as drug dealers and illegal immigrants respectively. Centre for Human Rights (2009) notes that discourses involving foreign nationals in South African media encourages negative stereotyping. The media often labels most migrants from Africa as “illegal immigrants” and continues to ignore diversity between different categories of migrants. This negative discourse reinforces the notion of “inherent criminality” of foreign nationals (Centre for Human Rights, 2009: 20). A good example of stereotypes created by the media was the screening of one former Minister of Home Affairs who came out referring to Nigerians resident in South Africa as “criminals and drug traffickers” (Centre for Human Rights, 2009: 21). Foreign nationals are also associated with crime and diseases (Centre for Human Rights, 2009: 20). Adebajo (2018) says that the Nigerian diplomats have often complained about negative press reports and xenophobic stereotypes of Nigerians, as drug traffickers and criminals, in the South African media and popular imagination. In a movie directed by South African-born Canadian, Neill Blomkamp, Nigerians are depicted throughout the movie as involved in drug and arms trafficking, business scams, car-theft, prostitution and cannibalism (Adebajo, 2018: 193). Muzondiya (2010) observes that these stereotypes and labelling of foreign nationals in South Africa is producing a new cultural content and perception of themselves. Mwepu (2005) conducted research on how stereotypes both positive and negative influence intercultural communication between black South Africans and black African foreigners in the country. Mwepu (2005) concluded that the stereotypes attached to both black South African and black African foreigners are usually misleading. The misconceptions embedded in the negative stereotypes are that black South Africans neglect school for entertainment, they do not like white people and are not welcoming and violent are not true (Mwepu, 2005). On the other hand, the positive stereotype that black African foreigners are hardworking, tender and caring, skilled, broadminded and

disciplined can be misleading (Mwepu, 2005). These stereotypes are misleading because some members of these groups may have these characteristics and some may not possess them. It is therefore concluded that stereotypes may be stupid judgements (Leysens, 1994; Mwepu, 2005). The process of stereotyping entails overgeneralisation and assumption that a person is just like anyone else who belongs to their ethnic or social group (Breslin, 1989; Jant, 1995; Mwepu, 2005). Mwepu (2005) concluded by highlighting that both positive and negative stereotypes should be regarded as dangerous. It is therefore prudent to unpack the stereotypes that are associated with the Pakistanis as reflected in the drama, *Uncle Malume*.

South Africa also faces some challenges resulting from immigration since the locals and the immigrants must compete for the already limited resources and employment. The country is battling with the “purported impacts of migration on the labour market and the country’s scarce resources” (Zinatsa and Saurombe, 2022: 3). The undocumented immigrants usually face harsh challenges as they find the situation forcing them to take menial jobs and sometimes underpaid resulting in employers preferring them because of their lack of negotiating power. Some illegal immigrants opt for street vending “because of lack of proper documentation and high unemployment in South Africa, the majority of migrants usually resort to entrepreneurship for survival, with the most common starting point being informal street vending” (Fubah and Moos, 2022: 2). Conflicts often arise as foreigners compete for vending space on the streets with local South Africans (Fubah and Moos, 2022; Mlambo, 2019; Tawodzera and Crush, 2023). Such circumstances as competing for vending space result in conflicts and the subsequent attack on foreign nationals.

Most of the foreigners are facing difficulties when it comes to relating with local South Africans as they face the burden of being conversant with the country’s languages and are as a result victimised. It has been observed that “foreigners living in South Africa face the challenge of establishing a platform for communicating not only with foreigners from other nations but for communicating with South Africans who do not form a monolithic cultural block but a diversity covered by one generic name” (Mwepu, 2005: 138). It is reported that in a study conducted by Cinini (2015), 90% of the foreign nationals that participated have faced victimisation because they had limitations in speaking any of the South African languages. Victimisation due to language barrier is mainly experienced in taxis, hospitals, and at the Department of Home Affairs (Cinini, 2015; Dlamini, Adetiba, Enaifoghe and Mlambo, 2020; Fubah and Moos, 2022; Mlambo, 2019).

Most studies about foreign nationals in South Africa revolve around the notion of xenophobia. Xenophobic attacks are a fight for resources driven by a patrimonial understanding of economic distribution and has significant implications for the future of civil conflict in South Africa (Dlamini et al., 2020; Fubah and Moos, 2022; Mlambo, 2019; Steinberg, 2012). Murray (2003: 441) notes that in South African cities, “migrants face many difficulties ranging from discrimination and prejudice to outright violence and intimidation”. Masenya (2017) looked at the general perspective of xenophobia in South Africa with the study focussing on the main reasons why local citizens attack foreign nationals. The xenophobic attacks in South Africa are caused by the anxiety and beliefs of citizens that foreign nationals are taking over what is supposed to be theirs especially the economic opportunities (Masenya, 2017). Neocosmos (2006) argues that xenophobia in South Africa dates to the apartheid era where Black South Africans were treated as ‘native foreigners’ and were often labelled as ‘Transkeians’, ‘Bophutatswanans’, ‘endans’ or whatever. The implication by Neocosmos (2006) is that South Africans are unleashing xenophobia on other Africans today because they also experienced xenophobia in their

native land during apartheid where they were not treated as citizens of their own country. It has been indicated that the first post-apartheid xenophobic attacks took place between May and June 2008 where the lives of between 62 and 64 people were taken and left around 150 000 displaced (Fubah and Moos, 2022; Segatti, 2011; Steinberg, 2008, 2012; Tafira, 2018; Vromans, Schweitzer, Knoetze and Kagee, 2011). Although many people fled to South Africa in expectation of a safe and secure future, migrants from other African countries became the targets of blame for many South African" poverty (Vromans et al., 2011).

Competition in business has also resulted in xenophobia. Ramathetje and Mtapuri (2014) recommended that instead of being hostile to foreign nationals, the South Africans should find ways of creating income for themselves instead of being attacking those foreign nationals who take the initiative. In 2013, the Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry sharply criticised South Africans for renting their properties to migrants, saying that "the scourge of South Africans in townships selling and renting their businesses to foreigners unfortunately does not assist us as government in our efforts to support and grow these informal businesses" (Crush et al., 2017). Charman and Piper (2012) argue that xenophobia attack on foreign nationals, particularly the Somali shopkeepers was not just ordinary anti-foreigner sentiment but was triggered by economic competition. Xenophobia is characterised by a wide range of looting, killing and attacking foreign national homes, shops and markets (Chenzi, 2021; Masenya, 2017). Violence against *spaza* shopkeepers of Somali and Pakistani origin may also be explained in terms of criminal activities and economic competition in the form of 'violent entrepreneurship' (Charman and Piper, 2012: 81). Despite a recent history of intense economic competition in the *spaza* market in which foreign shopkeepers have come to dominate, levels of violent crime against foreign shopkeepers, 80 per cent of whom are Somali, are not significantly higher than against South African shopkeepers (Charman and Piper, 2012). Similarly, Tafira (2018) notes that xenophobia has been blamed on an array of causes that include poverty, unemployment, competition for scarce resources and so on. However, it is important to note that Somali and Pakistani run *spaza* shops have been found wanting as there is evidence of selling counterfeit and expired goods, particularly foodstuffs that have posed health risks on people (Hornberger et al., 2023; Kempen, 2024; Konz, 2024). Kempen (2024) says that on 1 October 2003, two young boys in Soweto died after consuming biscuits and juice that they bought from a *spaza* shop while two more girls who consumed the same food were admitted in hospital. In a separate incident, two of the four children who were poisoned after consuming snack that they bought from a taxi rank in Bekkersdal died on 4 October 2004. These and other related incidents of poisoned food bought by children from *spaza* shops angered people in South Africa and this led to confrontation of the owners of these shops by the residents in various locations. Hornberger et al. (2023) note that selling of expired and fake foods left the foreign owned *spaza* shops looted or their owners harmed.

Sebola (2017) argues that studies on the causes of xenophobia in South Africa have not been convincing because those done so far were through interviewing the foreign nationals and not the local citizens of South Africa. Even some convincing studies that were done to determine the cause and effects of xenophobia in South Africa have never seen practical application (Sebola, 2017). Mosselson (2010) argues that the xenophobic violence that took place in May 2008 was symptomatic of the politics of belonging and contestation for citizenship that has taken root in post-apartheid South Africa. Mosselson (2010) says that the deliberate move to violently exclude foreigners is one of the central ways in which the new South African political community is being fashioned. The xenophobic attacks need to be understood as manifestations of the state of exception in South Africa (Mosselson, 2010).

This study is looking at the stereotypical images of foreign nationals in South Africa with particular focus on Pakistanis as reflected in the television drama, *Uncle Malume*. It is therefore prudent to review other studies that are centred on plays about foreign nationals in South Africa. Nenjerama (2021) made a criticism of the relationship between theatre, the concept of subalternity and xenophobia in a play by Blessing Hungwe (2008) entitled *Burn Makwerekere Burn*. The argument advanced by Nenjerama (2021: 103) point to the fact that cases of apartheid and colonial system in Zimbabwe and South Africa, respectively, “demonstrate the use of theatre in advancing antagonism against colonialism by using topics of identities and nationhood”. Keuris (2020) discussed migrant theatre in South Africa by analysing Mike van Graan (2017) play entitled *When Swallows Cry*. Keuris (2020) observed that change has occurred in theatre produced in the post-apartheid era as compared to that of the apartheid period as such theatre now reflects on migration within Africa and across the continents. On the other hand, Flockemann et al. (2010) studied the underlying causes of xenophobia using the play by Jonathan Nkala entitled *The Crossing*. Flockemann et al. (2010) concluded that reflections from the play indicated that xenophobic attacks are underpinned by prevailing discourses of exceptionalism and indigeneity. The focus of the current paper is on stereotypical images of Pakistanis in South Africa as reflected in the drama entitled, *Uncle Malume*.

2. Methods

The study employed a qualitative research design grounded in textual to examine the portrayal of Pakistani nationals in the South African television drama *Uncle Malume*. The methodological procedure unfolded in several stages. First, *Uncle Malume* was purposively selected as the primary data source on the basis that it is a locally produced drama reflecting South African social contexts and viewpoints. Second, relevant scenes depicting Pakistani characters and spaza shop interactions were identified and systematically sampled for analysis. Third, the selected scenes were transcribed and subjected to close textual reading, focusing on dialogue, characterisation, narrative patterns, and recurring themes related to identity, economic activity, and social relations. Particular attention was paid to explicit and implicit representations, including stereotypes, accusations and forms of social labelling directed at Pakistani characters. Fourth, these textual elements were coded thematically to identify dominant patterns in the portrayal of Pakistanis and the underlying perceptions reflected in the drama.

The analysis was guided by a sociological framework, which enabled the interpretation of these representations within broader contexts of migration, informal economies, and intergroup relations in South Africa. To enhance analytical depth, the findings from the textual analysis were triangulated with insights from existing literature across the social sciences, humanities, commerce, and legal studies. The use of drama as a data source was informed by the premise that artistic productions often reflect and reproduce social realities (Rendi, 2012; Tung, 2013), thereby providing a useful lens through which prevailing societal attitudes and stereotypes can be examined.

3. A brief narration of *Uncle Malume*

Uncle Malume is a South African drama directed by Thabo Mhlanga and produced in 2014. The story begins with Thoko visiting a traditional healer, who tells her that her uncle, Malume, must get married before she can. Thoko has recently come out of a failed marriage and is preparing for another, although it is unclear whom she intends to marry. However, it appears that she is considering marriage with Abdul, a Pakistani foreign national living in South Africa. Abdul runs a spaza shop in a suburb near where Malume and Thoko live with Thoko's son, Siphoh. When Malume visits Abdul's shop, he brings a

padlock with him. As Abdul greets him with, 'How are you, my friend?', Malume responds sharply, 'I am not your friend, my friend'. In South Africa, Pakistanis are often nicknamed 'My Friend' because they commonly address others, particularly customers, using that phrase. Consequently, their spaza shops are colloquially referred to as 'My Friend spazas' or 'My Friend shops'. After placing his grocery order, Malume locks Abdul inside the shop using the padlock and leaves without paying. Abdul is victimised not only for being a foreigner but also because he struggles with the local language. He is portrayed as attempting to obtain identity documents through illegal means and later by trying to marry Thoko. Malume continues to take goods from Abdul's shop without paying and eventually, Abdul loses his shop to Malume, who hands it over to Siphso, Thoko's son.

3.1. Portrayal of Pakistani nationals in *Uncle Malume*

In the drama, *Uncle Malume*, Pakistanis are portrayed as illegal immigrants who seek South African identity documents through informal and often dishonest means. Abdul, one of the main characters, is arrested for being in the country illegally and eventually loses his spaza shop to a South African national who is his girlfriend's son. In his desperation to obtain legal documentation, Abdul explores several avenues, ultimately attempting to marry a South African woman, Thoko, not out of love but as a strategy to acquire identity documents. This reflects a broader stereotype that some foreign nationals marry local South Africans to gain legal residency. Hoag (2010) supports this view, noting that some Pakistani men enter 'marriages of convenience' with South African women to access identity documents. Such portrayals reinforce xenophobic sentiments within society, where foreign nationals are often derogatorily referred to as *makwerekwere*, and families, especially parents, may refuse to allow their daughters to marry foreign men—even when they have children together—due to deeply rooted stereotypes (Masenya, 2017). While some foreign nationals may indeed have ulterior motives for marrying local women, as depicted by Abdul, the drama suggests that systemic barriers also contribute to these behaviours. If the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) provided more accessible and transparent pathways for foreign nationals to obtain legal documents, the prevalence of fraudulent or manipulative attempts to gain residency could be significantly reduced.

Thoko's brother, Malume, disapproves of her marriage to Abdul due to his negative attitudes toward the foreigner from Pakistan. Thoko, a young South African woman, is not marrying Abdul out of love, but rather because she hopes to benefit from his small business. The stringent conditions set by the South African government for acquiring permanent or temporary residence and citizenship are often difficult for many immigrants to meet (Klaaren, 2000), leading some to pursue unethical means to obtain legal documentation. Foreign nationals attempting to secure South African documents are frequently assisted by local South Africans. In the drama, Mango, a South African national, voluntarily offers to help Abdul obtain identity documents, demanding one million rand, while Abdul can only offer between ten and twenty thousand rand. It also becomes clear that Thoko was never genuinely committed to marrying Abdul as it is apparent that her true motive was access to his wealth. This is evidenced by her lack of emotional reaction when Abdul is arrested. Furthermore, when Malume confronts her about the wedding, Thoko admits in isiZulu that her interest lies not in love but in Abdul's money. The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) has been documented as facing serious issues of corruption in the issuance of identity documents (Klaaren, 2000). In the drama, Abdul attempts to exploit this by going through unofficial channels. The character Mango represents individuals who act as middlemen between immigrants and corrupt DHA

officials. *Uncle Malume* thus highlights how the corruption surrounding identity document acquisition is partly a consequence of the DHA's rigid and exclusionary policies.

The language barrier is portrayed in *Uncle Malume* as one of the major challenges faced by Pakistani immigrants in South Africa. This barrier has contributed to the widespread use of the nickname 'My Friend' as a blanket ethnic slur referring to all Pakistanis. This nickname stems from their frequent use of the phrase 'my friend' when addressing customers, as they struggle with local languages. Consequently, their spaza shops have come to be commonly known as 'My Friend spazas,' based on the observation that they rarely complete a sentence without using the term. In the drama, when Malume enters Abdul's shop, Abdul greets him with, "How are you, my friend?" to which Malume sarcastically replies, "You are not my friend, my friend." This response mocks Abdul, implying that 'My Friend' has become his identity, yet he is not genuinely accepted. Despite running retail businesses in South African suburbs, many Pakistanis do not speak local languages such as isiZulu, and their proficiency in English is limited. Fubah and Moos (2022) note that language barriers are a major challenge for immigrant entrepreneurs. In the drama, Abdul loses business and becomes a target of ridicule because he cannot understand isiZulu, the predominant local language. For example, when a man named 4x4 enters Abdul's shop to buy milk, Abdul repeatedly brings the wrong items due to the language barrier, and the customer eventually leaves without making a purchase. Interestingly, despite his struggle with the local language, Abdul does not employ any South Africans in his shop who could assist with communication. This challenges Fubah and Moos (2022) assertion that immigrant entrepreneurs often hire South Africans in their businesses. Although Pakistanis are classified as immigrant entrepreneurs, the drama suggests that they may not always be willing to employ locals, which could be another factor contributing to their marginalisation and victimisation. Pakistanis in South Africa face numerous disadvantages due to language barriers. Their inability to understand local languages often leaves them vulnerable to deception and exploitation. In the drama *Uncle Malume*, Thoko deceives Abdul into believing they are in a loving relationship, while secretly revealing to her brother, Malume, in isiZulu, that she does not love him. She deliberately speaks in isiZulu to prevent Abdul from understanding that she is only in the relationship for financial gain and to provide for her son, not out of genuine affection. Abdul is later shocked when he is arrested on the day he believes he is going to marry Thoko. The arrest is not prompted by any apparent wrongdoing on his part, but rather because he does not understand the isiZulu conversations taking place around him. When the police arrive to investigate an alleged kidnapping involving Malume and his friend Mango, the two speak to the officers in isiZulu, skilfully diverting attention away from themselves and towards Abdul. They inform the police that Abdul is an illegal immigrant, leading to his arrest and potential deportation. This scene underscores how language barriers contribute to the victimisation of foreign nationals, both by members of the public and law enforcement. Without the ability to understand or defend themselves in the local language, immigrants like Abdul become easy targets for manipulation and discrimination.

The hostility directed at Abdul stems primarily from the fact that he is a foreign national. Globally, South African nationals are often perceived as having highly negative attitudes toward immigrants (Chenzi, 2021; Nenjerama, 2021). These attitudes are not only widespread among ordinary citizens but are also observed among government officials, the police, and private organisations contracted to manage the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants (Sebola, 2017). In the drama *Uncle Malume*, this negativity is reflected in the attitudes of nearly everyone around Abdul: the pastor; his friend, Mango; his fiancée, Thoko; customers like 4x4; his prospective brother-in-law, Malume; an alleged pregnant girlfriend; and the police. All exhibit prejudice against him based solely on his

status as a foreigner. During a church service, for instance, the pastor even mimics the way Pakistanis speak, using the opportunity to publicly criticise them for impregnating local girls. Although the drama incorporates elements of comedy to engage the audience, it simultaneously projects realistic and serious social issues. The portrayal of Abdul's experiences highlights the deep-rooted xenophobic sentiments that continue to affect the treatment of foreign nationals in South Africa.

Pakistanis are portrayed as immigrants who enter South Africa to operate businesses, particularly small retail shops, often without the necessary documentation. This prompted the South African government to put stringent measures in 2024 to have all spaza shops legally registered. This was after there was suspicion that some spaza shops were selling counterfeit, expired and poisonous foods that resulted in the death of children in Gauteng (Kempen, 2024). Research indicates growing tensions and incidents of violence in local communities over the perceived takeover of small and medium enterprises by foreign nationals (Ntema, 2016; Crush et al., 2017). Many South Africans believe that such businesses should be reserved for locals, and this perception is clearly reflected in the drama. In *Uncle Malume*, South African nationals are depicted as feeling justified in benefiting from businesses owned by Pakistanis. For instance, Malume enters Abdul's shop on two occasions, locks him inside, and leaves with groceries without paying. These actions reflect xenophobic attitudes, which are often expressed through looting and attacks on shops and markets operated by foreign nationals (Masenya, 2017). Abdul does not report the theft to the police, likely because he is an undocumented immigrant or is aware that, as a foreigner, he may encounter difficulties when trying to open a case against a local citizen. This aligns with broader societal attitudes, where some South Africans perceive immigrants as criminals who are not entitled to access public services or police protection (Masenya, 2017). The drama thus illustrates how xenophobia manifests in everyday interactions and reflects systemic marginalisation of immigrant entrepreneurs. When Malume and his friend Mango have Abdul arrested, they take over his shop and hand it to Malume's nephew. This raises questions about the legality of running a shop in South Africa without the required documentation, such as an operator's license. In the drama, characters like Malume, Mango, 4x4, Thoko, the pregnant young woman, and the pastor are all portrayed as unemployed or without any visible source of income. This widespread lack of economic opportunity may be a key factor fuelling their resentment and hostility toward Abdul. Malume, for example, is frequently shown gambling, but there is no indication that he ever wins, highlighting the futility of his attempts to earn a living.

South Africa has a significant portion of its population living in poverty, which contributes to the perceived threat posed by immigrants and thereby giving justification to an inaccurate perception often cited in explanations of xenophobia (Neocosmos, 2006). As Masenya (2017) notes, xenophobia in South Africa has risen largely because locals believe that foreign nationals are encroaching on their business and employment opportunities. This fear has led to frequent attacks on immigrants as way of intimidating them into leaving the country, even though many have migrated in search of better economic prospects (Masenya, 2017). The negative attitudes of some South Africans toward Pakistani business owners appear to be driven by economic frustration. However, the blame is misdirected. Pakistani immigrants are not taking government handouts or stealing jobs but they are investing their own resources, operating businesses, and contributing to the South African economy through the payment of taxes. Their entrepreneurship should be seen as a contribution rather than a threat. Thabo Mhlanga, the producer of *Uncle Malume*, recognised that the drama had the potential to incite xenophobic sentiments against Pakistani nationals. As a result, the narrative appears to include deliberate efforts to discourage violence. For instance, the pastor in the drama

says, "This problem of Pakistanis who impregnate young girls can only be solved through prayer". This statement is intended to guide South African nationals toward seeking peaceful, spiritual solutions rather than resorting to violence. It can be inferred that the director deliberately shaped the storyline to encourage the audience to reject xenophobic violence and instead consider alternative, non-violent ways of addressing their grievances and misunderstandings with foreign nationals. The inclusion of such scenes suggests a conscious effort to promote social harmony and tolerance amidst rising tensions.

Conclusion

In the drama *Uncle Malume*, Pakistanis are portrayed as individuals who recognise economic opportunities in South Africa and establish small businesses, particularly general dealer shops commonly known as spaza shops. However, they are also depicted as immigrants who often lack the necessary documentation and who attempt to regularise their stay in the country through questionable means such as bribing officials at the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) or entering into marriages of convenience with South African women to obtain identity documents. A range of negative stereotypes are attached to the Pakistanis in the drama. They are portrayed as men who impregnate young women and evade responsibility. Their shops are said to sell expired or counterfeit products and they are often accused of operating multiple business ventures within single premises, thereby compromising service standards and public health. These shops are commonly referred to as 'My Friend' spazas, a label derived from the way Pakistanis address customers using the phrase 'my friend', a linguistic feature that has become part of their business identity in South Africa. The attitudes displayed by local South Africans toward Pakistanis in *Uncle Malume* reflect strong xenophobic tendencies. Economic frustrations appear to fuel hostility toward foreign nationals, based on the assumption that their presence denies locals economic opportunities. However, it is important to acknowledge that Pakistani business owners typically bring their own capital and entrepreneurial skills. Moreover, the economic difficulties faced by South Africans would not necessarily be alleviated by the absence of these immigrants. The real issue lies in broader structural economic challenges, not in the mere presence of foreign nationals.

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