

Politicising Immigration: Racialised Discourse and Electoral Politics in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The complex history of South Africa, which is anchored on colonialism, apartheid, Afrophobia and xenophobia, has incubated and hatched the politicisation of immigration. Premised on the foregoing contextual background statement emanating from the local people's frustration and aggression, this qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis study examined the Afrophobic and Xenophobic racialised narratives on immigration in South Africa. This study examined the language and narratives used by key political actors, such as politicians, policymakers, and media outlets, to instigate and legitimise racialised hostility narratives against immigration. This study established that the politicisation of immigration in South Africa stems from racialised narratives, which perpetuate Afrophobia and xenophobic behaviours with the political actors' endorsement. The findings demonstrate that political actors use political rhetoric to create a sense of crisis and urgency around immigration. The study aids in understanding the interplay between racialised political rhetoric on electoral politics and immigration policy in South Africa. This study's implication is promoting an inclusive and equitable immigration policy that brings harmony amongst the local and immigrant populations. Finally, the study recommends that policymakers and practitioners should focus on developing pragmatic-based immigration policies as a panacea to the underlying causes of xenophobia and Afrophobia in South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The intricate complexities of immigration politics in South Africa. The politics of immigration in South Africa are profoundly entrenched in the nation's colonial history and ongoing discussions. Hirsch posits that the historical context of colonialism and current discussions over the politicisation of immigration can be elucidated by analysing the historical foundations of migration policy and their dominant patterns.¹ The historical context of apartheid and colonialism in South Africa has fostered an environment conducive to the dual phenomena of xenophobia and Afrophobia, both rooted in racialisation. As a result of the preceding twin phenomenon in South Africa, the country is marooned in an endemic complex web of inequalities, poverty and unemployment, which continue to shape its immigration policies.² In the aftermath of the attainment of independence in South Africa, the country witnessed a significant increase in migrants from the neighbouring countries due to the socio-economic

¹ A. Hirsch, *South Africa Country Study: Migration Trends, Policy, Implementation, and Outcomes* (New South Institute, 2023).

² T. Reddy, *South Africa's Insurgent Citizens: Disruptive Politics and Democratic Deepening* (Jacana Media, 2015).

and political challenges. Subsequently, the influx of immigrants to South Africa exerted pressure on the country's economy, which was already rocked by the triple challenges incubated by the apartheid legacy.

Based on the political bankruptcy of solutions to resolve the matter, immigration in South Africa has recently become a battleground of political contestations manifesting through anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.³ According to Reddy, in an endeavour to resolve these challenges, the National African Congress (ANC) government promulgated various policies aimed at regulating immigration, such as the Immigration Act of 2002 and the Refugees Act of 1998.⁴ Despite the robustness of these policies, they were criticised for being unfriendly to the welfare of the immigrants by perpetuating xenophobia and Afrophobia in the country. The socioeconomic challenges in the country have recently become rhetorically associated with immigration, and the politicisation of immigration is slowly replacing the legacy of apartheid and colonialism. Burden-Stelly argues that immigrants are being regarded as a threat to the socio-economic well-being of the local South African populace.⁵ Consequently, politicians have crafted populist rhetoric about immigration to achieve political advantage. Nevertheless, research conducted by Banda and Mawadza has demonstrated that despite the socio-economic issues immigration presents to the local population, immigrants have substantially contributed to the expansion of the South African economy across multiple sectors.⁶

Notwithstanding the various ways through which the politicisation of immigration manifests in South Africa, the phenomenon is manifesting through racialised discourses and narratives. Ndlovu argues that the politicisation of immigration is ventilated through politicians and policymakers using derogatory language against immigrants in the country.⁷ A typical example is the recent racially motivated debate around the ANC's proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme, which was criticised for excluding undocumented migrants from accessing healthcare services. The abovementioned example has been legitimised and reinforced by xenophobic political vigilantism and parties such as Dudula and Action-SA.⁸ Political vigilantism, opposition politics, and the incumbent government, both trying to gain mileage, resorted to populist political scapegoating against immigrants. As a result, the wayward acts of the political parties, vigilant movements, and the incumbent government's discourse against immigration have created a multifaceted and complex history of the politicisation of immigration in South Africa.

Based on the foregoing contextual background, this qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis study examines the racialised discourse surrounding immigration in South Africa. This study comprises several sections that first include the contextual background, which provides an overview of the politicisation of immigration in South Africa and highlights the complex historical context and contemporary debates. Secondly, the study articulates the research problem coupled with the study gap, research questions, contribution and the justification of the study. Thirdly, the study provides a comprehensive literature review which covers an overview of key concepts, including racialised discourse, electoral politics, and immigration policy, the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, highlighting its relevance to the study and the South African context, highlighting the historical and contemporary dynamics of racialised discourse, electoral politics, and immigration policy. Lastly, the study presents the methodology, discusses the key findings from the literature, and presents a conclusion, implications, and recommendations for policy and practice.

The intensity of hostility against immigrants, especially those from the neighbouring countries in South Africa, has become a pressing issue that warrants critical examination. Premised on that backdrop, this study aims to unravel the politicisation of immigration by the political actors in South

³ D. Vigneswaran, "The Contours of Xenophobia in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 43, no. 5 (2017): 931–46.

⁴ Reddy, *South Africa's Insurgent Citizens: Disruptive Politics and Democratic Deepening*.

⁵ C. Burden-Stelly, "Racial Capitalism and the Crisis of Black Politics," *Journal of Black Studies* 51, no. 1 (2020): 3–20.

⁶ Felix Banda and Aquilina Mawadza, "'Foreigners Are Stealing Our Birth Right': Moral Panics and the Discursive Construction of Zimbabwean Immigrants in South African Media," *Discourse & Communication* 9, no. 1 (2015): 47–64.

⁷ Finex Ndhlovu, "South Africa's Social Transformation Policies: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Neoliberal Rhetoric," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 14, no. 2 (2019): 131–51.

⁸ Archwell Nhemachena, Munyaradzi Mawere, and Oliver Mtapuri, "Operation Dudula, Xenophobic Vigilantism and Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century South Africa," *Sovereignty Becoming Pulverignty: Unpacking the Dark Side of Slave 4.0 Within Industry 4.0 in Twenty-First Century Africa*, 2022, 153–74; J. Ringson, "Beyond the Binary: Unpacking Xenophobia and Afrophobia in South Africa," *Socium* 2, no. 1 (2025): 34–48.

Africa and its implications for the electoral politics of the country and the region. The research problem is based on the prevailing racialised discourse used by the political actors through the politicisation of immigration to gain support against each other. According to Ndlovu, the political rhetoric and discourses used by the political actors perpetuate xenophobic attitudes and reinforce existing power dynamics.⁹ As a result, the total number of political rivalries and actions using immigration has significant implications for the country's electoral politics.

Studies by Vigneswaran and Hirsch argue that despite the growing body of research on immigration and xenophobia in South Africa, there is still a need to unravel further racialised political discourses in the country and understand the reality of the claims raised against immigrants.¹⁰ This qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis study seeks to bridge the foregoing gap caused by political rhetoric, policy documents, and media reports. Premised on the abovementioned research problem and study gap, this study seeks to address the following research objectives:

- To examine how political actors in South Africa employ racialised discourse to politicise immigration.
- To identify the implications of the racialised discourse for electoral politics in South Africa.
- To analyse the extent to which these discursive strategies shape public opinion and influence policy decisions.

This study contributes to the existing literature on immigration, Afrophobia and xenophobia in South Africa by providing a critical discourse analysis on the politicisation of immigration through various platforms. This study's findings will offer significant insights into diverse political actors advocating for inclusive and fair immigration policies. This study's rationale is founded on the necessity to critically analyse the utilisation of racialised language in the politicisation of immigration in South Africa. As such, the contribution of this study focuses on understanding deeply the multifaceted, complex relationships between racialised political speeches, electoral politics and immigration policies in South Africa.

Additionally, the study's recommendations will provide helpful information to policymakers and practitioners who are promoting inclusive and equitable immigration policies. This study seeks to examine how political players in South Africa utilise racialised discourse to politicise immigration and its effects on electoral politics. Thus, the study will enhance comprehension of the multifaceted and intricate concerns underpinning racialised discourses, Afrophobia, and xenophobia, assisting advocates in promoting inclusive and equitable immigration policies. The following introductory section first discusses the literature review and theoretical framework, second, is a discussion on the conceptualisation of racialised politics and migration policies, third is the Critical Discourse Analysis and post-neoliberal frameworks, fourth is the dynamics of racialised political and migration issues in South Africa, fifth is the methodology section, sixth section is the discussion of findings, the seventh section proffers implications and recommendation and the final section is a conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A thorough literature review and theoretical framework are crucial in qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis for various reasons. Armayanti asserts that the literature review and theoretical framework elucidate the intricate dynamics of racialised discourse and the electoral political landscape in South Africa.¹¹ An extensive literature review creates a platform and a foundation for knowing the language used to shape public opinion and policy decisions. Furthermore, it is through a comprehensive

⁹ Ndlovu, "South Africa's Social Transformation Policies: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Neoliberal Rhetoric."

¹⁰ Vigneswaran, "The Contours of Xenophobia in South Africa"; K. Hirsh-Pasek and E. Blinkoff, "ChatGPT: Educational Friend or Foe? Brookings," 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2023/01/09/chatgpt-educational-friend-or-foe/Ilomäki>.

¹¹ Rika Armayanti, "Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on Qualitative Research: A Review," *REiLA: Journal of Research and Innovation in Language* 1, no. 1 (2019): 29–34.

literature review that the researcher discovers and identifies the gaps in the body of knowledge, which allows one to conduct an evidence-based analysis and contribute to the study.¹²

Likewise, a systematic literature review provides an understanding of the historical trends and ongoing contexts of xenophobic discourse and electoral politics in South Africa. In order for this to happen, the apartheid and colonialism that have shaped the country's migration policies and debates will be critically evaluated based on an extensive literature review of the political actors who employ racialised discourse to canvass public support.¹³ Thus, a comprehensive literature review helps the researcher gain a nuanced understanding of the racialised discourses, language, and electoral politics in South Africa. Ultimately, it will help the researcher establish critical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates working to promote inclusive and equitable immigration policies.

Conceptualisation of Racialised Discourse, Electoral Politics and Immigration Policy

The conceptual understanding of electoral politics, immigration rhetorics and racialised discourses in South Africa is complexly multifaceted. A historical examination of the context of racialised discourse and the relationships of immigration and electoral politics in South Africa is critical to grasp the phenomenon. Whilst the phenomenon of racialised discourses mutates with time, the history of immigration in South Africa stretches far back from the time of apartheid to date. During the apartheid, the incumbent government executed policies that regulated the flow of migrants, primarily from neighbouring countries, to supply cheap labour to the mining industry. Forrest convergently argues that these immigration policies during the apartheid era were meant to maintain cheap labour and a flexible workforce.¹⁴ As a result, these immigration policies perpetuated the racialised discourses and the socio-economic inequalities in South Africa.

The post-apartheid democratic South Africa endeavoured to obliterate the racialised discourse surrounding immigration in various ways, but to no avail. Rapanyane reveals that the ANC government promulgated policies geared to promote economic development and reduce poverty.¹⁵ Instead of these policies reducing the level of the racialised discourses, they perpetuated xenophobic attitudes and reinforced existing power dynamics by constructing "otherness". Tati and Forrest contend that racialised rhetoric has been employed to cultivate the narrative of "us versus them," portraying immigrants as a menace to South African employment, resources, and identity.¹⁶ The immigration and electoral politics of South Africa are intricate and multidimensional, necessitating a critical analysis of the surrounding discourses for comprehension. This has seen the political parties and the social pressure groups using racialised discourses to canvass political support to win the elections. For example, the ANC was distracted from the immigration policies by employing anti-immigrant rhetoric to appeal to its electorate. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) continued to support the migrants against the ANC's anti-immigration stance, which cost them to lose popularity. Durrheim et al. pointed out that the Democratic Alliance (DA), on the other hand, has employed a more nuanced approach, advocating for a more inclusive immigration policy while also emphasising the need for border control.¹⁷ Rosa and Flores define racialised discourse as the utilisation of language and communication to create and perpetuate racial and ethnic classifications.¹⁸

¹² Rebecca Rogers et al., "Critical Discourse Analysis in Education: A Review of the Literature, 2004 to 2012," *Review of Educational Research* 86, no. 4 (2016): 1192–1226.

¹³ Linda R Waugh et al., "Critical Discourse Analysis: Definition, Approaches, Relation to Pragmatics, Critique, and Trends," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Pragmatics, Culture and Society*, 2016, 71–135.

¹⁴ Kally Forrest, "Rustenburg's Labour Recruitment Regime: Shifts and New Meanings," *Review of African Political Economy* 42, no. 146 (2015): 508–25.

¹⁵ Makhura B Rapanyane, "Key Challenges Facing the African National Congress-Led Government in South Africa: An Afrocentric Perspective," *Insight on Africa* 14, no. 1 (2022): 57–72.

¹⁶ Gabriel Tati, "The Immigration Issues in the Post-Apartheid South Africa: Discourses, Policies and Social Repercussions," *Espace Populations Sociétés. Space Populations Societies*, no. 2008/3 (2008): 423–40; Forrest, "Rustenburg's Labour Recruitment Regime: Shifts and New Meanings."

¹⁷ Kevin Durrheim et al., "How Racism Discourse Can Mobilize Right-wing Populism: The Construction of Identity and Alliance in Reactions to UKIP's B Reixt 'B Reaking P Oint' Campaign," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 28, no. 6 (2018): 385–405.

¹⁸ Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective," *Language in Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 621–47.

In South Africa, racialised discourse has been utilised to construct a narrative of "otherness" associated with pejorative terms like "*makwerekwere*".¹⁹ Banda and Mawadza contend that critical discourse analysis can comprehend the interplay between electoral politics and immigration in South Africa.²⁰ Critical discourse analysis investigates the influence of language and communication on public opinion and policy formulation. Duffy et al. contend that examining the discursive methods utilised by political parties and officials enables researchers to understand the framing of immigration as a political problem.²¹ South Africa confronts substantial obstacles related to varied migratory patterns stemming from the socio-economic difficulties affecting its neighbouring nations, such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi. The rise in undocumented migration has offset the decrease in contract labour migration to South African mines. The conceptualisation of racialised rhetoric, electoral politics, and immigration in South Africa is intricate and varied, necessitating an analysis of the historical background of immigration for comprehension. Additional study is required to investigate the utilisation of racialised rhetoric within the immigration environment in South Africa and to formulate solutions for fostering more inclusive and equitable immigration policies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A comprehensive theoretical framework is crucial in a desktop and critical discourse analysis study. This framework provides a conceptual structure for understanding the complex relationships between immigration, racialised discourse, and electoral politics. According to Mhlongo, by integrating theories from fields like critical discourse analysis, postcolonialism and neoliberalism, researchers can develop a nuanced understanding of how language and discourse shape public perceptions of immigration and influence electoral outcomes.²²

Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonial and Neoliberalism Frameworks

Comprehending the intricate dynamics of politicising immigration, racialised discourse, and electoral politics in South Africa necessitates the application of pertinent theoretical frameworks. This study utilises Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonial, and Neoliberal theoretical frameworks to critically analyse the politicisation of immigration and racialised discourse in South Africa. Qianbo asserts that Critical Discourse Analysis is an essential framework for examining the interplay between language, ideology, and power.²³ Critical discourse analysis helps to examine the language of political rhetoric and ideologies based on agenda and context from the perspective of a particular group of people.²⁴ As such, Critical Discourse Analysis is particularly relevant to analysing how racialised discourse is employed in the politicisation of immigration in South Africa. Through the critical discourse analysis lens, language is seen as a tool for exerting, maintaining, and challenging power.²⁵ Van Dijk and Mullet further assert that language can be used to legitimise some actions and normalise ideologies.²⁶

Thus, in South Africa, language is used to identify the locals differently from the immigrants. Hence, a language such as "*makwerekwere*" was coined to segregate the foreign nationals from the locals racially and reinforce the power dynamics in the country. Since South Africa's socio-economic legacy is deeply rooted in colonial history, postcolonial theory helps the study to navigate through the

¹⁹ Sarah Helen Chiumbu and Dumisani Moyo, "'South Africa Belongs to All Who Live in It': Deconstructing Media Discourses of Migrants during Times of Xenophobic Attacks, from 2008 to 2017," *Communicare: Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa* 37, no. 1 (2018): 136–52.

²⁰ Banda and Mawadza, "'Foreigners Are Stealing Our Birth Right': Moral Panics and the Discursive Construction of Zimbabwean Immigrants in South African Media."

²¹ Lauren N. Duffy et al., "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Racial Violence in South Carolina, USA: Implications for Traveling While Black," *Current Issues in Tourism* 22, no. 19 (2019): 2430–46.

²² Lindelwa Mhlongo, "A Critical Analysis of South Africa's System of Government: From a Disjunctive System to a Synergistic System of Government," *Obiter* 41, no. 2 (2020): 257–74.

²³ L. I. Qianbo, "Theoretical Framework of Critical Discourse Analysis," *Studies in Literature and Language* 13, no. 5 (2016): 36–40.

²⁴ Lutvia Nurul Kafi and Agwin Degaf, "Euphemism and Dysphemism Strategies in Donald Trump's Speech at SOTU 2020," *International Journal of Humanity Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 194–207; Qianbo, "Theoretical Framework of Critical Discourse Analysis."

²⁵ T. A. Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 2015.

²⁶ Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*; Dianna R Mullet, "A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research," *Journal of Advanced Academics* 29, no. 2 (2018): 116–42.

understanding of the impact of such history on the politicisation of immigration. According to Van Dijk and Mullet, postcolonial theory examines how colonialism has shaped the country's migration policies, perpetuating racial and economic inequalities.²⁷

South Africa has been applauded as the epitome of constitutional democracy in Africa. Premised on the foregoing, the neoliberalism framework becomes essential to examine the impact of neoliberal immigration policies on the politicisation of immigration in South Africa.²⁸ Van Dijk and Mullet contend that neoliberalism has faced criticism for fostering xenophobic sentiments and supporting prevailing power structures, especially regarding immigration policies and discussions.²⁹ The integration of Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonialism, and Neoliberalism frameworks offers an in-depth comprehension of the intricate processes surrounding the politicisation of immigration, racialised rhetoric, and electoral politics in South Africa.

To this end, Critical Discourse Analysis can be used to analyse how racialised discourse is employed in the politicisation of immigration. Postcolonial theory can provide insights into the historical and contemporary contexts of colonialism and its impact on immigration policies and debates. Neoliberalism serves as a framework to analyse the influence of neoliberal policies on the nation's immigration strategies, emphasising commercial objectives at the expense of social and humanitarian considerations. The theoretical frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonialism, and Neoliberalism offer crucial insights into the intricate dynamics of politicising immigration, racialised discourse, and electoral politics in South Africa. Utilising these frameworks enables scholars to attain a more profound comprehension of the interplay of language, ideology, and power in shaping immigration policies and discussions within the nation.

Dynamics of Racialised Discourse, Electoral Politics, and Immigration Policy in South Africa

The past and current dynamics of immigration policy, racialised rhetoric, and electoral politics in South Africa are intricately interwoven. Consequently, it is essential to analyse the nation's history of colonialism, apartheid, and xenophobia to comprehend these processes. During the apartheid era, immigration regulations primarily aimed to regulate and control inexpensive labour for the mines from adjacent nations. Khalfani and Zuberi contend that these practices sustained racial and economic disparities, which persist in influencing the nation's immigration policies and discussions today.³⁰ This highlights the need to acknowledge that racialised discourse has profoundly impacted South Africa's immigration policy and debates.

Polzer contends that the racialised discourse in South Africa has constructed a narrative of "otherness," positioning immigrants as dangers to employment and resources within the country.³¹ For example, the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric by politicians and social pressure groups such as the "Dudula" and "Action-SA" can perpetuate xenophobic and Afrophobic attitudes and reinforce existing power dynamics. Neoliberal electoral politics in South Africa have also significantly shaped the country's immigration policies and debates. The freedom of speech from the neoliberal democratic constitution of the government gave the political parties the power to use the racialised discourse to mobilise public support and win elections. For instance, Zakharov et al. noted that the ANC ambivalently deviated from its post-independence inclusive immigration policies to anti-immigrant rhetoric to appeal to the electorate.³²

²⁷ Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*; Mullet, "A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research."

²⁸ Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*; Mullet, "A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research."

²⁹ Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*; Mullet, "A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research."

³⁰ Akil Kokayi Khalfani and Tukufo Zuberi, "Racial Classification and the Modern Census in South Africa, 1911–1996," *Race and Society* 4, no. 2 (2001): 161–76.

³¹ T. Polzer, *Discourses on Immigration in South Africa: Managing Diversity in a New Nation. Frontiers of Diversity: Explorations in Contemporary Pluralism* (Amsterdam: Randopi Publishers, 2005).

³² Nikolay Zakharov et al., "South Africa and the Struggle for Racial Equality: Debating Deracialization, Non-Racialism, Decolonization, and Africanization," in *Futures of Anti-Racism: Paradoxes of Deracialization in Brazil, South Africa, Sweden, and the UK* (Springer, 2023), 15–67.

Colonialism, apartheid, and xenophobia have shaped the immigration policies of South Africa. As such, the immigration policies in South Africa have been criticised for being overly restrictive, Afrophobic and xenophobic. As a result, Angu argues that it has the propensity to perpetuate racial and economic inequalities.³³ Zakharov et al. assert that the Immigration Act of 2002 has faced criticism for its stringent requirements for asylum seekers and refugees, potentially resulting in imprisonment and deportation.³⁴ The current dynamics of racial rhetoric, electoral politics, and immigration policy in South Africa are intricate and multifaceted. The nation is undergoing a substantial influx of migrants from several African nations, resulting in escalating tensions and discussions on immigration. The ANC administration has enacted policies designed to foster economic development and alleviate poverty; nevertheless, these policies have concurrently sustained xenophobic sentiments and maintained prevailing power structures.³⁵

To this end, the historical and contemporary dynamics of racialised discourse, electoral politics, and immigration policy in South Africa are complexly multifaceted. Understanding these dynamics is necessary to promote social justice and human rights and develop an effective, inclusive immigration policy. Additional study is required to investigate the utilisation of racialised language within the context of immigration in South Africa and to formulate solutions for fostering more inclusive and equitable immigration policies.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis approaches to investigate the intricate dynamics of racialised speech, electoral politics, and immigration policy in South Africa. The suitability of methodologies for this study was rooted in their ability to facilitate a comprehensive examination of language, power, and social structures. Qualitative desktop research entails the analysis of pre-existing data, including writings, photos, and videos, to derive insights on social phenomena. This method is ideal for studying sensitive or hard-to-reach topics, such as racialised discourse and electoral politics. According to Denzin and Lincoln, researchers can identify patterns, themes, and relationships that might be difficult to capture through other methods by using the qualitative desktop.³⁶

On the other hand, Critical Discourse Analysis is a critical approach to analysing language and political discourse. It examines how language constructs and reinforces social relationships, power dynamics, and ideologies that perpetuate xenophobic and afrophobic tendencies.³⁷ Data were analysed using thematic and critical discourse analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify, code, and categorise themes and patterns in the data. Critical discourse analysis was conducted to examine the language, power dynamics, and social structures that underlie the themes and patterns identified.

Although qualitative desktop research and Critical Discourse Analysis approaches possess benefits in examining racialised discourse and electoral politics, they are not without limits. A potential restriction is the risk of researcher bias, given that the analysis is subjective and interpretive. To mitigate this risk, the researcher utilised a systematic and transparent methodology for data analysis, employing tools such as coding to ensure rigour and reliability. A further potential constraint is the dependence on current data, which may fail to encompass the complete intricacy of the phenomenon under investigation. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher triangulated the data by examining several sources and using diverse analytical methods.

DISCUSSION

³³ Pineteh Angu, "Being Black and Non-citizen in South Africa: Intersecting Race, White Privilege and Afrophobic Violence in Contemporary South Africa," *Sociology Compass* 17, no. 9 (2023): e13123.

³⁴ Zakharov et al., "South Africa and the Struggle for Racial Equality: Debating Deracialization, Non-Racialism, Decolonization, and Africanization."

³⁵ Christopher Isike and Efe Isike, "A Socio-Cultural Analysis of African Immigration to South Africa," *Alternation* 19, no. 1 (2012): 93–116.

³⁶ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. (Sage Publications, 2011).

³⁷ Tebogo Mogashoa, "Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education* 1, no. 7 (2014): 104–13; Armayanti, "Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on Qualitative Research: A Review."

The findings of this study are presented, discussed, analysed, interpreted and synthesised based on the five themes extracted from the literature reviewed in the preceding sections. As such, these themes are racialised discourse and xenophobia, electoral politics and immigration policy, identity, belonging, and citizenship, power dynamics and social inequality and human rights and social justice. These themes are critically discussed, interpreted and synthesised with the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study in the subsequent section below.

Theme 1: Racialised Discourse and Xenophobia in South Africa

The racialised discourse and xenophobia are pervasive and worrying findings in the literature on immigration in South Africa. This theme aligns with the academic frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism in multiple aspects. Critical Discourse Analysis is essential in analysing the utilisation of language to formulate and perpetuate racialised discourse, Afrophobia, and xenophobia. Fairclough and Fairclough assert that Critical Discourse Analysis reveals the utilisation of language to build a "us versus them" narrative, portraying immigrants as a menace to South African employment, resources, and identity.³⁸ Research by Misago and Tati demonstrated that political discourse might enable the normalisation of xenophobic violence, as illustrated by the South African context where foreign nationals were assigned pejorative terms such as "makwerekwere".³⁹

The postcolonial framework enhanced comprehension of how colonialism and apartheid have influenced the nation's migration policies and discussions. Ndlovu (2019) and Forrest assert that postcolonial theory illustrates the enduring impact of colonialism and apartheid in perpetuating racial and economic disparities, evident in the racialised discourse and xenophobia associated with immigration.⁴⁰

For example, a study by Peberdy found that immigration policies in South Africa are often designed to maintain the racial exclusionary economic status quo that is based on the constructed narrative of the "us versus the other".⁴¹ Neoliberalism was applied to understand the impact of constitutional democratic policies on the politicisation of immigration. In this context, neoliberalism posits that the quest for economic expansion and profit may result in the exploitation of migrant labour and the continuation of xenophobic sentiments.⁴² A study by Landau indicated that neoliberal policies have fostered the proliferation of xenophobic views and violence in South Africa.⁴³ In conclusion, racialised speech and xenophobia are intricate, diverse phenomena influenced by various elements, including language, history, and economy. Theories of Critical Discourse Analysis, postcolonialism, and neoliberalism offer a comprehensive framework for comprehending and analysing this issue.

By analysing the use of language in the formation and perpetuation of racialised discourse and xenophobia and comprehending the historical and economic contexts from which these discourses arise, one can initiate the development of strategies aimed at fostering more inclusive and equitable immigration policies in South Africa.

Theme 2: Electoral Politics and Immigration Policy in South Africa

The subject of electoral politics and immigration policy is essential to the politicisation of immigration in South Africa. This theme illustrates that immigration has emerged as a significant issue in electoral politics, with numerous political parties employing anti-immigrant rhetoric to galvanise popular

³⁸ N. Fairclough and I. Fairclough, "Textual Analysis," in *Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science* (Routledge, 2015), 186–98.

³⁹ Jean Pierre Misago, "Politics by Other Means? The Political Economy of Xenophobic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *The Black Scholar* 47, no. 2 (2017): 40–53; Tati, "The Immigration Issues in the Post-Apartheid South Africa: Discourses, Policies and Social Repercussions."

⁴⁰ Forrest, "Rustenburg's Labour Recruitment Regime: Shifts and New Meanings."

⁴¹ S. Peberdy, "Immigration, Xenophobia and the State in South Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 34, no.1(2016): 1–15.

⁴² V. Satgar, "Neoliberalism and the Crisis of South Africa's Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, no.1(2018):1–18.

⁴³ L. B. Landau, "The Human Rights Paradox: Migration, Mobility, and the Politics of Belonging," *International Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 3 (2018): 351–66.

support.⁴⁴ Critical Discourse Analysis is helpful in analysing the use of language to formulate and perpetuate anti-immigrant sentiments. It indicates that political discourse may facilitate the normalisation of xenophobic violence and the continuation of unfavourable attitudes against immigrants.⁴⁵ The terminology "illegal foreigners" and "border security" can instil urgency and panic in the public, resulting in heightened support for stringent immigration regulations. Although these measures are welcomed as a solution to reduce illegal immigration into South Africa, they also signify the politicisation of immigration by the current government, which is responding to the demands of anti-immigration vigilante organisations.

The study utilised postcolonialism to analyse the ongoing influence of colonialism and apartheid on South Africa's migration policies and discussions. Postcolonial theory posits that the nation's history of exclusion and marginalisation has engendered a complex and frequently contentious relationship between South Africans and immigrants.⁴⁶ The utilisation of immigration as a scapegoat for economic and social issues exemplifies a colonial legacy, evident in the manufactured narratives portraying immigrants as a menace to national identity and resources. This study utilised a neoliberal framework to examine the influence of constitutional democracy on fostering a favourable atmosphere for the politicisation of immigration in South Africa. In this context, neoliberalism posits that the quest for economic expansion and profit may result in the exploitation of migrant labour and the continuation of xenophobic sentiments.⁴⁷ The implementation of temporary labour permits and the limitation of migrant workers' rights serve as mechanisms to sustain a cost-effective and adaptable labour force. While this practice sounds colonial, it is currently being experienced by most of the country's undocumented immigrants, who are subjected to cheap labour based on their vulnerable legal status.

In synthesis, the theme of electoral politics and immigration policy established the complex and often fraught relationship between immigration, politics, and society in South Africa. Critical Discourse Analysis, postcolonial theory, and neoliberalism offer a comprehensive framework for analysing the influence of language, history, and economics on immigration policies and discussions. By analysing the linguistic strategies employed by politicians to formulate and perpetuate anti-immigrant sentiments, alongside an understanding of the historical and economic contexts that give rise to these discourses, one can initiate the development of strategies aimed at fostering more inclusive and equitable immigration policies in South Africa.

Theme 3: Identity, Belonging, and Citizenship in South Africa

The ideas of identity, belonging, and citizenship are essential components of the politicisation of immigration in South Africa. This subject emphasises that immigration has emerged as a significant issue in discussions over national identity, belonging, and citizenship. Critical Discourse Analysis is crucial in investigating the utilisation of language to formulate and perpetuate restrictive concepts of identity, belonging, and citizenship. In South Africa, anti-immigration rhetoric from political figures has been prevalent, particularly during election campaigns. Critical Discourse Analysis demonstrated that political discourse can foster an "us versus them" narrative, portraying immigrants as a threat to South African identity and resources.⁴⁸ For instance, the use of terms like "foreigners" and "outsiders" can create a sense of otherness and reinforce exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants. Such terms are

⁴⁴ Sigrid Weber et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Attitudes towards Migrants and Displaced Persons," 2024; Banda and Mawadza, "'Foreigners Are Stealing Our Birth Right': Moral Panics and the Discursive Construction of Zimbabwean Immigrants in South African Media."

⁴⁵ Michał Krzyżanowski, "Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism: Imaginaries of Immigration, Moral Panics and the Discourse of Contemporary Right-Wing Populism," *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 503–27; Weber et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Attitudes towards Migrants and Displaced Persons."

⁴⁶ Alan Hirsch, "The African Union's Free Movement of Persons Protocol: Why Has It Faltered and How Can Its Objectives Be Achieved?," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2021): 497–517.

⁴⁷ Biniam E Bedasso and Pascal Jaupart, "South-South Migration and Elections: Evidence from Post-Apartheid South Africa," *IZA Journal of Development and Migration* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1–47; Banda and Mawadza, "'Foreigners Are Stealing Our Birth Right': Moral Panics and the Discursive Construction of Zimbabwean Immigrants in South African Media."

⁴⁸ M. Mangena, "Rallying to Defend Democracy," *Sunday World*, April 18, 2021; Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis. The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*.

commonly used when completing job application forms or applying for accommodation and are used as a bottleneck and selection criteria.

Postcolonial theory was employed to understand how the legacy of colonialism and apartheid continues to shape South Africa's debates around identity, belonging, and citizenship. In this regard, the theory established that the country's history of exclusion and marginalisation has created a complex and often fraught relationship between South Africans and immigrants.⁴⁹ As a result, this has caused biased applications by law enforcement agencies. The law is becoming a xenophobic and Afrophobic instrument to punish the immigrants in the country. For example, the use of immigration as a scapegoat for economic and social problems can be seen as a continuation of colonial-era discourses that constructed immigrants as a threat to national identity and resources. The neoliberal framework was employed to understand how economic interests shape debates around identity, belonging, and citizenship. In this view, neoliberalism established that the pursuit of economic growth and profit can lead to the commodification of citizenship and the creation of new forms of exclusion and marginalisation.⁵⁰ For instance, the use of temporary labour permits and the restriction of migrant workers' rights can be seen as a means of maintaining a cheap and flexible labour force.

In synthesis, the themes of identity, belonging, and citizenship established the complex and often fraught relationship between immigration, identity, and citizenship in South Africa. Critical Discourse Analysis, postcolonial and neoliberalism theories provide a robust framework for understanding how language, history, and economics shape debates around identity, belonging, and citizenship. By examining how politicians use language to construct and reinforce exclusionary notions of identity, belonging, and citizenship and by understanding the historical and economic contexts in which these discourses emerge, stakeholders can begin to develop strategies for promoting more inclusive and equitable notions of identity, belonging, and citizenship in South Africa.

Theme 4: Power Dynamics and Social Inequality in South Africa

The theme of power dynamics and social inequality is a pervasive and disturbing finding in the literature on immigration in South Africa. This theme established that immigration has become a site of power struggle, with various groups vying for control and influence over immigration policies and debates. Critical Discourse Analysis is instrumental in examining how language is used to reinforce and challenge existing power dynamics and social inequalities. Critical Discourse Analysis reveals how politicians' rhetoric can contribute to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants, reinforcing existing power dynamics and social inequalities.⁵¹ For instance, the use of terms like "illegal foreigners" and "border security" can create a sense of urgency and fear among the public, leading to increased support for restrictive immigration policies that reinforce existing power dynamics and social inequalities. The establishment of border security towards the 2024 elections by the South African government is a sign of the highest politicisation of immigration. Border security was established following the social movement pressure groups, such as the "Dudula" and "Action-SA", which protested, and the government sanitised them, creating border security and management.

The study utilised a postcolonial framework to examine how the legacy of colonialism and apartheid continues to influence South Africa's power dynamics and socioeconomic inequities. Postcolonial theory posits that the nation's history of exclusion and marginalisation has engendered a complex and often contentious relationship between South Africans and immigrants, with immigrants frequently perceived as a threat to national identity and resources.⁵² The utilisation of immigration as a scapegoat for economic and social issues exemplifies a colonial legacy that portrays immigrants as a menace to national identity and resources. A neoliberal framework was utilised to analyse how economic

⁴⁹ Peberdy, "Immigration, Xenophobia and the State in South Africa"; Mullet, "A General Critical Discourse Analysis Framework for Educational Research."

⁵⁰ X. Tshabalala, "The Politics of Belonging in South Africa: A Critical Analysis of the 2015 Xenophobic Attacks," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 5 (2018): 857–72.

⁵¹ Landau, "The Human Rights Paradox: Migration, Mobility, and the Politics of Belonging"; Kafi and Degaf, "Euphemism and Dysphemism Strategies in Donald Trump's Speech at SOTU 2020."

⁵² Misago, "Politics by Other Means? The Political Economy of Xenophobic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Qianbo, "Theoretical Framework of Critical Discourse Analysis."

interests influence power dynamics and social inequality within the context of immigration. Neoliberalism posited that the quest for economic expansion and profit might result in the exploitation of migrant labour and the continuation of prevailing power structures and social inequities.⁵³ The implementation of temporary labour permits and the limitation of migrant workers' rights serve to sustain a cost-effective and adaptable labour force, thus supporting prevailing power structures and social disparities.

To synthesise, the issue of power dynamics and social inequality delineates the intricate and frequently contentious relationship among immigration, power, and social inequality in South Africa. Critical Discourse Analysis, postcolonial theory, and neoliberalism offer a comprehensive framework for analysing how language, history, and economics influence power dynamics and social inequities in the realm of immigration. By analysing the linguistic strategies employed by politicians to uphold or contest prevailing power structures and social disparities, and by comprehending the historical and economic contexts from which these discourses arise, one can formulate strategies to advance more inclusive and equitable immigration policies in South Africa.

Theme 5: Human Rights and Social Justice

The theme of human rights and social justice is a critical aspect of the literature on immigration in South Africa. This theme established the need to prioritise human rights and social justice in immigration policies and debates. Critical Discourse Analysis is vital in analysing the utilisation of language to formulate and bolster narratives concerning human rights and social justice related to immigration. The Critical Discourse Analysis indicates that political rhetoric can foster a discourse on human rights and social justice that emphasises the rights and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their nationality or immigration status.⁵⁴ The terminology of "human rights" and "social justice" can engender a sense of moral duty and accountability among policymakers and the populace, resulting in heightened endorsement for inclusive and equitable immigration policies.

Postcolonial theory was utilised to comprehend how the legacies of colonialism and apartheid persist in influencing South Africa's human rights and social justice discourses regarding immigration. Postcolonial theory illustrates that the nation's history of exclusion and marginalisation has engendered a complex and frequently contentious relationship between South Africans and immigrants, with immigrants frequently perceived as a threat to national identity and resources.⁵⁵ The use of immigration as a scapegoat for economic and social issues perpetuates colonial-era narratives depicting immigrants as a menace to national identity and resources. Neoliberalism theory was used to comprehend how economic concerns influence narratives of human rights and social justice concerning immigration. Neoliberalism emphasises that the quest for economic expansion and profit may result in the exploitation of migrant labour and the continuation of prevailing power structures and social inequities.⁵⁶ The implementation of temporary labour permits and the limitation of migrant workers' rights serve to sustain a cost-effective and adaptable labour force, hence perpetuating established power relations and social disparities.

In synthesis, the issue of human rights and social justice underscores the necessity of prioritising these principles in immigration laws and discussions in South Africa. Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonial, and Neoliberalism theories offer a comprehensive framework for analysing the influence of language, history, and economics on human rights and social justice discourses related to immigration. By analysing the linguistic strategies employed by politicians to formulate and bolster narratives surrounding human rights and social justice, and by comprehending the historical and economic contexts from which these discourses arise, stakeholders can formulate strategies to advocate for more inclusive and equitable immigration policies in South Africa.

⁵³ Peberdy, "Immigration, Xenophobia and the State in South Africa."

⁵⁴ Landau, "The Human Rights Paradox: Migration, Mobility, and the Politics of Belonging"; Zakharov et al., "South Africa and the Struggle for Racial Equality: Debating Deracialization, Non-Racialism, Decolonization, and Africanization."

⁵⁵ Misago, "Politics by Other Means? The Political Economy of Xenophobic Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa"; Khalfani and Zuberi, "Racial Classification and the Modern Census in South Africa, 1911–1996."

⁵⁶ Tshabalala, "The Politics of Belonging in South Africa: A Critical Analysis of the 2015 Xenophobic Attacks"; Qianbo, "Theoretical Framework of Critical Discourse Analysis."

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To this end, this study established a critical understanding of the complex dynamics of racialised discourse, electoral politics, and immigration policy in South Africa. The findings of the study were presented, discussed, analysed, and interpreted based on the five themes extracted from the literature. These major recurring themes were extracted using thematic analyses and then interpreted through the Critical Discourse Analysis methods. The five major recurring themes extracted from the literature include racialised discourse and xenophobia, electoral politics and immigration policy, identity, belonging, and citizenship, power dynamics and social inequality, and human rights and social justice. These themes commonly highlight the need for an in-depth understanding of their intersections in the politicisation of immigration, racialised discourse, and electoral politics in South Africa.

These findings hold considerable significance for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. They underscore the necessity of critically analysing the interplay between racialised discourse, electoral politics, and immigration policy in South Africa. This approach necessitates identifying how racialised language can be utilised to rationalise exclusionary policies and practices and how electoral politics can sustain xenophobic sentiments. Secondly, the study underscores the significance of advancing inclusive and fair immigration policies that acknowledge the rights and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their country or immigration status.

This study advises that policymakers and practitioners engage in critical discourse analysis to comprehend how language and discourse influence immigration policies and practices. This necessitates acknowledging the power dynamics and socioeconomic inequities that underpin speech. Furthermore, the report advocates that the ideas of human rights and social justice should inform immigration policies. This necessitates acknowledging the rights and dignity of all individuals, irrespective of their nationality or immigration status.

This paper advocates for the mitigation of xenophobic sentiments and racialised rhetoric via educational initiatives and awareness-raising efforts. This necessitates the advancement of critical thinking and media literacy, alongside the promotion of public debate and discourse. The report supports the support and empowerment of proponents and activists striving for inclusive and fair immigration policies. This necessitates the allocation of resources and funds for advocacy and activism, as well as the establishment of venues for dialogue and collaboration. Ultimately, the mechanisms for making decisions about immigration policy ought to be participatory and inclusive. This necessitates the engagement of various stakeholders, including immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this paper was to examine how political actors in South Africa employ racialised discourse to politicise immigration. This was done by identifying the implications of the racialised discourse for electoral politics in South Africa. Also, the paper analysed the extent to which these discursive strategies shape public opinion and influence policy decisions. The study concluded that advancing inclusive and equitable immigration policies in South Africa necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the intricate interactions of racialised rhetoric, electoral politics, and immigration policy. Through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis, the promotion of inclusive and equitable policies, the confrontation of xenophobia and racialised discourse, the support of advocacy and activism, and the encouragement of participatory and inclusive decision-making, we can strive to establish a more just and equitable South Africa for all.

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