



## Blame Me On Apartheid: Colonialism, Apartheid and the legacy of townships as peripheral spaces for 'non-beings' – A Book by Mr Thamsanqa D. Malinga

This insightful book by Mr Thamsanqa D. Malinga could only have been written by one who has lived and grown up under apartheid in South Africa's racially segregated townships. It is not desktop research stuff, and this is a quality that gives it authenticity of thought and delivery.

This is a welcome development because the telling of too many of our stories as black South Africans is often done by people who have not experienced the life we have lived, the avoidable difficulties to which we have been subjected. Even the stories of Nelson Mandela (South Africa's first President under the first universal franchise), Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (his wife and a fiery socio-political activist in her own right dubbed "Mother of the Nation") and Steven Bantu Biko (leader of the Students' movement in the 1960s and 1970s and a Black Consciousness Movement advocate and leader) have been told largely by people who have not walked one mile in their shoes. And so in all three cases, the lack of authenticity is palpable.

The book covers a wide range of topics including Education, the Economy, Entrepreneurship, Unemployment, Religion, Money Matters and others.

One of the chapters in the book that rankles is the one about **Townships**. The mind boggles how some black South Africans have come to romanticise life in those townships. Talk of "*the township economy*", as if we chose to move there and develop a vibrant economy separate from and independent of the rest of the country, is one of black South Africa's most confounding ironies. Some even tend to shame others for not visiting township, as if to suggest that they have somehow become turncoats. The memory of such depravity as the Group Areas Act, 1950, the Group Areas Act, 1966 and other depraved government policy interventions intended to

segregate people according to race has somehow vanished into thin air.

These are glorified concentration camps. "Peripheral spaces for non-beings", as Mr Malinga describes South African townships. Nothing less. Nothing more. One thinks of them in the same vein as one thinks of Nazi Germany.

Talking of Nazi Germany, ***Lest We Forget*** is another memorably insightful chapter in the book, both for its text and for the thoughts and emotion it triggers.

There is no question that the holocaust was a reprehensible and barbaric crime. In fact, no adjective in the English language can even begin to do justice in describing the horror of the holocaust. So, one does not seek to play down the magnitude of that barbarism and the suffering of Jewish people when one draws parallels between the holocaust, on the one hand, and the psychological scars etched by centuries of systematic and structural sculpting of inferiority complex in the minds and brains of black people and the corresponding sculpting of superiority complex in the minds and brains of white people in South Africa, on the other.

One has often argued that the most evil thing that successive apartheid governments could have done to destroy an entire nation is to deprive the black child of quality education as a matter of government policy. One can forgive (but not excuse) murderous rampages of entire populations. People die; and children are born. But psychological damage that comes with systematic deprivation of the ability to think critically, to reason logically, and to make critical choices is inter-generational and therefore long-lasting. Of all apartheid's enduring achievements, the psychological damage that it has caused to generations of the black nation in South Africa is the highest achievement.

Sadly, since 1994 that most evil and enduring apartheid achievement seems to be perpetrated by successive governments of what used to be a liberation movement, sacrificing the cerebral

development of the black child at the altar of political expediency. It is a fact that ruling over an ignorant population is less complicated than having to account to a population that thinks and therefore can reason and therefore can make informed choices, especially when the ruling elite has nothing to offer except promises of “a better life for all” which often translates to food parcels and poverty trap social grants.

Yet, the Jewish people have fought for and obtained reparations for their suffering at the hands of Nazi Germany. More than that, we still read and hear in the news in 2020 about people who collaborated with the Nazis being tracked down around the world and brought to justice more than half a century after the crimes of which they are accused. One understands that politicians opted for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process that is now widely considered as having been flawed. But why should black people in South Africa not receive similar treatment as the Jewish people by way of reparations for the unimaginable cruelty that has been visited on them, the scars of which are still etched in their psyche? The funding of a specialist Leadership Academy, a Technology Centre, a Research and Development Institute would cost a fraction of what the Jewish people have received in reparations.

In his seminal and much acclaimed essay, “*The Case for Reparations*”, American author and critical thinker, Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing in May 2014, says the following which one thinks may be a good reference point for South Africa:

“West Germany ultimately agreed to pay Israel 3.45 billion deutsche marks, or more than \$7 billion in today’s [May 2014] dollars. Individual reparations claims followed—for psychological trauma, for offense to Jewish honour, for halting law careers, for life insurance, for time spent in concentration camps. Seventeen percent of funds went toward purchasing ships. ‘By the end of 1961, these reparations vessels constituted two-thirds of the Israeli merchant fleet,’ writes the Israeli historian Tom Segev in his book *The Seventh Million*. ‘From 1953 to 1963, the reparations money funded about a third of the total investment in Israel’s electrical system,

which tripled its capacity, and nearly half the total investment in the railways.’ Israel’s GNP tripled during the 12 years of the agreement. The Bank of Israel attributed 15 percent of this growth, along with 45,000 jobs, to investments made with reparations money. But Segev argues that the impact went far beyond that. Reparations “had indisputable psychological and political importance,” he writes. Reparations could not make up for the murder perpetrated by the Nazis. But they did launch Germany’s reckoning with itself, and perhaps provided a road map for how a great civilization might make itself worthy of the name. Assessing the reparations agreement, David Ben-Gurion [first prime minister and defence minister of Israel – 1948-1953 & 1955-1963] said:

‘For the first time in the history of relations between people, a precedent has been created by which a great State, as a result of moral pressure alone, takes it upon itself to pay compensation to the victims of the government that preceded it. For the first time in the history of a people that has been persecuted, oppressed, plundered and despoiled for hundreds of years in the countries of Europe, a persecutor and despoiler has been obliged to return part of his spoils and has even undertaken to make collective reparation as partial compensation for material losses.’”

Successive apartheid regimes, and their supporters, owe black South Africans a huge debt for much the same.

**Self-Hate**, finally, seems to be the bane on blackness. Mr Malinga’s treatment of this sensitive subject is brutally frank. Self-hate is a function of the “*divide and rule*” motif that has been perfected by successive plunderers of South Africa’s resources – from colonisers to the current ruling elite.

The territory that is today South Africa has, since the arrival of colonisers in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, been carved out for colonialist spoils. But there was no South Africa until about 1910 when the Dutch and the British carved out the territory between themselves into four colonies that were dominions of the British empire: the Orange River colony (now Free State), the Cape (now Western Cape, Northern Cape and Eastern

Cape), the Transvaal (now North West, Gauteng, Limpopo & Mpumalanga) and the Natal colony (now KZN).

South Africa only became a sovereign state in 1961. Even then, it was characterised by division into the four original British colonies which were inhabited by Dutch/French descendants (Free State, North West, Gauteng, Limpopo & Mpumalanga), on the one hand, and British descendants (KZN & Cape) on the other.

So, division has always been a feature of South Africa in recorded history. Successive apartheid ruling elites perfected that division with their Group Areas Acts and other *“divide and rule”* policies. So, for example, black people classified as “Coloured” under the harmlessly named Population Registration Act, 1950 could secure better jobs and salaries than black people classified as “Bantu” or “African”, regardless of educational qualification or skill. Black people classified as “Coloured” could live closer to places of work and have better amenities than black people classified as “Bantu” or “African”.

Of course, people classified as “white” had the best of all that was on offer, regardless of aptitude. So, one could have a white man, who never even set foot at higher primary school, supervising a coloured man with Grade 10 education at the South African Railways and Harbours (now Prasa and Transnet), and a coloured man with a Grade 8 supervising an African man with Matric at the South African Post Office – by law.

One should pause here to point out a curious irony. Even in 2019 we learnt about the appointment of a white man with a Matric as Chief Executive of an airline owned by government. The appointment is not done by a racist apartheid government known for its job reservation policies for white men in 1968; it is done in 2019 by the predominantly black government of what was once a liberation movement. **Self-Hate**.

Returning to the darker days of apartheid then. Survival being a basic human instinct in

desperate times, it should then have come as little surprise that many coloured people who fancied themselves as white because of the lighter hue and straighter hair than their fellow travellers, desperate to escape their “status” in life as pre-ordained by the Population Registration Act, and the limited opportunities that came with that status, passed themselves off as white. And many black African compatriots with lighter skin tones tended to straighten their hair, perfect their Afrikaans accents, and pass themselves off as coloured for a better life.

In those desperate situations, self-hate was born among black people. So, when the apartheid regime introduced the so-called *“tri-cameral parliament”* in 1983 – giving the right to coloured people and Indian people to vote for their own representatives in their own separate parliaments, but not to black people who had been relegated to homelands as self-governing states – the illusion of superiority by Coloured to African and by Indian to both was further entrenched.

So, the hierarchy of races – even among the black peoples of South Africa – is not a recent phenomenon. It has been carefully calibrated and systematically carved into the South African psyche over, at least, 70 years. What an irony it is, then, for a predominantly black government of a “broad church” political party to entrench that self-hate – wittingly or not – by maintaining a standard of what is to one a sorry excuse for state-funded school education, and trapping black African people in poverty with carefully timed food parcels and social grants.

History repeating itself.

The honesty and insight with which Mr Malinga tells his story, and the dexterity with which he weaves together the various chapters of the book, is awe-inspiring. That this is only his first book suggests that there are more to come. Talent of this magnitude seldom contents itself with one offering in the literary world.

Will this book strike a nerve with the ruling class? One doubts. But should it strike a chord with

fellow South Africans to the extent that they are moved to change the course of our history for the better and away from the cliff to which it is surely headed? One is hopeful.

**VUYANI NGALWANA SC,**

Chambers, Sandton  
June 2020