

*What does
racism look like
in 2025?*

An Essay by:

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What *does* racism look like in 2025? Racism is not so much an act as a summoning—a lingering necromancy, a relic from a past that refuses simply to die. In South Africa 2025, racism is not always the shouted slur or the overt denial—it is the air, thick with memories, histories, and unspoken divides. It is the silent inheritance of wounds not yet healed and privileges not yet relinquished. The degree of marginalization felt today is not always engraved in law, but written quietly into daily experience. This essay will explore the qualities of racism in a personified perspective, touching on the gray matter of racism in-between South Africa’s “rainbow” of experiences, the stigmatized born-free generation, economic disparities and the unpaved road to true freedom.

The Lingering Mindset: Racism

Our constitution promises freedom. But what use is unshackled flesh if the mind is still imprisoned? Laws evolve, explicit oppression is outlawed, yet many are still bound by the mindset: racism. We compare our present lack with the years’ hardships, sometimes echoing those who, in ancient times, sighed, “It was better in Egypt.” Is this what salvation looks like—not a journey forward, but a longing for old certainties? True freedom is not only emancipation from chains, but deliverance from nostalgia for past bondage. “*To be free is not to be saved*”—that dichotomy haunts every negotiation of identity in South Africa. To still yearn for a bygone era is to confess: the wounds endure. We limp as a nation, carrying pain that has been insufficiently grieved, relationships never thoroughly restored, because the truth is that just maybe, maybe a relationship, both with history and each other, has been violated and left unrestored.

You cannot narrate racism in this country without invoking apartheid. The word is heavy, shaping every family’s story. The divides—between “coloured and black, black and white,” privileges conferred and denied—still cast long shadows over everyday interactions. Every Heritage Day tribute, every replay of Sarafina on June 16th, becomes a national ritual. Sometimes, these gestures are reminders that the past is never truly past. We may perform unity in museums and on TV, but true reconciliation feels unfulfilled. The surface rituals don’t always dig down to the marrow where pain lives; the annual commemorations risk becoming habits of remembering pain, not healing it. So in shops, in classrooms, in the rhythms of daily life, race draws invisible boundaries around us. Even when you think you’re floating in a neutral space, history colors the air you breathe.

The Feel of Racism

My introduction to racism did not come as a thunderclap, but as a slow seep—an awakening that began. My world was self-contained, secure, a little capsule of belonging. I imagined that I grew up inside a bubble—clear and transparent—a world that would burst into beautiful surges of colour: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, and indigo. I imagined that this state was my truest—oblivious and naïve, yet genuine and untainted, innocent. It was precious, more than I realized then. Yet, imagine that racism was the needle that burst my bubble.

I believed racism was a problem “out there,” black-and-white, easy to spot and easier to denounce. However South African racism is not monochrome—it is a spectrum, a uniquely local palette, each person’s

upbringing giving them different shades of experience. Racism was the needle that slipped beneath my skin, not always seen but always felt. The awakening was gradual, like an injection you don't notice until it stings. It crept in each year with the reflection of Sarafina on TV every June 16th, in those scenes that seemed both distant and too close. It stared at me from across the town square, where I counted faces—who shops, who serves, who belongs, who is unwelcome. It jabbed at me in glances that questioned my presence, in stares that replaced smiles, in those rare but unrelenting moments when my eyes met those of another race and I smiled—only to be met with unblinking stares and deadpanned eyes, in the offhand “pinches” that, though individually small, accumulate until you awaken—restless, uneasy, aware.

Not every pinch hurts immediately; some seep into your flesh and catch you unawares, even in your sleep. To me, that was and still is racism: the pinch that awakens you from slumber. I came to realize that in my blissful sleep I was wrong; my bubble was not transparent—it was ‘black’. Racism in 2025 still finds you—not as a single wound, but as a hundred small nicks; adding up, embedding themselves in your sense of self, surfacing at unexpected times.

The Shape of Racism

I must confess I grew up guarded and privileged, from the gray class between the middle and upper lower class, maybe that's why I often questioned the depth of my truth and it dawned on me “privilege” this word I was so often associated with was the gray area with which I based my truth. Much like how I am unsure which social class I fall under, because of “privilege” I was unsure whether I knew what racism was.

*“Despite the accumulated pinches and the forewarning of my parents to “Avoid being too friendly to **them**.” I was unsure as to whether I feigned ignorance because I was given the impression that I am saved or if it was because I simply could not tell, but I came to know: **I am freed but not saved, I am privileged.**”*

Privilege in 2025 is soft-spoken yet all-pervasive. It is comfort, the freedom from fear or punishment—an invisible advantage granted by birth, skin, accent, or upbringing. As Maya Angelou reminds us, we are “the hope and dream of the slave,” but that hope is unevenly distributed. Some are born into “post-apartheid” privilege: free, yet carrying the echo of ancestral suffering. Others, meanwhile, still shoulder the tangible burden of inequality—evidence that South Africa's transformation remains incomplete.

*“I am privileged, born free from the pain of the systematic tyranny that was apartheid. I am the hope and dream of the slave. Still, I am tied to the pain of my forefathers, **freed only in body, not in spirit.**”*

Alongside privilege persists stigma, tainted unity, and enduring divides; the echoes of old hierarchies still resound in “the hope and dream of the slave.” The echoes of apartheid's hierarchy persist in subtle favors and silent exclusions, a “rainbow” that sometimes fractures into separate colors. This ambiguity—being both witness and participant, both heir and pioneer—defines the post-1994 generation. We inherit a wound as well as a promise: liberation that feels partial, identity that is always negotiated.

The Colour of Racism

What makes South African racism distinct in 2025 is its subtlety and its layers. Our so-called “rainbow nation” contains gradients within, and racism is woven through. One of the cruellest aspects of subtle racism is how easily it hides within normalcy, it appears in the everyday assumptions about who belongs in which spaces. It is visible in the economics of access; land, capital, and opportunity flow along old routes. There is a form of racism born not just of hate, but of indifference and inertia—the kind that persists because those who benefit are not forced to notice. Subtle racism in South Africa today extends beyond personal slights and into the core structures of economic opportunity. Even as overt discrimination is outlawed, the distribution of wealth, work, and security traces the ghostly borders drawn decades ago.

In 2025, it’s clear that freedom is meaningless without economic justice. Subtle racism’s economic footprint ensures that wounds remain open and that the old freedom struggle continues under new terms. The persistent economic disadvantages faced by Black South Africans—higher unemployment, lower wages, limited access to capital—are not accidental but a living relic of the system that claimed to have ended in 1994. To be free only in law but not in livelihood is a bitter triumph. Without equal opportunity to participate in the economy, without the ability to accumulate wealth or to access quality education, the promise of democracy falls short. Freedom, then, becomes paradoxical: technically available to all, but only truly accessible to some.

True Reconciliation

In the end, the question burns: What will racism look like moving forward?

While legal apartheid is over, the legacy of racism persists subtly through unhealed wounds, unrelinquished privileges, and everyday interactions. True freedom for South Africa requires not only political change but deep, personal transformation and honest reckoning with the past, until economic doors open as fully as legal ones, freedom in South Africa will remain aspirational—a banner fluttering above unhealed wounds and unfulfilled business. The road to true liberation requires not just removing old chains, but building new bridges. If we are to change, we must avoid letting commemoration replace action and true reconciliation—and ultimately, to rewrite the story for the future. In 2025 and beyond, the work remains: to both wake and heal.