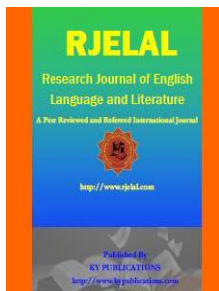




THE PLIGHTS OF IMPOVERISHED BLACKS OF SOUTH AFRICA IN ATHOL FUGARD'S PLAYS: *THE TRAIN DRIVER* AND *THE ISLAND*

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, South Africa witnessed racial discrimination and oppression of blacks by the minority whites population which resulted in the majority of the black population devoid of jobs, education and economic stability. The apartheid era institutionalized by the National Party in 1948 ensured physical and social segregation of colored people, especially blacks by forcing them live in separate quarters, denying them equal access to civil facilities like transportation and education and forcing them with low wage jobs. As a result, the blacks in South Africa were faced with high rates of unemployment, low rates of education and a very low standard of living, which worsened even after the fall of apartheid government in 1994. This paper attempts to explore the different dynamics of racial oppression and economic inequality faced by the black population in South Africa by studying the literature related to it. In this paper, Athol Fugard's plays *The Train Driver* and *The Island* are studied and analyzed for the common themes of racial discrimination, despair and the implications of the apartheid rule on future generations. While *The Train Driver* deals with despair and oppression of black victims and guilt of the white oppressors post-apartheid, *The Island* attempts to understand the political consequences of racial discrimination.

Key Words: Apartheid, South African Theatre, racial discrimination, oppression, Athol Fugard.

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1. Background of the Study

When the National Party government fell in 1994 and its apartheid laws abolished, it was expected that the racial discrimination would end with government. Racial discrimination and segregation of blacks and other non-whites population during the apartheid era resulted in a divided population with a wide economic and education gap, which further worsened during the post-apartheid era. This post-apartheid era witnessed an increase in unemployment rates,

crime, political divide and income that further divided the population on race (Bhorat; Treiman). During the apartheid era, blacks and other non-white ethnic groups were segregated geographically, made to live in poor conditions, given access to separate civil facilities and transport and had little access to education, medicines, skills development and employment opportunities. There was wide spread racism in all spheres of life against blacks, with strict rules and legislations enforced upon them and little to no opportunity given for higher

education, employment or fair wages. Even though blacks consisted of over 75% of the total population during the apartheid era, their unemployment rate was at 42.6% and only 7% were educated (Treiman).

The post-apartheid era of South Africa saw an increase in literature regarding the plights of blacks under the apartheid law and order. These literary works explored the social stigma associated with the colored populations, the physical and mental trauma they underwent and implications of the racial, economic and political divide in the apartheid and post-apartheid society. In order to understand the common national identity of South Africa and the extent of effects of apartheid on the black population as well as the socio-economic changes required to undo centuries of racial discrimination, it is important to study the South African literature. For this purpose, two prominent plays by Athol Fugard, *The Train Driver* and *The Island* have been selected for this assignment. *The Train Driver* explores the themes of despair, brotherhood and redemption set in a post-apartheid era, when a middle-class white train driver searches for the grave of the mother and child who were killed under his train and meets a black grave digger. The second play, *The Island*, set in a fictitious prison revolves around two inmates staging a prison play adaptation of *Antigone* (a famous story about political repression), deals with the themes of oppression and racial discrimination against the backdrop of apartheid rule in South Africa.

2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to understand and study the plights of blacks in South Africa during the oppressive apartheid rule using two plays by Athol Fugard—*The Train Driver* and *The Island*. The objectives are:

- i. To study and explore themes of oppression and despair faced by blacks, in Athol Fugard's plays
- ii. To understand racial discrimination and its consequences on the sense of individuality for blacks in South Africa.

3. Literature Review

The history of South African theatre is filled with narratives addressing racial discrimination, the plights of the blacks, political conflicts existing in the

country and cultural awareness and identity in South Africa (Blumberg and Walder). However, the post-colonial or post-apartheid era saw a shift in these narratives from apartheid and the war against it to the legacy of apartheid and nostalgia (Blumberg and Walder). Theatre not only reflected the current moods and climate of the South African population, but also acted as a catalyst and weapons for the struggle against the repressive government. The Protest Theatre and Theatre of Resistance, established during the peak of resistance were followed by the masses that strongly advocated political liberation and were against the black oppression. Many of these plays were showcased abroad, thereby catching the solidarity of those audiences (Attridge and Jolly). Athol Fugard is regarded as one of the most prominent writer and dramatist in the South African theatre and has a legacy spanning over five decades, with the common themes of identity, protests, survival, memory and place being an important part of his plays. Two plays, *The Train Driver* and *The Island* pursue two different themes, both of which are explored in the further sections.

3.1 *The Train Driver: Guilt, Redemption and Brotherhood in Post-Apartheid Era*

Athol Fugard's play, *The Train Driver*, revolves around two central characters, a middle class white train driver and a black grave digger set in post-apartheid South Africa. Through this play, the writer attempts to address two main issues: plights of blacks during that era which continued in the post-apartheid era and the social redemption of the oppressors for their past actions (The New York Times). During the Post-Apartheid era, while conditions of the blacks continued to deteriorate, the whites still continued to rule the economic and political landscape of the country. Along with understanding both the trauma of the victims of oppression and the drivers of actions by perpetrators, academics and writers also addressed the issues of guilt and redemption (mostly partial) that a small section of the society had to deal, in their works (Foster, Haupt, and Beer). In this play, a middle-aged train driver is in search of the graves of the woman and child who stepped in front of his incoming train and chances upon a black

gravedigger who buries the 'ones without the names'. Through this play, the audience witnesses for the first time, the train driver Roelf's transition of an ignorant, racist white Afrikaner as seen from his anger towards the dead woman to recognition and empathy for her condition. The victim, in despair and hopelessness of her economic condition flung herself in front of the incoming train, thereby making the driver her unwilling killer. This fact haunts the driver Roelf, who starts on a search for her grave since he believes it will help him as evident by his comment '*If I can stand beside her grave, it would maybe even better than just knowing her name...*', thereby conferring the nameless victim with an identity, even in death (Walder 6). The gravedigger, Simon helplessly and patiently listens to the trauma which the driver has gone through and tries to placate him, although he fears for his life for helping a white man amidst the impoverished black colony. An underlying disconnection between the races is visible, the white man's bitter conscience for the transgressions and the continued plight of the blacks (CurtainUp). And even though the driver comes in terms with her death, his helplessness and the tragedy of the situation, he realizes that by identifying her and claiming her body for a proper burial, he can to some extent make peace with the incident.

In the end, the play attempts to find reconciliation and harmony in a society torn by its violent and traumatic past through a blurry attempt of social absolution of the perpetrators or bystanders who can find some measure of peace and understanding in their deed for healing. For a country that has undergone decades of social injustice, it is of utmost importance that they not only remember the past wrongdoings but also acknowledge the actions of perpetrators and bystanders.

3.2 The Island: Political and Historical context of Apartheid government

The Island is the second play in the political drama *Statements* trilogy, and is based on the famous Robben Island prison, where majority of the political prisoners were kept during the Apartheid regime (Paul Prece). This island symbolizes the inhumane treatment meted upon the prisoners but

also signifies the solidarity and brotherhood expressed within the prisoners against the unfair forces of the apartheid system (The Guardian). The story discusses the political, historical and social context of the apartheid system using the story of *Antigone* as its central theme. This play revolves around two prisoners, John and Winston in the island prison, attempting to stage the play '*Antigone*' by Sophocles as a form of protest against the apartheid regime and prison (Shamsuddeen; Trinya). Through the daily routine of back-breaking labor work and severe ill-treatment, the two prisoners struggle to survive by focusing and practicing the enactment of a scene from *Antigone* for the annual prison concert. This enactment is a form of safe protest, under the freedom art offers, against the obnoxious prison system and the cruelty of their captors (Trinya; Bodunde). The prisoners turn to acting for the sake of their survival and as a means of escape from their realities but also to spread a (political) message (Forin). Through enactment of the final confrontation scene of the legend of *Antigone*, the prisoners want to convey the essence of standing up to the perpetrators and hence confront the unjust policies and actions of the oppressors (Forin). *Antigone* is one of the first plays addressing the theme of resistance against oppression and injustice, through its dominant character of the same name who defied an unjust law that was oppressing the people, thereby being one of the most powerful literary tools in the resistance of oppressive politics (The New York Times; Forin).

A second theme that is observed in this play is the tight bonds of brotherhood that is formed between prisoners living under shared atrocious conditions of abuse and maltreatment. During the course of practicing the play, the prisoners are forced to question the depths of their friendship when it is known that John's release is near while Winston's is still unclear. Although in the end Winston overcomes his fear of losing the brotherhood, by enacting the female protagonist *Antigone*, he is also forced to face the social and gender injustice resulting from the apartheid rule and in (Forin; Trinya; Paul Prece). Consequently, *The Island* is an artistic form of protest at multiple levels

of art with its 'play-inside-play' concept and confronts the political and social injustice under apartheid law.

4. Conclusion

Under the 50 years of National Party's Apartheid rule of oppression, South Africa witnessed institutionalized racial discrimination between whites and colored population and injustice met upon the colored people, especially the blacks. During the apartheid rule, blacks were subjected to the most atrocious forms of ill-treatment and forced to live in squalor as well as denied access to employment, education and fair wage. During this era, the South African theatre also underwent changes, especially by transforming itself into an artistic and literary weapon of resistance against the oppressors and attempted to educate the masses with regards to social and political contexts of the apartheid rule. These plays would touch upon the common topics of racial discrimination, gender bias, human rights violation and trauma associated with them besides also exploring the drivers of unwarranted actions of the perpetrators.

Athol Fugard is considered as one of the most prominent playwright and writer in the South African theatre and two of his plays, *The Train Driver* and *The Island* are analyzed for their themes of social and political contexts of Apartheid. While *The Train Driver* is set in the post-apartheid era and deals with consequences of social and economic injustice on blacks, *The Island* which is set in the apartheid era questions political injustice of oppressors as well as explores the essence of brotherhood among the equally oppressed people. *The Train Driver* openly explores the blurred concepts of redemption and absolution of the white perpetrators without the harsh blame, it also showcases a wide disconnection between the races which can take a long time to heal. In the case of *The Island*, political prisoners attempt to confront and question the oppressors using a similarly themed play *Antigone*, all the while exposing the uncertainty of brotherhood and solidarity among prisoners. By analyzing these two plays, a broad idea of plight of blacks in South African apartheid regime can be formed and the extent of the atrocities affecting the blacks in the different spheres of life,

like education, employment and skills and economic condition can be established.

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