

Review of the *Post-apartheid Guernica* Exhibition: A Commentary on the South African Condition

Siseko H. Kumalo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6591-5995>

University of Fort Hare, South Africa

skumalo@ufh.ac.za

On 19 November 2021, I went to the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG)—a space that I had never visited prior to going to see Sharlene Khan and Mokgabudi Amos Letsoalo’s *Post-apartheid Guernica* (10 October 2021–30 January 2022). Getting into the space was both interesting and overwhelming, as the JAG is situated in a very busy part of Johannesburg—one that is teeming with life, people who are trying to get by with the little means they have, and a palpability of the disenfranchisement that is abided owing to the history of our country. I refer to the space, that is, the geographical location of the JAG, because of the commentary that the work of the artists is making with respect to the conditions of life in post-apartheid South Africa. What the reader who is familiar with the decolonial tradition will note are the implications that the exhibition has/had for the context that defines the gallery space where the exhibition was curated and displayed. These implications speak to the reality of how a capitalist society abjures the “fact of Blackness” (to borrow a Fanonian concept) to the extent that we kill Blackness/Indigeneity for its lack of conformity to the capitalist system that governs society. To this end, the exhibition made a chilling statement about those who are forgotten, ungrievable, erased, and go un-mourned in a timocracy that styles itself as a democratic state.

In the first instance, there is a sense that even as things have changed for the majority, in the sense of being able to participate in the sociopolitical decision-making of the country through universal franchise, there is a great sense of despair and hopelessness for those who were previously excluded and would like to claim South Africa as home. However, I do not wish to come across with a sense of arrogance and disaffection, in the sense that I realise the claim of hopelessness can be refuted on the premise of an inquiry into whose vantage point we use when looking at the world. Those who enjoy comfort, privilege and security would claim certain spaces are defined by destitution owing to what they know. Destitution comes from the reality that the lives of the majority have not changed, or—better put—the majority seem to be eking out an existence at the edge of the promised land that was the hope of democratic South Africa. To this extent, the exhibition made a chilling commentary that brings to vivid reality the

claim we find in Tendayi Sithole's *The Black Register* (2020) when he writes of the anti-Black world that must be destroyed. Sithole (2020, 178–79), like the artists under consideration in this review, accounts for the delegitimizing strategies that feign the inclusion of Blackness/Indigeneity in the polity when he writes, “the antiblack world expels blackness from the realm of existence and the logic that prevails is that of bad faith, where there is a pretence that blacks do matter.” Khan and Letsoalo explore this theme by centring the names of those who were killed by a democratic government—a centring that happens through the recitation of these names and a public performance of grieving Black life.

Moreover, and as a secondary consideration, the exhibition brings to bear the expendability of Black life, owing to the decisions that the democratic regimes of South Africa have made and how they have impacted the lives of the majority. Though bold, the claim can be made that the African National Congress (ANC) government(s) has been solely interested in preserving the life of those who were the beneficiaries of apartheid. Simply, what the exhibition—*Post-apartheid Guernica*—demonstrates, with chilling effect, is the expendability of Black life in South Africa. Inadvertently, the work challenges the claim that the reader finds in Mahmood Mamdani's (2021, 17) book, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, when he suggests that “by taking the political approach, South Africans reconfigured perpetrators and victims—alongside beneficiaries and bystanders—as something altogether new: survivors. All groups were survivors of apartheid, with a place at the table after its violence.” Khan and Letsoalo (2021) demonstrate that this is not the case; the lives of whiteness are comfortably ensconced in the comfort and privilege that were created through the sole preserve of the economy and its fruits for their gain and beneficiation. This is not to dismiss the idealistic thinking that the reader encounters in Mamdani's (2021) writing. Put in another way, what the reader finds in the work is the reality that while this is an ideal and admirable objective, it is abrogated by the cheapening of Black life owing to the violence that is meted out by the state against Black lives, on a daily basis, a matter that the reader finds in both Khan and Letsoalo's (2021) work and in Dumile Feni's *African Guernica* (1967) of the previous century.

The attentive reader will note that I am framing both *Guernicas* as texts that are to be read in relation to the context that they are commenting on. This is deliberate in that I seek to draw our attention to the reality that all three artists are referring to in their compositions. While *African Guernica* (1967) was dedicated to thinking through the condition of Black life under a repressive and totalitarian government—and I use the concept of totalitarianism as developed, analysed and understood by Hannah Arendt in her treatise on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* ([1951] 2017)—*Post-apartheid Guernica* (2021) is dedicated to the conditions of Black life under a government that claims to be committed to the liberation of the masses. To this effect, the artists' note to the work reads as follows:

Post-apartheid Guernica (2014–2021) explores themes of violence and oppression by security forces. It primarily references the Marikana massacre of 44 miners by the South African Police Service on the 16th of August 2012 during protests for increased wages. Not since the days of apartheid has South Africa witnessed such a public slaughter of civilians engaged in social protests, but this was a culmination of many different incidents where black lives are wasted by the police force.

In reading the artist statement, those who are familiar with the militarisation of police services in the country—which is not merely a South African problem, but rather a global one—will also be considerably aware of the challenges of what is intended by the notion of cheapened Black life (what Khan and Letsoalo call the wasting of life) owing to a capitalist orientation that sees Blackness/Indigeneity as nothing but a means to an end, with respect to cheap labour. To view Black/Indigenous subjectivity in this form centres the reality that ours is not a democracy but rather a timocratic state of existence wherein one’s legitimacy as a “human being” is qualified by one’s material possessions and earning capacity. This cheapening of Black life is also witnessed in the case of what the South African polity saw with the unjustifiable murder of civilians at the hands of the South African National Defence Forces (SANDF) on the premise of protection and stemming the rise of the coronavirus under emergency security measures that were reminiscent of the States of Emergency in the country in the 1980s.

What Khan and Letsoalo (2021) and Feni (1967) draw our attention to are the adverse effects of violence and oppression on the psyche of the oppressed subject. What is most fascinating and telling about the aptness of Khan and Letsoalo’s play on the tradition of *Guernica*, as we find it in Feni’s work, is how they reveal the ways in which timocracy styled as democracy constantly betrays those that it claims to be working to liberate. In simple terms, Khan and Letsoalo (2021) draw out the reality found in the claim propounded by Letta Mbulu ([1993] 1996) when she says “Akukho mehluko kulelizwe—Qhawula Amakhamandela.” The scariest aspect, however, is that in heeding this claim and in liberating ourselves from the shackles of slavery, bondage and oppression, the Black/Indigene in this country is always murdered for demanding that they be treated like a human being. It is this reality that the reader will find in Khan and Letsoalo’s exhibition, the brutal, unapologetic, and murderous nature of a democratic government that claims to be working on behalf of the majority who have always been denied their humanity, a reality that led Sithole (2020) to the conclusion that this world cannot be salvaged—it must rather be destroyed.

As the reader walked into the exhibition, they were greeted by a screening depicting a series of events that embody and demonstrate this murderous attitude of a government that claims to be working with and for the people. The audio that accompanied this screening was triggering in its uses of struggle songs and chants that the reader will be familiar with, if ever they have witnessed—first-hand—the public service delivery protests that have increased since the current administration took office. Embedded in this audio is the sound of gunfire, unabated and unapologetic, which is itself denotative of the cheapened nature of Black life, even to Blackness/Indigeneity itself.

Khan and Letsoalo (2021) invite us to consider a series of questions, resultantly. In the first instance, one is forced to ask: Has the colonial process of Black hate—an anti-Black world—so effectively taken root, even among Blackfolk, that we are so easily ready to murder even our own people? Secondly, if the answer to the previous question is in the affirmative, the subsidiary question should inquire into the possibilities and futility of the objective of decolonisation, be it political, epistemic, or conceptual. To put the question in a different way, if the political conditions of possibility still give us the ability to create works of a *Guernica* nature, what is the possibility of arriving at a point of Uhuru, or will we forever and perpetually be stuck in the shackles that led Mbulu ([1993] 1996) to claim “Not Yet Uhuru”?

These two questions are undergirded and foregrounded by a moving phallic-footed figure that the reader encountered on the running screen on display in the exhibition. Here, Khan and Letsoalo (2021) draw the viewer’s attention to a running commentary that we find in the works of prominent and consistent feminists who have critiqued the force of phallic power, culminating in two salient commentaries of the century in the treatises *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2016) and *Female Fear Factory* (2021), both of which were penned by a respectable and prominent feminist scholar—Pumla Dineo Gqola. To suggest that these works are a salient contribution of the century, in South Africa, is predicated on their sentinel posture, with their author having been constant in her critique of the challenges of a colonial condition that gives rise to insecure masculinities that culminate in violence as a mode of securing their power and authority. As a parting question, one that is inspired by both Gqola (2016, 2021) and Khan and Letsoalo (2021), I am curious about what a focus on our nightmare means for the possibilities of imagining and willing new futures through the process of a dream? If the nation is captured and tormented by the nightmare that is constitutive of our reality, is there a possibility for us to stop and imagine, dream up, what our world could potentially look like?

The critical respondent to my questions will say that for us to understand the world that we want—in order for us to dream—we must first and primarily confront the inner recesses of ourselves that we are most frightened by/of. In such a confrontation, we may be able to rise out of that reality with the ability to see and imagine the world anew. The only way to countenance such a response would be in the reply that in our psycho-social political endeavour to confront the evil that we have become, we ought to be weary not to lose ourselves in such a process. We must be weary to keep a light that will guide us back to ourselves in the process of interrogating ourselves. Moreover, it is the duty—or less presumptuously—the function of the artist, as both writer and art practitioner, to help us simple fools with the capacity to dream up new possibilities. Khan and Letsoalo’s (2021) *Post-apartheid Guernica* attends to such a demand, as we—fools—make of our artists. In confronting us with the violence that defines our world(s), and in inspiring such questions, Khan and Letsoalo press us to dream—to create new possibilities as we are dissatisfied with/by the realities that we encounter of ourselves. It is for these reasons that I would frame this exhibition as a searing and salient

commentary on our reality, one that we are in need of as we attempt to piece back our lives and dream up new possibilities in a world ravaged by the disparities of leaders who lack vision and political gusto in their ineptitude that is propelled by greed, corruption, and a lack of moral and ethical directionality.

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