

## **Intimations of the End of Apartheid in South Africa: A Critical Look at Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!***

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### **Abstract**

From the point of view of the content and style of presentation, South African literature is also known as protest literature. This literature was devoted to the strident criticism of the unhealthy South African- Socio Political atmosphere. South African writers or playwrights, as the case may be, differ in their approaches to the condemnation of the apartheid policy. The difference notwithstanding, the commitment of the writers was focused on revealing the truth about the misery and dehumanization inflicted upon the blacks in South Africa by apartheid policy. This paper examines the intimations of the end of the apartheid era in South Africa using Athol Fugard's: "*My Children! My Africa!*", where Thaimi (a black boy), Mr M (a black teacher), and Isabel (a white girl) were used to showcase the different perspectives of Athol Fugard's way of putting an end to apartheid. The history of how apartheid became a stigma in South Africa, the day-to-day practice, and how apartheid bred the seed of its own decay are points to note in this paper.

### **Introduction**

From the point of view of content, style and presentation, South African literature is known as protest literature. This literature was devoted to the strident criticism of the unhealthy South African Socio-Political atmosphere. Though attention is focused on Athol Fugard's play, it is pertinent to mention some writers such as Dennis Brutus and Oswald Mtshali (who are poets), Alex Laguma (a novelist) and Ezekiel Mphahlele (a novelist/essayist) who have made great contributions.

Apartheid and its evil shadow rose violently to suppress the innocent black, depriving them of their heritage and many other opportunities in the land. The black man's condition soon attracted sympathy across the globe. Stiff penalties began to trail the South African government (mostly by whites) from the international community. Signs of the end of apartheid began to emerge between late 70's and 90's. South African writers or playwrights (as the case is here) differ in their approaches to the condemnation of the apartheid policy. The difference notwithstanding, the commitment of the writers was focused on revealing the truth about the misery and the dehumanization inflicted upon the blacks in South Africa by apartheid policy. Hence, in this paper, attempt is being made to show how Athol Fugard depicts the unstoppable decline of apartheid in his work by critically studying "*My children! My Africa!*"

### **History of Apartheid in South Africa**

Racial segregation and the supremacy of whites had been accepted in South Africa since 1948, but in the general election that year, Daniel F. Malan officially includes the policy of apartheid in the Afrikaner Nationalist party platform, which brought this party to power for the first time. The reason for apartheid was to separate whites from non-whites, and among the Africans (called Bantu in South Africa), of one group from another. In addition to the Africans, who constituted about 75% of the total population, those regarded as nonwhite include those people known in the country as coloures (people of mixed blacks, Malayan, and white descents) and Asian (mainly of Indian ancestry) populations.

In some ways, apartheid was an extension of the segregationist's laws implemented by previous white minority governments. Examples include the 1913 Land Act and the various work place "colour bar". However, by the end of the Second World War (1939 – 1945), the enforcement of these laws had been lessened by the United Party government led by Jan Smuts. This culminated to the 1948 report of 'Fagan commission', which was set up by the government to investigate changes to the system. The report recommended that segregation in the cities should be ended, thus also ending the migrant labour system whereby the permanent home of Black South Africans was in distant rural "reserve". Prime Minister Smuts in favour of the findings of the commission, said: "the idea that natives must all be removed and confined to their Krials is in my opinion the greatest nonsense I have ever heard" (Welsh 1998:438).

In response to Fagan commission, the nationalist party convened its own commission called the Saver commission. The findings of this commission were almost the exact opposite of those of Fagan commission, as it recommended that not only should segregation continue, but it should also be made even severe, and implemented in all spheres of social and economic life. It recommended the concept of apartheid in which the races were to be completely separated as much as possible.

The nationalist party won the national election of 1948, narrowly defeating Smuts' United party (though losing the popular vote). It immediately began implementing stricter racial segregation policies, creating the system of

apartheid which was to exist for 42 years until it was dismantled in 1990 by F.W. de Klerk, after decades of domestic protest led by the African National Congress and extensive international outcry.

### **Apartheid in South Africa**

Apartheid came in several spheres to the detriment of the non White or Black South Africans. It was implemented through draconian laws. These restrictions below were not (only) social but were also strictly enforced thus:

- Blacks were prohibited for holding many jobs and were not allowed to employ whites.
- Non whites were not allowed to run businesses or undertake professional practices and many areas were designated as being for whites only. Every significant metropolis and practically every shopping and business district was in a white area.
- Non whites were excluded from national government and were unable to vote except in elections for segregated bodies which had no power.
- Blacks were forbidden to own properties.
- Blacks must use separate equipment and transportation facilities inferior to those of the whites.
- Being without a pass made a black person subject to immediate arrest, summary trial and “deportation” to the “homeland”. Police vans containing “sjamboll” – wielding officers roamed the “white area” to round up “illegal blacks”.

Apartheid maintained its solid ground under Hendrick Verwoerd who succeeded Han Strydom after the demise of the latter in 1958. A man of terrifying energy and commanding presence, that Harold Macmillan had ever encountered, the only man who “scared stiff” the otherwise unscarable Helen Suzman – Verwoerd had been appointed to the senate in order to become Minister for Native Affairs between 1950 and 1958. In this period, he was allowed a “free hand to develop his scheme for grand apartheid”, which would provide the final solution to the native problems and provide political and theoretical framework on which permanent white, particularly Afrikaner, supremacy could be constructed. More than any other person, Verwoerd was the architect of the grandiose and complex system which made South Africa “the stunk among nations”.

Given the absurdity of the division already embedded in South African society and institutionalized by Malan, apartheid – or ‘aparte ontwikkeling’, separate development, as Verwoerd’s plan of quasi-independent “Bantustan; which he developed during his eight years in charge of the department of Native Affairs could be presented as the creation of “ethnonational” states and described as the promotion of Bantu self Government Act in 1959. There was no possibility of including the prosperous towns with a Bantustan, all were to be farming communities, providing sustenance and acting as dormitories and retirement homes for the black men whose labour was needed on the towns. The objectives were bluntly stated:

As soon as they become, for one reason or another, no longer fit to work or superfluous on the labour market, they are expected to return to their country of origin or the territory of the national unit where they fit ethnically....

It is an accepted government policy that the Bantu are only temporarily resident not in the European areas of the Republic for as long as they offer their labour there.

The Bantu who have to be resettled in the homelands are:

- The aged, the unfit, widows, women with dependent children and families who do not qualify for accommodation in European urban areas;
- Bantu on European farms who become superfluous as a result of age (or) disability ... or Bantu squatters from mission stations and black spots which are being cleaned up;
- Doctors, attorneys, agents, traders, industrialists, etc (who are not regarded as essential for the European labour market (Welsh 1998:449 – 450).

Land, ambulances, trains and buses, education beaches and other forms of essential needs by the blacks were segregated. Membership in trade unions was not allowed for blacks until the 1980s, and any “political” trade union was banned. Strikes were banned and severely repressed. The minimum yearly taxable income for blacks was 360 rand (30 rand a month), while the white threshold was higher, at 750 rand (62.5 rand per month).

Apartheid pervaded South African culture as well as the law. A white entering a shop would be served first ahead of blacks on the queue; irrespective of age dues or any other factors. Until the 1980s, blacks were always expected to step off the pavement to make way for any white pedestrian. A white boy would be referred to as Klein Bass (little boss) by a black; a grown black man would be addressed as a boy by whites.

### **How Apartheid Came to an End**

On March 21, 1960, 20,000 black people congregated in Sharpville to demonstrate against the direction that black must carry identity cards (under the stipulation of the pass law). Police opened fire on them, killing 69 and injuring 180. All the victims were black. Most of them had been shot in the back. The evil became known as the Sharpsville massacre. In its aftermath, the government banned the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan

Africanist Congress (PAC). The event led to a great change in ANC tactics, switching from non-violent to violent protest. Though, their units detonated bombs in government buildings for the next years, the ANC and PAC were no threat to the state, which had a monopoly of modern weapons.

The United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 1761 on November 6, 1962 which condemned South Africa's racist apartheid policies and called for all UN members' states to cease military and economic relations with South Africa. In 1964, Nelson Mandela, leader of the ANC was sentenced to life imprisonment.

In 1974, the government issued the 'Afrikaans medium Decree' which forced all schools to use the Afrikaans language when teaching blacks Mathematics, Social Sciences, Geography and History at the Secondary school level. Punt Janson, the Deputy Minister of Bantu Education was quoted as saying.

I have not consulted the African people on the language issue and I'm not going to an African might find that the "big boss" only spoke Afrikaans or only spoke English. It would be to his advantage to know both language ([www.answer.com](http://www.answer.com)).

The policy was deeply unpopular on April 30, 1976; children at Orlando West junior school in Soweto went on strike refusing to go to school. Their rebellion spread to other school in Soweto, the students organized a mass rally on June 16, 1976, which turned violent police responding with bullet to stone thrown by children. Hector Pietarson, aged 12 was one of the 566 children who died at the hand of the police. The incident triggered widespread violence throughout South Africa claiming further lives.

Intentionally, South Africa became isolated. International movements combined with internal trouble, persuaded the South Africa government that its hard line policies were untenable, and in 1984, some reforms were introduced. Many of the apartheid laws were repealed and a new constitution which gave limited representation to certain non white (though not to the black) was introduced. The violence continued throughout the 1980s.

In 1989, F.W De clerk succeeded as president. On February 12, 1990, at the opening of the parliament, he declared that apartheid had failed, and ban on political parties including ANC were to be lifted. Nelson Mandela was released from prison. De clerk went on to abolish all the remaining apartheid laws. A period of political instability ensued. More South Africans died from political violence between 1990 and 1994, Mandela was sworn in as president of South Africa before an euphonic crowd.

Among his first actions were the rewriting of the constitution and setting up of the truth and reconciliation commission to investigate abuses from the apartheid era. In the following all-race elections, Mandela ANC won a landslide victory, effectively terminating the apartheid era.

### **Intimations of the End of Apartheid in South Africa in Fugard's *My Children! My Africa***

In *My children! My Africa!*, Athol Fugard attempts to identify and defend a different approach to changes by most black writers, he makes a ceaseless agitation for changes but unlike the black writers, he differs in approach. Athol Fugard presents his position in the play in question. *My children! My Africa!* is basically an encounter Isabe (a white girl) and Thami (a black boy), with Mr M. serving as the third party or mediator, on the one hand, and more importantly Mr M. and Thami on the other hand, each of them sticks to a position of armed struggle as against heady idealism of non violence. The play opens with a debate between Candebou high school (a white school) represented by Isabel Dyson and Zolile High school (a black school) represented by Thami Mbikwina. The venue of the debate is a black school. The debate was organized by principal of the black school, Mr. M Anela Myalata. The brilliant debate competition is soon nervously won by Isabel and thus initiating a new trend in the white lady's respect for black and Mr. M's and Thami's opposing views. Through the conversation that ensued between Isabel and Thami, after the debate, the former is able to discover the intelligence of the black boy. One needs not to move too long into the play before one discovers that Mr. M and Thami contradicts each other. The poor boy reveals to Isabel

I don't listen to what he says and I don't do what h says .....it's Just that he makes me so mad Sometimes. He always think he knows What is best for me. He never tries to Ask me how I feel about things. I know He means well, but I'm not a child anymore I've got ideas of my own now (144-145)

The character obviously talks about his teacher Mr. M , It must be said before further discussion is made that this play was written towards the end of the apartheid era. That does not mean apartheid had ended or was no longer interested in non violence. They had been overwhelmed by the pain and injustice of apartheid. Little wonders therefore, Thami is never happy about Mr. M position on the situation.

Mr. M., on the other hand is the mouthpiece of Athol Fugard. He is so excited about what he believes in that he can defend it to the point of death. He believes in talking or dialogue rather in violence. Like Confucius, his mentor, Mr. M. Stick to education as the only way to ensure changes in a society. To this end, it is considered important to say one or two things about Confucius, a Chinese philosopher, was born in 551 BC and died in 479 BC. He was the first person to devote his whole life to learning and teaching for the purpose of transforming and improving society. He believed that all human beings could benefit from self-cultivation. He inaugurated a humanity programme for potential leaders, opened the doors of education to all and defined learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but also as character building. Confucius resisted the temptation to herd with birds and animals, which are to live apart from the human community, and opted to try to transform the world from within. For decades, Confucius was actively involved in politics, wishing to put his humanist ideas into practice through governmental channels. He posited that rulers should be examples who govern by moral leadership and exemplary teaching rather than by force.

It should not be forgot that as a teacher, Mr. M acting as Fugard's mouthpiece, takes after Confucius and this explains why he is been spectacled and passionate about his vocation as Fugard is about his career as a (talented) playwright. Mr. M describes himself as a black Confucius. In an encounter with Isabel, the passion for his job drives him to confess thus:

Those wonderful words come from the  
Finest teacher I have ever had that  
Most wise of all ancients philosopher.....  
Confucius! Yes. I am a Confucius  
A black Confucius! There are not many  
Of us ..... the only one in the country is  
Talking to you at this moment (155)

The whole idea appears stupid and time wasting to Thami. With all the brutalities, dehumanization, and the poverty to which the black are subjected. Thami identified with Mandela's old friend, J. V Singh, who is the face of the evil policy protestants. "Non-violence" has not failed us. We have failed non violence (Welsh 1998:458). The urge for freedom from the white man's imperialism and apartheid policy is fast gaining momentum in Thami- a representative of other blacks. He is afraid Mandela – in prison-could be killed at anytime. The angry boy declares

There are quite a few ozymandias  
In this country, waiting to be toppled  
And with any luck you (Isabel) will  
Live to see it. We won't leave it to  
time to bring them down.....  
By identifying with fight for our freedom (166).

Mr. M also believes in the fight for freedom. He will not opt for violence in his own protest but rather for a peaceful and intelligent approach. He reacts to Thami's belief:

Destroying somebody else property is  
Inexcusable behaviors. No Thami, as  
One of the people you claimed to be  
Acting for, I raise my hand in protest

Please don't pull down any status  
On my behalf. Don't use me as  
An excuse for an act of lawlessness  
If you want to do something "revolutionary"  
For me let us sit down and discuss it,  
Because I have a few constructive  
Alternatives I would lives to suggest (168-167)

Thami is of the opinion that should Black South Africans refuse to stage a strong opposition against the rapid spread and iron power of apartheid, whites will soon succeed in taking the country in its entirety. The need for armed struggle and revolution is consequently a seemingly, inevitable alternative. Thami wants freedom for his people but he appears greatly troubled by Mr. M's position on violence. Thami says of Mr. M that:

He's got eyes and ear but he  
Sees and tears nothing....He is  
Out of touch with what is really happening  
To us black and the way we  
Feel about things. He thinks the world is  
Still the way it was when he was young (169).

Thami accuses Mr. M of being insensitive to the plight of his fellow blacks. He regards Mr. M as the see no evil, hear no evil and speaks no evils type of man. His teacher seems to have forgot the killing in sharpville, Soweto, and other black streets. On march 21, 1960, police opened fire on demonstrators in sharpville, killing 69 and injuring 180. Mr. M has soon forgot. The police Massacre (and no other word is appropriate) that took place on June 13, 1976 in Soweto, a black township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, was like Munich or Suez.... As one of those rare historical catalysts which irreversibly transformed the political landscape, thus beginning a new continuous cycle of violence. Yet, Mr M. is not sensitive to this. The school in which he teaches is also in a deplorable condition. Black schools, in the age of apartheid, were not catered for. The classes were overcrowded. Wherever possible, expenditure was curtailed, hours reduced and parents expected to clean the classrooms, but the number of pupils was indeed increased and nominated school boards were introduced. As Isabel puts it:

They were waiting for us in what  
they call number one classroom  
honesty, I would rate it as the most  
bleak, depressing, dingy classroom I have  
ever been in everything about it was  
grey the cement floor, the walls, the ceiling ..... (147).

Mr M. seems not bothered about this very poor accommodation. He chooses education as the only way to resolve the injustice. To defend his stand, Mr M. has this to say:

Very silly things are being said,  
Isabel and I've got a suspicion  
that even sillien things are being  
whispered among themselves (160)

Thiami sees Mr M. as an advocate of the white man's supremacy. He (Mr M.) seems to support the apartheid policy. He chooses a showdown with his teacher but rather unfortunately; Thiami has broken away from the role for which Mr M. is building him- to succeed him in becoming another teacher of his kind. Thiami is not prepared to feed his teacher's "Hope". He condemns Mr M's idea in its totality and protest:

...sitting in a classroom doesn't mean  
the same thing to me that it does to you.  
that classroom is a political reality  
in my life... it's part of the whole  
political system we're up against and  
Mr M. has chosen to identify himself with I, (170).

Thiami seems to share views with Steve Biko – a rising black South African medical student in 1954. Biko was the first President of the South African Student's Organization (SASO). The talented young black and articulate founder of the "Black consciousness" movement did not live long. In the face of the struggle for freedom, Biko insisted, like Thiami on the absolute necessity for black South Africans to act for themselves, not relying on any



support from white sympathizers who has provide ineffective allies, and to develop society on the basis of their own African traditions:

Our belief is that white society will not  
Listen to preaching. They will not listen their  
Liberals. Liberation has not grown  
within white society, and we blanks cannot  
start idly by watching the situation. We  
only generate response from white society  
when we, as blacks, speak with a black  
voice and say what we want...  
now has come the time, we as  
blacks, must artrealate what we want  
and put it across to the white man, and  
from a position of strength (Welsh 1998:476)

South African Children (Pupila) were prevented from knowing what their parents went through in the chains of apartheid. Thami is poised to dare history. He recounts:

I see a generation of tired, depeated men  
and women crawling bok to their miserable  
little pondoks at eh end of a day's work for the  
white baas or madam...  
Those men and women are our father and mothers.  
We have grown up watching their humiliation...  
Black people lived on this land for centurres  
before any white settler had landed (174, 175).

The goat has indeed been pursued to the wall and now biting the remaining and inevitable option. Mr. M. is poised to stay on his position. This idea makes him look like a traitor before his black pupils. His obedient Thami Tabikwana has grown rebellious. He and his fellow students in ZOLINE High School have abandoned classrooms. They are proud and eager to learn lessons about the genuine history of South Africa and her heroes. They are determined to shout AMANDLA (Mandela) and nothing more. Thami does not want to have anything to do with whites in a bid to guard against any betrayal his fellow blacks may attach to his character. As earlier said, Mr. M. believes in talking-dialogue-and education to bring about change rather than violence. His heady idealism is well expressed in:

If the struggle needs weapons give it words,  
Thami, Stones and Petral bombs can't  
get inside those armourd cars, words lean (182)

Mr. M. is fanatical about his opinion that he holds that words will do something more devastating. He maintains words cannot get inside the heads of armored cars. That sounds stupid to Thami. Mr M's heady idealism reaches its climax in:

I speak to you like this because if I have  
Faith in anything, it is the faith in the power  
of the word. Like my master, the great  
confuse is, I believe that, using only  
words, a man can right a wrong and  
judge and execute the wrongdoer. You  
are meant to use words like that (182).

Mr M. fails in his bid to stop Thami and his group. They boycott classrooms and got on rioting. Consequently upon this, the teacher gives list of his pupils (and rioters) to the police. In June 1976, student in Sowete organized a rally which turned violent. The consequences are already identified in Chapter One.

Mr M's act sets him against the rage of the black youths. Thami warns him to escape. He is reluctant but will rather face the consequence of his action. Mr M. admits his action. Mr M. admits he is guilty but he still believes in his approach to change. Mr M. defies Thami's advice and rejects his suggestion to exonerate him from violent action before the mob.

The consequence is Mr M's death. Shortly before his death, he addresses Thami in a thought-provoking manner:

...that tribeman and dead  
Child do duty for all of us, Thami.

Every African soul is either carrying  
that bundle or in it. What is wrong  
with this world that it wants to waste  
you all like that... my children ....  
My Africa! (191)

The play is indeed a clash of ideas. It shows a few of the suffering the blacks went through during the apartheid era. It was written at the time Mandela and other freedom fighters were still in prison. Thami's act and his group's rebellious are some of the signs of the end of apartheid in South Africa. Through this medium Fugard shows, as it were, he was against injustice on both sides of the fence. Fugard indirectly attacks the South African Youth Movement for deciding to boycott African schools as he realized the image and damage it would cause a generation of African pupils.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that Fugard's aim at change through his writings. According to him, dialogue and education are the most effective tools for ending the apartheid policy and not violence as preached by Thami. The larger part of Africa was once taken over by colonialist. The white colonial masters' refusal to grant African earlier freedom was greeted with violent confrontation and bloodshed. The above notwithstanding, the writings of Athol Fugard constitute a significant contribution to the development of African literature.

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