



# The Church as refuge: missiology, migration, and belonging in South Africa's literary landscape

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**Abstract:** *The Church as a place of refuge has been a main idea in Christian missions for a very long time, however, it has an entirely different position in migration and belonging within the South African literary world. In post-apartheid fiction, stories of displacement, exile, and religious sanctuary overlap a lot, showing how invariants of religious communities are the means of both affiliation and separation. Writers like Zakes Mda in *The Heart of Redness* centres concerns around interrelations of indigenous traditions and Christian structures, as they unveil the elasticity of groups of believers during societal shifts. Likewise, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* deals with the moral dilemmas of migration, as urban spaces once the scenes of opportunity turn into places of alienation and condemnation, thus challenging the Church's role as a place of unconditional acceptance. The shaded writings in Mandla Langa's *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* and K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* enhance the intricacy of the portrayals and illustrate the variety and destructiveness of religious stories and concepts of home, exile, and redemption. Through a missiological lens, this research probes how literature apprehends Christian hospitality's blemishes and chances in contemporary society still wrestling with the apartheid's remnants. It also prompts the readers to think on a wider sense if one may ask whether the Church can still be a true haven to the ones who are forced to leave their homes due to the progressing social and political upheaval in our world. This research is an interrogation of the role of faith in constructing, defying, and reshaping the South African socio-cultural landscape through the lens of literary and missiological studies.*

**Keywords:** *Christianity, exile, migration, mission, South African literature, and theology, fragmentation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A very relevant connection of Christian theology or missionary work, migrations, and literary works results in a solid base for the comprehension of both the influence of religious institutions and their interaction with social development. In a time when the history of exclusion and forced displacement still has an impact on the present-day talk about it in the post-apartheid South Africa, literary creation exists as the most important arena to engage the Church in contradicting its use as one or the other, a sanctuary or a contested belonging. We also have evidence of how David Bosch, in *Transforming Mission*, essayed the argument of Christianity as a movement that not only changes but also takes diverse and innovative forms, revealing that mission is a concept which can be correctly realized only in the context of historical, cultural, and social setting. [1]

In the same manner, Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness* provides a case for the theological necessity of reconciliation and the possibility that the Church can internally create bridges between different factions. This paper attempts to seek the literary analysis that is likely to showcase situations reflecting, challenging, as well as reinterpreting the Church's mission both in connection with societal transformation and in migration-related themes. The research questions centre on the issue whether the Church is depicted in South African fiction as a genuine hospitable community where people are welcome or it plays a role in forging structures of exclusion. At the same time, the authors contemplate the able theological and moral capacity of the Church to combat social injustice. [2]

The holistic (total) research approach involves the mutual use of literature analysis and missiological inquiry, hinging on migration theory, and near-emergency case-study perspectives to afford the multi-layered/simultaneous reading of books such as Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, and Mandla Langa's *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon*. Moreover, Kwame Bediako's *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* brings out the idea that the relationship between African religious identity and both the indigenous and Christian traditions need strong academic thinking, which is a key factor closely connected with the stories examined in this work. By using this multilateral perspective, the study is expected to be part of the discussions of the issues of



faith, life, residence, and the changing limits of genuine hospitality in a South Africa facing situations of diversity and difficult blending. [3]

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Church as a shelter has been widely studied in historical and theological works, with scholars laying stress on the fact that it is at once a refuge for the oppressed and a subject of institutional power. One can observe that John Milbank, in his *Theology and Social Theory*, is of the opinion that Christian ecclesiology must be regarded as a non-linear way of being-in and as a counter-narrative to the secular models of community, thus, an alternative form of social cohesion rooted in divine hospitality. The same philosophy was also discussed in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* by Andrew Walls who draws attention to that Church historically has been a kind of a medium through which Christianity could get closer to the indigenous peoples and expand its reach, yet very often this was a place of refuge alternatively, a conflicting ideological space. This conflict becomes more evident in contexts of forced migration and internal displacement where theological frameworks of hospitality meet the real things - exclusion and xenophobia. [4, 5]

It is impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between Christianity and migration in South Africa without dealing with the broader historical implications of colonial evangelization and the apartheid era segregation that were the seedbeds where faith communities flourished. To the same extent, we can point out that Lamin Sanneh, through his *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, points out the paradoxical nature of Christian missions in Africa by indicating that while Western missions were carriers of cultural power the indigenous expressions of faith, they promoted sometimes crossed the colonial lines. In South Africa, this multifaceted and multifarious phenomenon finds its reflection in literary texts which tackle the issue of Christian mission in relation to the migration of people, exile, and the quest for identity. Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* are some of the literary texts that mirror urban environments characterized by a duality of faith, realness, and spirituality, on the one hand, and exclusion and segregation, on the other, thus the religious constructions in post-apartheid narratives are featured by ambivalence. [6, 7, 8]

The lie of poetry in this country, a land of faith and exile, is having its bones picked out to be exposed. It is a never-ending process of renegotiation and constant transformation. A difficult text is like an exorcism that blows and bruises the words of the living, yet there is nothing beyond the sacred word. With faith and exile as a leitmotif, South African literature is one of the richest sources of its dialogue with the issues of faith, migration, and identity in post-apartheid South Africa, where the boundaries of belonging are constantly substantiated. In the same vein, Isabel Hofmeyr, in *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress*, narrates the story of how Christian allegories have been applied within African tradition and how these allegories are redesigned to attend contemporary incidents like emigration and exile. An example is the writings of Zakes Mda, whose *The Heart of Redness* re-envisioned spiritual and historical conflicts in the background of the postcolonial South Africa, drawing on both indigenous and Christian notions to examine the thematic of continuity and rupture. Mandla Langa's *The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* goes into the question of the interrelation between faith, politics, and national identity, showing the Church as a site of the moral authority and as a place of power struggles. [9]

One way of developing the theology of mission, particularly that which is related to the ethics of hospitality, is through viewing them as an important lens through which to make the themes of migration and faith in literary works seen. What is more, the work by Christine Pohl *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, exemplifies the significance of hospitality as an ethical and a theological obligation; she argues that this is the welcoming of strangers that stands at the heart of the Christian identity. This viewpoint is closely connected to the problems experienced by the modern-day South African communities, where migration typically results in conflicts between the acts of hospitality and exclusion, as seen in both theological talks and literature writing. By combining thoughts from missiology, migration studies, and literature review, it is the aim of this study to illustrate the ways in which the Church is seen as a place of safety, but also as a venue of negotiation, and, at times, even a part of the general narratives of displacements in post-apartheid South Africa. [10]

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study, from an interdisciplinary perspective, simultaneously utilizes literary analysis, theological inquiry, and migration studies to examine South African literature and see how it portrays the Church as a place of refuge and negotiation in the context of displacement of people. We also see that Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, highlights the role of hermeneutics in understanding texts within their historical and cultural contexts, which is a fitting approach when dealing with post-apartheid narratives laden with religious themes and socio-political realities. Through a close reading of literary works such as Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, Mandla Langa's *The Lost Colours of the*



Chameleon, and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, this study explores how the motif of the Church as a sanctuary is both affirmed and problematized in contemporary fiction. [11]

The research in theological aspects is infused with missiological viewpoints which are related to the ethics of hospitality and Christian migration. We also see that David Bosch, in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, offers a critical frame for comprehending how the mission work has alternated with inclusivity and exclusion over time, which has led to the disparity in the way people practice faith. Using theological reflection to the issues at stake, the author critically probes the question of whether the Church is presented in literature as either a centralizer of the missiological discourse or as a palette to challenge the norm. South Africa appears as a specific example where however faith-based organizations have on the one hand been instrumental in both resistance and reconciliation.

Moreover, this paper integrates insights from migration studies to give context to the literary narratives of migration and belonging. We also see that Achille Mbembe, in *Necropolitics*, examines the ways that postcolonial sovereign states have regulated bodies and spaces, which is a necessary vantage point to understand the interactions between religious institutions, exclusion carousels, and safe shelters. By looking at these components, the research inquiry looks if the Church as it is presented in literature can serve a real place of asylum or a necessarily indebted space where power is re-enforced. Bringing literary criticism, theological analysis, and socio-historical inquiry together, this research aims to be a comprehensive negotiation of missiology, migration, and narratives of belonging in South African literature. [12]

#### **4. THE CHURCH AND MIGRATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The connection of Christian mission and migration in South Africa brings up the complex and historically rooted relationship with the themes of refuge, sanctuary, and social justice. Besides that, Andrew Walls, in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, talks about the dynamic nature of mission which is to adapt to changes, especially for the cultural and social crises. A perspective becomes particularly relevant when analysing the Church's response to displaced communities. Theologically, the concept of sanctuary is deeply seated in Christian thought, having its biblical precursors such as the cities of refuge in the Old Testament and Christ's ministry of radical generosity offering foundational frames for understanding the Church's role of giving shelter and belonging to migrants. [13]

In addition to theological principles, the past and contemporary roles of the churches in supporting displaced populations are well known, particularly in the case of crisis and systemic exclusion outcomes. Also, Allan Boesak, in *Radical Reconciliation: Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism*, states that churches in South Africa have always been torn between compliance and prophetic activism, which have been the tension the migrants and the refugees find them caused by them. The work of different organizations, both faith-based and not, from bringing food and clothing to legal aid has made people who were once homeless have somewhere they now call home because of the church; however, a lot of texts have shown that it is not always the case. [14]

In contemporary South Africa, xenophobia has become a great issue concerning the Church's practice of migration making the situation more complicated, which raises ethical and theological questions on the role of the church in fighting social exclusion. Moreover, Musa Dube, in *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, notes that religious institutions have sometimes supported and fortified the exclusionary discourses showing the result point to a missiology that does not just resist but actively fights structures of marginalization. [15]

#### **5. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CHURCH AS REFUGE IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE**

South African literature tackles the Church issue from the point of both a safe haven and a contested zone, which in turn illustrates the complex historical and social characteristics of this country. The use of religious symbolism for the purpose of promoting the paradoxes of faith becomes clear in *The Madonna of Excelsior* by Zakes Mda through both of his characters who are a pastor's wife (his mother) and a not-so-sorrowful (Sarafina) girl who brings to the surface, the particularity of the church as a place that heals while it also deepens the gap. The reconciliation of the Church as a place of safety with the concept of a country where people are still in exile, migration, and displacement have been going on which has moulded the characters to launch their exploration of how to fit in a fragmented society. K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* reflects the conflict between established religion and personal spirituality and the protagonist in this case is going through loneliness in a city where he is both being rejected and transformed spiritually. [16, 17]

Migrant authors through their writings often portray the Church as a place for such people to look for stability and comfort but the same building can at the same time become a rejecting place. We find also that Phaswane Mpe, in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, supports his claim by talking about how the Church deals with foreigners, who in his opinion are in a very awkward situation, when society shows them, hospitality facing hostility. Equally, Jonny Steinberg's *A Man of Good Hope* deals with the difficult life of the refugees from the Horn of Africa (most of them from Somalia) in





South Africa and how their faith communities are involved in providing and restricting the opportunities in the countries. On the one hand, the Christian doctrine requires us to be kind and thus unified and on the other hand, the literary narratives display the hidden veils of discrimination shown by cultural prejudices and economic fears that limit inclusion. [18]

This double characterization of the Church as a haven and the one to be avoided raises a critical issue wherein morality is associated with belonging concerning a racially polarized and fragmented South Africa. We find also that Desmond Tutu, in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, asserts the theological fact that the reconciliation process should go on, but narratives still carry a vibe of impossibility. [19]

## 6. LITERARY WORKS ENGAGING WITH MIGRATION AND FAITH

South African literature predominantly weaves a plot of diverse stories which are filtered through the issues of migration, displacement and the position of faith in finding one's identity and place. In the context of *The Heart of Redness*, the role of the historical and spiritual continuity in the present community and exile is intertwined with Mda's interplay of indigenous and Christian belief. The book, represented in a dual narrative, points to the struggle between colonial missionary impact and the ancestral traditions, thus the only reality being the cross-cultural individual's attempt to shape the faith-based and cultural identity. Past and present are intertwined by the author and through this he unmasks that religious belongingness is both continuity and rupture, which even complicates the idea of the Church as the only and absolute sanctuary. [20]

Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a novel that deals with the topic of migration by emphasizing the moral scrutiny faced due to the arrival of immigrants, and it also shows how xenophobic and religious factors are intertwined. In addition to this, we are introduced to the protagonist's journey that began in a rural area and ended in Johannesburg, the latter being a place where one feels their belongingness to the city cut down by the alienation of a cultural environment and the suspicion of the local community. The story expresses a critical view on the way in which religious regulations have failed in the domain of justice, hence religious institutions, instead of nurturing inner unity, often establish separations and thus deepen social alienation. In a similar vein, Mandla Langa's *The Lost Colors of the Chameleon* develops the topic of religious and political struggles that are associated with displacement, as he describes the churches' roles as parts of resistance and complicity. Through his analysis of the power struggles, postcolonialism changes from an example of conversion and shows how critics of it only become refugees and never cease to be fugitives. [21, 22]

This time around, we find that it is K. Sello Duiker, in his work *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, who gives us the more intimate portrait of spiritual and psychological exile where a main character is living his inner life that is a part of bigger stories such as displacement and fractured faith. The novel's interaction with the mental health issues, sexuality and religious estrangement reveals that the spiritual lives of those who experience themselves being in the marginal positions of both the secular realms and the ecclesiastical space are rather intricate. Duiker's exposure of the meeting point of personal trauma and religious institutional life as well as his questioning of the traditional division of religious and sacred spaces yields the suggestion that spiritual solitude causes the same lack of orientation as the physical kind of displacement. Through these works, faith is seen as not only a comforting source but also as a place where ideology is constructed, which mirrors the broader social issues characterizing migration and the exclusion of people in the post-apartheid South Africa. [23]

## 7. CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CHURCH'S ROLE

The Church in South Africa has long had a peculiar position, existing as both a liberating and a controlling institution, especially in the matter of migration and displacement. We can also observe that John W. De Gruchy, in *Christianity and the Modernization of South Africa*, investigates the Church's historical role characterized by the tension between resistance to and the imposition of the policies of power, thus showing the typical religious institutions' duality of being theological and political. Though at times, Christian communities have promoted the cause of the displaced and the marginalized, the ecclesiastical structures have also functioned as exclusion mechanisms to some others by setting inflexible rules of morality and social life determining who rightfully belongs and who remains an outsider. This "paradox" is even more pronounced in the case of churches that deal with migrants. Their reception is shaped by changing theological interpretations and socio-political considerations. [24]

We also find David Chidester, in *Religion in Public Life: Shaping South African Democracy*, recognizing religious institutions, which have diversity at heart, nonetheless, as mirrors of political hierarchies in the communities that host them, thus jeopardizing their potential as truly open sanctuaries. The Christian kindness idea contradicts to the structural realities of the challenge of exclusiveness, in that denomination, ethnic, and economic factors play a key role in whether displaced individuals integrate or be marginalized. In the context of contemporary migration, this inconsistency can be



observed in the Church where certain religious leaders actively condemn discrimination while others indirectly approve of nationalist narratives that narrate foreign migrants as threats to local stability. [25]

We also see that Stephen Bevans, in *Models of Contextual Theology*, gives an idea of how missiological viewpoints to migration should change to fit the new global circumstances, leaning toward a theology of radical inclusion. In South Africa, missiologists face the dilemma of finding a balance between the teaching of brotherhood uniting all people and the practice of communities struggling with poverty and cultural disintegration. While some congregations have been at the forefront in starting outreach programs and legal advocacy initiatives for migrants, others are part of the exclusion problem, thus they oppose the very idea of Christian hospitality. This internal conflict is a metaphor for the immense undertaking of reconciling faith with the complex scenario of contemporary displacement, where the Church has got to manage its double position as both a sanctuary and a gatekeeper in a time when there is intense social change. [26]

## 8. CONCLUSION

The issue of post-apartheid South Africa in terms of the interconnection of literature, missiology, and migration brings to the limelight a very intricate process of belonging, achieving exclusion, and getting spiritual support which the Church in its turn usually serves as a place of hospitality or a place of contestation. A look at the work of Gerald West, in *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, is an example of how theology has played a role in creating opinions about marginalized people in the past moments. These preach that Christians should be supportive of the one endeavors of the church in the context of the dispossession, resettlement, conflict, but also the restrictions, economic deindustrialization, then the resegregation caused by the exclusion, and the exploitation of immigrants and migrants. This paper has made it clear that fictional stories are effective media for dissecting such processes, for those were the days of Zakes Mda and Phaswane Mpe, whose novels stood against dominant beliefs of faith, identity and displacement through a complex network of religious metaphors entwined with societal fragmentation.

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