**Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal – Vol. 12, No. 03**
**Publication Date:** March 25, 2025
**DOI**:10.14738/assrj.1203.18390.
Forti, E. L. (2025). Black Empowerment and Affirmative Action: The Incongrous Irony of South Africa's Multiracial Democracy. Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 12(03). 60-72.

# Black Empowerment and Affirmative Action: The Incongrous Irony of South Africa's Multiracial Democracy

**Etienne Langmia Forti**
University of Maroua

## ABSTRACT

**The central focus of this paper is the racially engendered irony that underlying the African National Congress'(ANC) use of affirmative action as a policy to achieve social justice by empowering the black population. The discussion centres on fictionalized examples from Nicholas Mhlongo's Dog Eat Dog and After Tears and highlights how the rise in racial tension observed in the country's public sphere is a consequence of the policy's seemingly racist and/or racial nature. The irony of affirmative action in post-apartheid South Africa can be examined from two broad, interconnected perspectives: the government's initiatives inspired by affirmative action and the general black population's response to the policy. The article argues that despite the ANC's commendable intent in implementing affirmative action, some of the actions of the new leadership - driven by this policy – subtly reflects the very racial and/or racist tendencies it once fought against. Ultimately, the irony of South Africa's affirmative action policy is shaped by its often racialised repercussions, which arise from a public that has not fully grasped the spirit of the policy and frequently misconstrues the government's initiatives. The discussion in the paper is shaped by new historicists' and postcolonial theoretical considerations as it borrows from the major concepts of New Historicism such as those propounded by Anton Kaes, Louis Montrose, Jerome McGann, and the Postcolonial concepts of Centre/Margin, Self/Other binaries, Race, Class and Ethnicity.**

**Keywords:** affirmative action, irony, race and racism, black empowerment programmes.

## INTRODUCTION

The examples that are drawn from the novels of Nicholas Mhlongo justify the claim that the rise of racial tension in the country is the outcome of the black population's misconstrued understanding of the government's policy of affirmative action. And this paper argues that despite the commendable intent inherent in the government's use of this policy, affirmative action within the South African context represents a certain degree of the politicization of race if one were to draw from the meaning of the practice as described by Teigen (2000) who thinks that it "… is about applying differential treatment procedures to achieve a more balanced composition of individuals according to group characteristics" (p.63). In post-apartheid South Africa, the racial nature of the said governance policy stems from the African National Congress' (ANC) motif of upgrading the lives of the majority black population in a multiracial society where the leadership upholds non-racialism as the pillar of its nationhood drives. And when the same leadership opts to apply differential treatment procedures in favour of its black population whom it considers to have been disfavoured by the previous apartheid regimes, then the implementation of affirmative action assumes a racial character. This claim is based on the controversy that is bound to ensue from the ANC's application of the policy considering

that during the apartheid era white South Africans by virtue of their race were given inelastic advantages by the Afrikaner Nationalist Party over the rest of the racial groups with the black population dispossessed of almost all access to the country's resources (O'Reilly 2001, pp40-41). Like O'Reilly (2001), Andrews (1999) also notes that "The apartheid government's racial allocation of resources on education, health, welfare, housing and many other areas ensured that black people were locked into a spiral of dispossession, dislocation and poverty" (p.84). Against this backdrop, it is most evident that the ANC which is at the helm of power would initiate affirmative action driven programmes that are meant to bring the once disfavoured black population to the 'Centre' of all aspects of socio-economic and professional life of the country. This is one amongst the few means available to the current leadership to bridge the chasm that exists between the very influential white minority and the black population if the ANC must achieve the broad goal of reconstructing this much divided society. And this view is expressed by Andrew (1999) who thinks that "…in South Africa the purposes of affirmative action involve an interplay with overall goals of political and economic reconstruction of the society. Both in its constitutional directives and in the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), affirmative action becomes part and parcel of the …" (p.82) of the country's reconstruction. Hence, it can be assumed that all initiatives that are geared towards the betterment of the lives of the black population and/or reconstruction of the socio-economic and political strata of this society is guided by the spirit of the policy in question. Thus, the black population believes that they occupy a preferential position as evidenced by the group's display of racial assertiveness. They assume it is their time to benefit from all the advantages that have emerged with the advent of a black-dominated multiracial democracy.

## AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND BLACK EMPOWERMENT: IRONIC CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The racist attitudes displayed by some members of the country's leadership and black population in general can be considered as one of the consequences of the misappropriation of government's policy of affirmative action. Most often their actions seem to be induced by an erroneous perception and/or deliberate misuse of the precepts of differential treatment that is embedded in affirmative action. Mhlongo (2004) describes this disturbing image of the new South Africa where members of the ANC leadership most often use the country's history of race relations in order to silence opposition from their white counterparts. This state of affairs becomes most acute when Njomane subtly insinuates that his attitude towards the blonde lady is informed by the same sort of unwillingness to accept the presence of white parliamentarians, ironically, exhibited by those who represent the democratic multiracial government. This is evidenced when he states:

> *I had been told that playing the race card is a good strategy of silencing those whites who still think they are more intelligent than black people. Even in parliament it was often used when the white political parties questioned the black parties they would be reminded of their past atrocities even if their questions were legitimate. Then the white political parties would have to divert from their original questions and apologize for the past deed. (p.35)*

Though South Africa is now a multiracial democracy as sanctioned not just by the negotiated settlement between the F.W. De Klerk government and the ANC championed by Nelson Mandela, but also by the first democratic elections of 1994 (O'Reilly, 2001, pp40-41), this

multiracial and most importantly non-racial character of the political entity both groups created is a travesty of what it ought to be, especially when those who incarnate this philosophy still use race as a means of silencing any opposition to their ambition. The law makers who are supposed to safeguard the principle of multiracialism are, ironically, exploiting the element of guilt that characterises white South Africans to build an equally intolerant 'racial democracy' where the very principles of democracy are relegated to the background as the black leadership, they symbolise, tries to impose their world view on all South Africans.

This major threat to the country's reconstruction process is most critical due to the fact that the debates in parliament have become racialised by the black lawmakers on the supposed pretext that they represent the black population and its aspirations. These black lawmakers interpose the very sensitive issue of race between what constitute the collective good of all, symbolised by the debates on national issues, and their self-interests as a political party and/or racial group. These debates in the country's parliament, which are a common feature of a democratic culture meant at promoting national unity, social justice and prosperity in the nation, are gradually becoming non-existent because the white lawmakers would eventually stop contributing to the social and political growth of the nation for fear of being reminded each time of their responsibility in the suffering of black South Africans. Ironically, these black lawmakers use the country's history of race relations not because they really want to change the lives of the black population but simply because they want to always have their way around in the matters of state that favour them as members of a political party that represent a faction of the country's population; black South Africans. At this point, one agrees with Knowledge Rajohane Matshedisho (2008) who declares that apartheid was quite successful in separating South Africans in terms of race since the legacy thereof abounds in all aspects of life in the country and predominate the mind-set of black South Africans. And this mind-set is accentuated by the government's policy of affirmative action which has inculcated in the minds of the black population a supposedly racial superiority to the whites. In this light, Rajohane Matshedisho (2008) notes:

> *It is however sad that with one of the most liberal constitutions in the world and the struggle against racism and other forms of discrimination our political public sphere tends to revive the ghosts of the past – apartheid categories. The ANC government has grown intolerant and arrogant of criticisms. It's response to criticism can be put into four categories depending on one's 'race'. Blacks who criticise the government are regarded as afro-pessimists who believe nothing good can come from a black government. On the other hand whites who criticise the ANC are regarded as racists. The situation has deteriorated to an extent of personality attacks rather than rational-critical discussion of political matters. (pp. 15-16)*

Rajohane Matshedisho's revelation exhibits a probable misappropriation and weaponization of the policy of affirmative action which supposedly should guide the institutionalization of social justice in the country. In fact, one can notice a sort of racist assertiveness promoted by an intolerant radical wing of the government who surf on the delicate issue of white guilt, and the need for a block comradeship from the overall black population as it enforces its political agenda for the country. This actually confirms the apprehension expressed by Teigen (2000) on one of the controversy that typifies affirmative action when he points out that "In the debates on affirmative action the single most important objection emphasises the *principle of non-*

*discrimination/equal treatmen*t, according to which affirmative action is a form of discrimination against those not benefiting from such procedures…" (p.65). It is at this point that one notices an acute concordance between the actual situation in the country described by Rajohane Matshedisho and Mhlongo's depiction of the appalling attitude of the country's new leadership and its policy of affirmative action evidenced by the attitude of the black parliamentarians. The attitudes of the black law makers could have devastating consequences on the nation-building process for the common South African on the street might tend to adopt such racial intolerance towards the white population.

This is the case when one reflects on Njomane's racist attitude toward the blonde which he acknowledges to have copied from the black parliamentarians. His vindictive attitude shows his outright unwillingness to embrace multiracialism upheld by the African National Congress (ANC) as a guiding political ethos in the endeavour to achieve united South Africa. Hence, the character's reaction becomes a deliberate rejection of the principles of reconciliation and non-racialism as the founding ideologies that should enable the attainment of the above goal. Njomane acknowledges:

> *I could tell that my words had had a strong impact. Yes, it is true that I was implying that she was a racist. It was the season of change when everyone was trying hard to disown apartheid , but to me the colour white was synonymous with the word and I didn't regret what I had said to the blonde. (Mhlongo, 2004, p. 35)*

This attitude is a disquieting revelation of the persistent racial tension which continue to determine human relations despite the efforts of Nelson Mandela and the ANC to eradicate such. One can argue that if blacks such as Njomane do not want to expunge from the new social landscape the mindset that caused so much misery and oppression in the country it is due in part to their miscomprehension of the spirit of affirmative action implemented by the current leadership. And the reaction of blacks like Njomane could have been copied from the racialized behaviours of black lawmakers who use the apartheid past to deny white South Africans, symbolised by the white lawmakers, the opportunities to participate in the consolidation of equality, freedom, and prosperity of the new nation. At this point, the futuristic outlook which had epitomized the South African multiracial democracy at its inception seems to have become an issue of conjecture, especially when affirmative action imposes a new form of racially imposed Self/Other and Centre/Margin binaries. It therefore becomes clear, as indicated by Leon de Kok (2000), that in post-apartheid South Africa the old "racial and class cleavages persist. Political rivalries of the past, with accompanying atrocities, continue to reemerge" (p.286) and it is further compounded by the government's policy of affirmative action which further entrenches the already existing racial division in the country.

The attitude of members of the new political dispensation vividly reflects the claims of Frankz Fanon (1965) about the shortcomings of national consciousness in independent nations when he notes:

> *National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious results of the mobilization of the people, [has been] in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been. (p.119)*

Drawing from Fanon, one could say that the ANC-led leadership's conception of post-apartheid South Africa as a 'rainbow nation' - which can be considered as a symbolic form of national consciousness - has failed to materialize as the concretization of their expressed wish for a democratic and non-racial South Africa. In essence, the attitude of the black law makers towards their white counterparts confirms the apprehension of Teigen (2000, p.65) on the supposed collective benefits of affirmative action. In this regard, it is quite evident that the struggle the black law makers waged and sustained throughout the years of apartheid was because they wanted to enjoy the privileges that come with being leaders and not necessarily because they actually believed in working for the common good of their entire population whether blacks, whites, coloureds or Indians. It is therefore unfortunate as the attitude they display is not geared towards working for the betterment of the section of the population they represent and whose interests are supposed to be prioritized over those of all other racial groups. This is because such preferential benefits can only be enjoyed by the racial group they represent if the country enjoys a high degree of stability. And, ironically, the racial tension that may emerge as a result of the policy of preferential treatment being attributed to the black population is bound to disrupt such cherished stability which is indispensable for the country's prosperity. In fact, South Africa's stability can only prevail if there is a consensual collaboration between the two major racial groups and, unfortunately, affirmative action is not the best means to ensure such collaborative co-existence of the citizenry. At this juncture one can therefore opine that these black South African law makers and the broad base policy which influences their attitude is out of tune with one of the most important lessons that should guide all democracies, especially theirs. This lesson is that of unity in diversity considered by T.V. Smith and Eduard Lindeman (1951) as one of the fundamental principles of democracy as they emphasize that:

> *Persons striving to adapt themselves to the democratic way of life are required to discipline themselves to one variety of unity, namely unity which is achieved through the creative use of diversity. A society which is by affirmation democratic is expected to provide and protect a wide range of diversities […] Multiformity […] is one of the conditions of freedom. Where conformity is imposed as an external discipline, liberty is by definition excluded. The right to differ is the sine qua non of freedom and hence the symbol of humaneness in personal relations. The moment one person demands the privilege of shaping others to his image, kindness, generosity and tolerance remove themselves from the equation. (p.91)*

At the backdrop of the implementation of affirmative action in the social arena, the ANC government, precisely the law makers, through their actions have denied the white South Africans the right to belong to the new nation under reconstruction. These black law makers have rejected the diversity of opinions which should emanate from the racial diversity of their country, and, consequently, they have equally denied the whites the freedom to identify with the new political ethos guiding the new South Africa. It is, therefore, such an attitude as exhibited by these black law makers which greatly accounts for the continued widespread nature of racism in the country since blacks such as Njomane seem to have copied their example. This conclusion is based on the claim that leaders are, in the view of Chinua Achebe (1983), role models to their citizens and the latter always look up to the former for directives. Thus, borrowing from Achebe's view that "leaders are in the language of psychologists, role models. People look up to them and copy their actions, behaviour and even mannerisms" (p.31),

one could consider Njomane's attitude as having been copied from his role models who are the black law makers and the government the latter represent.

The majority of the black South Africans' misappropriation of the governance philosophy of affirmative action is evident on the country's public sphere. Concretely, black South Africans' misconstrued understanding of the government's implementation of the principle of affirmative action actually contributes to the polarization of the post-apartheid public sphere. And this actually casts a doubt over the feasibility of the ANC's nation-building aspiration since the said policy seems to have rekindled the divisive old racial question which is detrimental to the achievement of forgiveness and reconciliation on which is built the reconstruction process. This is observed in Mhlongo (2004) where Njomane decries the widespread disorder that reigns in the country where blacks have embraced lawlessness as a consequence of a distorted interpretation of the principle of affirmative action. In fact, this overt and often ironic appropriation of this government's policy is clearly depicted through the narrator's indignation at the chaos that reigns in his historic township of Soweto which may symbolically represent what obtains in the entire country. He sarcastically observes that a couple of weeks before this discovery, a section of his township was an open ground but the situation has been reversed since this population has suddenly seen the accession to power of a black leadership which promotes black affirmative action as an opportunity to occupy uninhabited land in the name of the said policy. Njomane explains that the whole of Soweto is now covered with new shanty houses:

> *[…] through what they call 'affirmative occupation'. Everything is'affirmative' nowadays, I thought to myself. Slum or squatter camps have become 'affirmative settlements'. Shoplifting is called 'affirmative transaction. Carjackers make 'affirmative repossessions'. Even going out with a white person is an 'affirmative romance'. (Mhlongo, 2004, p.79)*

It can be said that these attitudes are the result of a deliberate distortion or misunderstanding of the real meaning of affirmative action. The objective of the latter is to bring the black South African to the 'centre' of the country's political, social and economic activities from where together with whites, who have enjoyed these privileges for long, they can all participate in the reconstruction of a united multiracial nation. Unfortunately, the policy has engendered the debate as to the entrenchment of social cohesion within the new nation if one looks at the attitude of these blacks who now believe that a black dominated multiracial leadership now gives them the opportunity to re-appropriate what they believe the apartheid regimes had deprived them of. This is actually the case of the carjackers who believe that the acts of theft and violent crimes they commit are a form of re-appropriating what should have belonged to them long before the emergence of multiracial democracy. By acting this way this group seems to consider the latter and its policy of affirmative action as a long awaited opportunity for their society to compensate blacks after decades of deprivation but ironically not only whites are the victims of their deeds, every South African is. What is quite obnoxious about the attitudes of these blacks is the new and despicable form of racial assertion which accompanies their different actions especially when an amorous relationship with a white becomes a means of not only asserting one's manhood or womanhood but also a form of vindictively challenging the general white population who thought a black was inferior to them.

This deliberate misinterpretation of the policy of affirmative action therefore accounts for the pervasive wave of thieving and cheating that has become a way of life peculiar to blacks who steal from white businesses. This is the case with Themba, the narrator and the black security guard at a white owned supermarket described by Mhlongo (2004). Njomane describes the attitudes of such blacks towards their white business bosses when he points out that Themba, who is a cashier in a white owned supermarket, colludes with blacks, such as him, from the townships in stealing from the white businesses. Njomane declares that at the supermarket's:

> *[…] shelves I took as many goodies as I wanted without even bothering to check their prices. At the till Themba would either pass my goodies through without ringing them up, or he would ring up a lesser price. As he was doing this he would say, 'the rand is weak my friend, we must save money when we have a chance'. (p.36)*

The rationale underlying Njomane's and Themba's attitudes lies in their belief that the advent of multiracial democracy has now given them the possibility of exploiting the whites who had prospered on the blood and sweat of blacks when apartheid was the prevailing socio-economic and political ideology. Themba tells his friend that the value of the national currency - the Rand - is dropping by the day and in order to remain above the poverty level, they must steal from and cheat whites who, by implication, had never given blacks the possibility to enjoy the luxury that comes from having money and wealth. Thus when Themba tells his friend "[…] we must save money when we have a chance" (Mhlongo 2004, p.36), he is referring to the opportunity which multiracial democracy, better still freedom, has now given them to exist side-by-side with whites which therefore makes it possible for them to exploit these whites in return. The attitude of Njomane and Themba highlights the elements of vengeance and retribution which underlie the attitudes of most blacks towards white South Africans most often promoted by a misinterpretation of the goal of affirmative action as promoted by the country's leadership. And this sort of mindset is a handicap to the current orthodoxy of a democratic and multiracial South Africa built on forgiveness and reconciliation where national reconstruction requires the collective commitment of all South Africans irrespective of race.

Mhlongo (2007) equally exposes how the policy of affirmative action continues to thwart the government's nation-building endeavours in the area of social welfare schemes. This is illustrated through the protesting Sowetans against what they term their government's exploitative tendencies directed to the black populace. This is vividly brought out when Bafana and Zero, while driving through Soweto see a group of inhabitants of this township staging a protest march against the government whom they accuse of unjustly interrupting power and water supply to the township as a consequence of the inhabitants' unwillingness to pay their bills as laid down by the national company in charge of water supply. This is the sad reality of the government's policy of affirmative action where a racial section of its citizens think that by virtue of the struggle they all staged against apartheid, the former which now represents their most cherished ideals of freedom and liberty has an obligation to satisfy all of their basic needs without asking for any financial contribution in return from them. This is actually the perception that stands out when Zero erroneously compares the new leadership to capitalists who are more interested in the profit they make than in the welfare of the people they are supposed to have rescued from the claws of apartheid's oppression and exploitation. In fact he claims that:

> *[…] these capitalists have removed the cables. Ever since we voted for them they don't give a fuck about us any more […] They claim that we are stealing their electricity. To get reconnected we need to pay one thousand five hundred bucks. That's why […] the residents are angry […] I've never seen people as angry with the government […] The government is taking us for shit! […] we'll show them like we showed the apartheid government before them. (Mhlongo, 2007, p.156)*

The old racial question becomes most palpable when Zero alludes to the past thereby drawing a parallel between the reign of the apartheid regimes and that of the new dispensation. What is most shocking and ironic in Zero's experience is the fact that the Sowetans and, symbolically, the black populace think that the advent of a black-dominated democratic government which upholds the policy of affirmative action means a total and complete welfare policy towards those with whom they share the same racial affinity. This outlook is demonstrative of the ambiguity that characterises the ANC's policy of affirmative action since by condemning the new leadership, the Sowetans seem to be asking the multiracial government to adopt a socialist policy whereby they will be provided with everything they need while contributing little or nothing to the upkeep of the government and the country. And because the government cannot engage in such an unrealistic affirmative action venture, the black populace who have always been at the 'Margin' now consider their leaders to represent the capitalist ambition of making more profit at the detriment of the poor, whom they are. This, therefore, is the depiction of the dilemma facing the new leadership which is blamed for not doing enough to satisfy the poor blacks as it is "[…] only interested in exchanging the riches of this country with white people" (Mhlongo, 2007, p.158). The idea of a dilemma is apparent when one realises that whatever option the government chooses, it would embitter a section of its population with the most feared being whites who have always dreaded a socialist black leadership given the ANC's initial policy grounded on Marxist philosophy. Thus the attitude of the Sowetans vis-à-vis the new leadership and the current socio-political climate in the country accounts for why Attwell (2005) holds that "indeed, ambiguity seems to be the distinguishing feature of a transitional South Africa" (p. 2). This sort of ambiguity the critics talk about can be likened to the Sowetans', and symbolically blacks', misunderstanding of the government's policy of affirmative action which at times is even ambiguous and racial in itself because, as Leon de Kok (2000) holds, " debates about affirmative action and employment equity cannot but mobilize racial particularity as a category of identity" (p.287).

Similar to the Sowetans' misguided interpretation of the government's policy of affirmative action is Bafana's myopic display of ingratitude towards the new government which has helped him to study at the University of Cape Town even though he misuses this privilege by dropping out because of his irresponsible behaviour. In effect, Bafana receives two letters from the University and the government respectively. The letter from the former shows that the character has failed in all the courses offered in the field of study he had chosen and so he cannot be offered a Bachelor's Degree in Law. This notwithstanding, it is the letter from the government which is most important given the central focus of this discussion. The letter in question shows that Bafana owes the government and has to start repaying the debt so that other black students such as him can equally benefit from such an affirmative action scholarship scheme. Ironically, Bafana expresses a sort of misplaced anger at the government's insistence on repayment of what had been spent on him. He tells the reader that the second

letter is from the National Financial Aid Scheme reminding him that he owes the government the sum of fifty six thousand Rands which he has to repay after spending the stipulated number of years to obtain a Bachelor's Degree. But instead of filling in an accompanying form outlining how he intends to repay the debt owed the state, rather demonstrates ingratitude when he says "if the IMF and the World Bank were willing to cancel the debt owed to them by poor African countries, why couldn't our government scratch out the loans owed it by poor African students like me? Charity must start here, at home" (Mhlongo 2007, p. 55). His reaction is definitely a disregard of the government and its endeavour to improve the wellbeing of blacks through such affirmative action inspired opportunities opened to those who want to study in universities across the country. The argument which he uses is misplaced because if the government was to neglect the debts owed it by his predecessors, he would not have had the opportunity to study for four years on a scholarship though he drops out as a result of his nonchalance. The charity which he says starts at home with the government cancelling his debt is rather supposed to start with him repaying the said debt so that others after him would be able to study, like he did, in preparation to contribute positively towards the growth of their nation.

If one were to appraise the attitudes of these black South Africans as motivated by affirmative action then one would equally consider its negative consequences as being the most conspicuous contradictions of the new leadership's governance policy. This conclusion is reinforced by Leon de Kok's (2000) view when he observes that:

> *Since the country's 'negotiated revolution' and the inception of full democracy in 1994 non racialism has remained the government's pivotal philosophy, although it has been put under considerable strain by the demands of affirmative action which necessarily mobilize race as a category. (p.283)*

In Leon de Kok's opinion, the government's ideology of non-racialism as the guiding principle of the country's multiracial democracy has almost been compromised by the policy of affirmative action meant to give preferential opportunities to blacks because it actually encourages racial chauvinism as noted in the attitudes of the black population so far discussed. In other words, this government policy seems to be racial in character and is in contradiction with the country's democratic philosophy of non-racialism, and the reconciliation and forgiveness between white and black South Africans. This is manifested through the attitudes of Njomane, Themba, the Sowetans, the black members of parliament and the government itself.

In addition to the racial chauvinism exhibited by blacks so far discussed is the hesitant attitude of a section of the black populace to accept the trade-offs that preceded the country's smooth transition to multiracial democracy. Some blacks, as portrayed by Mhlongo (2007), think that their leaders' reconciliatory options have rather disfavoured them. This is the case with Njomane's group of friends who are so embittered with what they consider to be an easy compromise struck with the whites. This is observed in the discontent expressed by Dworkin and Themba towards the new leadership's recent change of the names of the country's public holidays which are symbolic of the struggles against apartheid. In this regard, Dworkin tells his friend that:

> *I hate the fact that Dingane's Day has been changed into Day of Reconciliation with this absurd post-apartheid renaming […] this renaming is totally blotting out our history. Instead of thinking about King Dingane fighting the British, we now think of reconciliation with the same enemy who killed him […] That's liberal light weight politics. It's time we were proud of our history. (Mhlongo 2007, p 213)*

The change of the names of the country's historical public holidays is politically symbolic of the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation between blacks and whites but Dworkin's discontent with such change, despite its significance in the present political context, is a clear-cut depiction of the racial assertiveness which threatens South Africa's reconstruction This threat is critical when blacks such as Dworkin reject the reconciliation between South Africans which is the very basis of the nation-building initiative undertaken by the country's new political dispensation. Dworkin, who may symbolise a section of the black populace, is not happy and even feels cheated by their leaders' peaceful trade-offs with their former oppressor, though this constitutes an indispensable part of their country's transition to democracy and reconstruction. It is against the background of such adherence to the past that the fragility of the country's philosophy of democratic multiracialism becomes most conspicuous. By considering the reconciliation between blacks and whites symbolised by the change of the names of some historical public holidays to be a blotting out of the former's history, Dworkin, like most black South Africans, is still clinging to that past which all South Africans, epitomised by their leadership, want to bury as a means of building a united and non-racial South Africa, beneficial to all.

The irony that characterises Dworkin's view is enhanced by Themba's intransigence on the same issue. This unforgiving mindset exhibited by Dworkin and Themba do not typify the futuristic modus vivendi championed by the new political order, since on the one hand, their attitude is a challenge to the concept of a united and non-racial South Africa upheld by the historic architects of the multiracial democracy. In this regard, one would say that their outlooks seem to defeat the very purpose of this political and social formation especially when Themba, like Dworkin, intimates that the change of the name of the public holiday known as the Sharpeville Day to Human Rights Day is rather a disservice to the blacks unlike the government's intended glorification of that day as representing the climax in the fight for equality which has now been realised. In fact, when the character points out to his friends that it is useless for the government to have changed the name of the public holiday because "[…] that day we used to commemorate the ruthless massacre of sixty-nine unarmed black men and women who protested against the notorious pass law of apartheid on the 21st of March 1961" (*Mhlongo 2007, p.*214), one actually sees the fragile foundation of the new South Africa built on reconciliation and forgiveness. Unfortunately, the unity of the country seems to be – through the historical allusion to the apartheid history - paradoxically more firm in the past than in the present and future. The said paradox that dominates the new leadership's endeavour to foster a multiracial nation is most noticeable when Themba juxtaposes the past and present, which, to him, like to Dworkin, brings out the government's disservice to those whose interests she is supposed to be defending given that such changes will make it practically impossible for the coming generation of black South Africans to know "[…] why the Day is a holiday, because it is now called Human Rights Day. That is like undermining the struggle of the black people in this country. And for what? […] so that we can please the white people?" (*Mhlongo 2007, p.*214). The

characters' anger can be seen as a subtle rejection of the united multiracial South Africa founded on forgiveness and reconciliation which necessitated such political trade-offs so that peace could reign in the country. This could be influenced by the government's overall policy of affirmative action which gives black South Africans the impression that their history of resistance symbolised by the old names should be given preference over the element of reconciliation equally symbolised by the new names.

The attitudes of these black youths are clear manifestations of the fragility of South Africa's nation-building process when one considers the reasons Desmond Tutu (2000) gives for such changes when he explains that:

> *It was bizarre in the extreme that such a sectional chauvinistic holiday should have been known as Dingane's Day, as if it was the Zulu king who was being honoured when it was his defeat that was being recalled. And so the name was changed to the Day of the Covenant under the rule of the Nationalist Party government which formally introduced apartheid starting in 1948 […] The focus of the celebrations would be more religious – it would be the promise, the covenant that those Voortrekkers had made to God on the eve of the battle that a God-given victory over their foe would be commemorated in perpetuity as a religious observance. Thus the name change to the Day of the Covenant. It was a relatively small step from this new understanding to the one whose focus would be on promoting healing and the recognition that South Africa, in the words of the Freedom Charter, adopted by the liberation movement in 1956, 'belonged to all who live in it' […] It embodied the philosophy that undergirded the TRC – that more and more South Africans would find commonalities, those things that bound a diverse people together, those that are inclusive and not sectional, those events and persons and occasions that did not serve to denigrate one section and exalt another at others' expense. (pp.71-73)*

This conclusion is based on the symbolism of these youths in the present and future multiracial South Africa as their dissatisfaction with the terms of the negotiated transition is an indicator that post-apartheid South Africa could well be a utopian rainbow nation.

On the one hand, the irony that underlies these characters' attitude equally portrays the irony that characterises the very concept of multiracial democracy and some of the government's policies such as affirmative action. Some of the government's initiatives such as the polemics on change of historic names could be viewed as a miscalculated move whose attendant consequence is a gradual and complete attempt at effacing the history of black South Africans as future generations will not be able to know their history. At this point one may conclude that Dworkin and Themba are right if one were to take into consideration the argument that the past, symbolised by the historical allusions to Sharpeville Day and Dingane Day, is the very basis of the foundation on which the united post-apartheid South Africa is built, which must be preserved in order to perpetuate the spirit that should bind the multicultural and racial formation of its democracy. Based on such an argument it would not be an overstatement to affirm that these changes are actually expunging the collective memory of all South Africans whether blacks, coloureds or whites.

On the other hand, one equally realises that the government's gesture is a positive move meant to perpetuate the spirit of unity, forgiveness and reconciliation which are the binding forces of a united and non-racial South Africa. Thus it is against this duality of meaning which characterises the attitudes of Dworkin and Themba that the racial challenge to South Africa's quest for nationhood becomes obvious. Against the broader picture of the new South Africa, what stands out is the symbolism which each group and section of the population attaches to an event in its history, rather than the intrinsic meaning that accompanies that symbolism. Looking at the situation one would think that Gerhard Mare (1999) is right to hold that "it is, therefore, not surprising, if less often acknowledged, that segregation and apartheid left their mark not only at the level of material discrimination but deeply in the racialised identities of the self and of others that were created" (p.247). The concordance between the attitudes of these blacks and the critic's opinion lies in the fact that the racialised attitudes of black South Africans symbolised by Dworkin's and Themba's is a manifestation of the calcified nature of the 'Self' and 'Other,' Centre/Margin identities apartheid and the struggle against the latter inculcated in the consciousness of the once oppressed population. This is the reason why blacks, symbolised by Dworkin and Themba, consider the compromise struck by their leaders with the former apartheid regime as a disservice to them by virtue of what they consider to be an act of effacing their history as blacks for the sake of pleasing the whites.

This sort of adherence to attitudes of the past as demonstrated across the racial divide forms the basis of the dangerous character of the political challenge to the country's nation-building aspirations as inherent in the image of a 'rainbow nation' aspired for by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. The resurgence of vindictive attitudes determined by the past leaves one asking if it has the same relevance to whites who are nostalgic about the past, and blacks, who cite its myriad injustices as justification for retribution? On the other hand, do blacks have, to a certain extent, the right to complain about their situation? In other words, how relevant is the outrage expressed by blacks such as the black the protesting Sowetans; the attitudes of the lawmakers; Njomane; Dworkin's and Themba's attitude about the new names of the country's public holidays; Bafana's refusal to refund the debt he owes the state? The answers one may attempt to provide to these crucial questions would in themselves be polemical. This is because these answers are emotional in nature, just like the obscure reasons behind the actions of these South Africans, rather than rational. This notwithstanding, these questions and the controversial answers one may provide are quite relevant within the country's nation-building process as they tend to expose both the fragility of the latter and the difficult task that awaits all South Africans who want to live in an egalitarian and democratic nation. Like Nelson Mandela once said "the hardest, most complex task for the African National Congress was to build solidarity across the racial and tribal divides that had been calcified and institutionalised by the apartheid state" (qtd in Loomba, 1998, p.123), given that:

> *Forging a new nation gives the necessary illusion of inclusiveness, but it is an illusion not a reality […] the euphoria generated by the radical changes which have overtaken South Africa should not blind anybody to the problems inherent in the decolonisation process. (Waldmeir, 2006, p.206)*

## CONCLUSION

At this juncture it becomes apparent that racial consciousness and assertiveness remain the major character of South Africa's contemporary socio-political landscape which unfortunately

ensues from its violent apartheid past. This is because the latter was firmly constructed on a more violent racial assertiveness born of fear and this attitude seems not to have been done away with by the peaceful negotiated co-existence of the former apartheid regime and the ANC who took over power in 1994. In fact, the latter in a bit to reverse the inequalities which the previous racist regime had created, ironically has created a new form of racially-motivated tension due to its implementation of the policy of affirmative action which mobilises racial differentiation inherent in the character of preferential treatment it promotes. One is therefore tempted to agree with Nelson Mandela who holds that it is very challenging to undo the racial consciousness that the apartheid regime had instituted for over four decades. Hence, the racial dimension to the policy of preferential treatment becomes more acute in the context of the country and therefore situate itself within the numerous problems inherent in the decolonisation of the mind-set of all South Africans from across the two main racial divides.

## References

ACHEBE, Chinua. (1983).The Trouble with Nigeria. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing.

Andrews, Penelope (1999). "Affirmative Action in South Africa: Transformation or Tokenism". Articles &Chapters. 1256.http://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/fac_articles_chapters/1256.

Attwell, David (2005). Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History. Athens: Ohio University Press.

DE KOK, Leon. (Summer 2000). "South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction", in Poetics Today. The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Vol. 22, no.2, pp263-98.

GORDIMER, Nadine. (1999). The House Gun. New York: Penguin Books.

FANON, Frantz (1965). The Wretched of the Earth.London: Penguin Books.

LOOMBA, Ania (1998). Colonialism and Post-Colonialism. London: Routledge.

MARE, Gerhard (1999). "The Notion of 'Nation' and the Practice of Nation-Building in Post - apartheid South Africa. In Palmberg, Mai. Ed. National Identity and Democracy in Africa. Cape Town: University of Western Cape, PP232-44.

MATSHEDISHO, Knowledge Rajohane (2008). "Between Imbizo and Battle Grounds: The Deterioration of the Public Sphere in South Africa". In Codesria. Yaounde, pp1-24.

MHLONGO, Nicholas (2004). Dog Eat Dog. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

___ ___ ___ (2007). After Tears. Cape Town: Kwela Books.

O'REILLY, Christopher (2001). Post-Colonial Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SMITH VERNOR, Thomas and Eduard C. Lindeman (1951). The Democratic Way of Life. New York: The New American Library.

Teigen, Mari Jim (2000). "Affirmative Action Controversy". NORA. Norway:Taylor &Francis, no2,vol.8.

TUTU, Desmond (2000). No Future without Forgiveness. New York: Doubleday.

WALDMEIR, Patti (1997). Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa. London: W.W. Norton and Company.