

A THEMATIC STUDY OF ATHOL FUGARD'S TOWN PLAYS

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Abstract: There are few playwrights who can match the honesty and commitment of Fugard. His contribution to African theatre is remarkable. Fugard, the South African playwright is multifaceted. Writer, director and actor, he has been a great source of inspiration for many aspiring dramatists. No one has explored the post-war theatre like him. His plays offer a compelling insight into the role of theatre in a situation of oppression. As a matter of fact, the plays appear fractured, disconnected and incoherent. But it must be noted that this has been consciously planned by Fugard to express the fractured identity of South Africa, a country poised between a pre-colonial past and a decolonized future. His plays *No Good Friday*, *Nongogo*, *Coat*, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and *The Island* grouped as Township plays brilliantly portray the impact of imperialism on the colonized people. Dennis Walder, in his introduction to *Township Plays* talks in detail about it. The Sophia town plays nevertheless reflect the aspirations, violence and vitality of urban black people, offering a window into the world of the correspondence student, the tsotsi (thug) and the rural migrant. They also helped legitimate everyday urban black experience as a subject for blacks as well as whites. Tobias, the migrant worker adrift in the city, tells his wife at home about his arrival in the city of gold, his yearning for the countryside, and the job he hops for the countryside, and the job he hopes to get, in a letter dictated to Guy the saxophonist. (xiv)

In the townships of South African, people live a wretched life. Fugard is brutally frank about it. He often employs filthy language and Afrikaner accent to express the anguish of the natives. John Kani, long time friend of Fugard tells what the Township Plays stand for: "give back to the people their voices" (xv). Paying heed to the ideas of the oppressed usually called the 'others'. Professor N. Krishnaswamy in his book *Contemporary Literary theory: A Student's Companion* emphasizes the importance of celebrating 'other nesses. Foregrounding differences and diversity, celebrating hybridity, plurality and 'otherness' as potential sources of vitality and change, and rejecting notices like standardization, conformity, universalization that are seen as sources of power, hegemony and colonialism... (93) The aim of this study is to explore the major and minor themes in Township Plays.

"Theme is a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader." (121)

notes M.H. Abrams in *Colonialism And Aftermath* 'Colonialism' is very much a part of power-dynamics operating in any human situation. It is not just political power alone that constitutes power and is used for domination and exploitation. There are several avatars of colonialism called neo colonialism, economic colonialism, cultural colonialism, linguistic colonialism etc. Such expressions are widely used in current literature." (90) The Township Plays of Fugard expose all the avatars of colonialism in South Africa. These plays talk in detail about the impact of colonialism in the lives of native people. Displacement, shattered families, single men's quarters, shebeens, carnal relationships are some of the major themes that the reader encounters while

reading the texts.

Displacement: Johannesburg, the city of mines and sky scrapers beckoned people from all the villages of South Africa. Leaving their loved ones, men and women came to the luring city with the sole idea of making it big in their life. But what awaited them was misery. Life in Johannesburg was not a bed of roses. They had to be invisible if they expired for a decent life. First of all to get into the city, passports (not exactly) or identification cards were mandatory. Record or pink card issued by the white government to avoid influx (infiltration) should be carried by the job seekers should be carried by the job seekers otherwise they would be immediately deported to their home towns. The cruel pangs of colonialism chased them away from the capital city of their own country. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*; *Sizwe Bansi* takes the pink card of a dead man called Robert and calls him Robert. He loses his identity to get a job in *Feltex*. Earlier, he was a bit apprehensive about taking the name of a dead man but his friend and rescuer Buntu convinces him to do so. Buntu argues. When the white man looked at you at the labor bureau what did he see? a man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an NI number? Isn't that a ghost? When the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out, Hey John! Come here . . . to you, *Sizwe Bansi* . . . Isn't that a ghost? Or when his little child calls you 'Boy' . . . You a man, circumcised with a wife and four children... Isn't that a ghost? Stop fooling yours elf All I'm saying is be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they have turned us into. (185) *No Good Friday* presents a similar situation where in a young man called Tobias Masala has come to the city with dreams and gets killed in the hands of a local thug called shark. Earlier Willie, the protagonist of the play debunks Tobias for

his foolish decision of earning a living in a place like Johannesburg. Sophia town is not at all a heaven for innocent people. It stinks and sucks Willie while describing Sophia town regrets. When it rains over here we have to walk up to our ankles through muck . . . there is another patch of muck . . . the tears and sympathy for our innocent brother's (11) Willie, the disillusioned idealist worries about the poor and innocent treble people who still believe in leaving their villages and staying in the townships will earn better livelihood. The Island (Robben Island) discusses another type of displacement. The prisoners live far away from their families in a deserted island for political reasons. Arduous labor and mental agony torment them. They terribly miss their loved ones and all of them are undeniably homesick. Loneliness haunts them. All these plays bear testimony to the plight of internally displaced people. There are innumerable refugees seeking refuge in their country. Fugard in the play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and its companion piece *The Island* has brilliantly brought out the miseries of apartheid. A special mention has to be made about the black actors Kani and Ntshona who helped Fugard in his endeavors.

Shattered families: As a matter of fact, displacement is followed by shattered families. Fatherless homes are order of the day once the domineering father leaves the family, things turn upside down. If the mother is emotionally strong, she can lead the family without any problems. But society will never allow a woman who is on her own to live peacefully. In many cases, if the man stops sending money to the family, the woman has no other go. She has to be the breadwinner. Naturally she must work and earn. The children become vulnerable. All the more, there is no guarantee for life in apartheid Africa. Armed forces are all powerful. Anyone can be arrested at any time without proper warrant. Bulldozing the houses of black people are very much likely. Any house can be demolished in the name of encroachment. Given such hostile and not conducive circumstances children are bound to grow into brats. The local thug, Shark in *No Good Friday* and *Tsotsi* in Fugard's only novel *Tsotsi* are products of shattered families.

Shebeens, Single Men's Quarters And Carnal Relationships: All these are quite common thanks to the white government's partial and highly prejudiced laws against the natives, many women deserted by fathers and husbands took to unlawful activities like prostitution and liquor-selling. Shebeens are nothing but illicit bars run by women. In *Nongogo*, the play is a vivid presentation of life in a shebeen. Queeny, the owner of the shop is in her late thirties and with the help offered by Sam, a former pimp she has been selling liquor for a long time. Another character in the play Johnny, a rag seller who visits Queeny to sell

the table covers and curtains muses over his life in the mines and the rampant homosexuality in those compounds. He is being haunted by that something dirty! I've tried to wash it off, Queeny, Everyday; I try but bring it back. Ironically, the title of the play in Afrikaans language if translated refers to a woman for two pence.

Role of Women In The Rebellion: Simon de Beauvoir in her pioneering book *The Second Sex* states: Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth."(xii) Whenever and wherever there is subjugation women are doubly oppressed. Sexual politics and moral policing dictate norms as to how woman should live. Chastity and motherliness are the most overrated issues not only in Asian or African contexts, it is the case everywhere. But in the township plays the reader comes across a number of women who are clear-headed, self-reliant and strong-willed. Be it Rebecca in *No Good Friday* or Queeny in *Nongogo*, their confidence and self-esteem is remarkable. Fugard has paid great attention to his female characters. When the male protagonists live in dreams, the women remain rooted and all the more, their pragmatism impresses. Rebecca lives in partnership with Willie. He tries to comfort her. She provides everything that he wants to soothe him. The death of Tobias has completely shaken Willie that he is unable to come to terms with the routine, ordinary life. Willie is indifferent. Rebecca understands that his indifference is the result of frustration, not hatred. It is a kind of revelation to her. She decides to leave him. When a friend of both Willie and Rebecca tries to stop her she regrets. Willie is a man and because of that you can't force a thing down his throat like a mother with a child that won't take medicine Its' over. Back to my mother. (41) Unlike Willie, Rebecca remains composed in the most adverse environment. She endures things as they come. She never complains. Her maturity is remarkable. It gives her an edge over all the other characters in the play. Queeny in *Nongogo* is a diametrically opposite character to Rebecca. For Rebecca has always been in safe hands. If it is not Willie, she will go back to her mother. Queeny is someone who does not need protection or security. All that she needs is love and care. She is bold enough to lead life on her own terms. In fact, she gives asylum to a hunchback, Blackie. Even Sam, the bar owner, relies on her for his sales. In *John*, Queeny discovers the decency that she has been looking for a long time. But when Johnny pulls her up, on knowing her past, she ditches him just like that and gets back to work. Unrelenting and unfazed Queeny bears everything. Finally when inquired about Johnny she shouts. Man? There was

no man here. There is a plethora of other female characters in the Township Plays who are astounding and admirable. To name a few, Mama in the Coat and Nwotetu in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Influence Of Post-War Theatre Forms In Township Plays That theatre in south Africa has a history at all has come as a surprise to many, It is a history including activities ranging from rural rites and ceremonies, to urban song and dance, as well as Western influenced written drama. Herbert Dholmo observed that western and African drama stemmed from the same urge to re-create, through action, rhythm and gesture, the sacred and secular stories of the community, Fugard's township plays represent the first really outstandingly successful example of such interaction (XII) says Dennis Walder in his introductory remarks to the Township Plays. Be It the Jazz music or the dialogues, one could see the influence of western drama on Fugard. He was very much influenced by the various schools of post-war theatre. After the World War-II, life has lost its meaning for the Western people. The impact of the complete destruction and devastation shattered the people. A vast majority of people lost their faith in religion. Thinkers and philosophers like Sartre, Camus questioned the meaning of life. Existentialism and Absurdity rocked the very edifice of the western society. During this turbulent period, there emerged a playwright, Samuel Beckett; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* changed the rules of theatre. Main theme of the play is absurdity. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Absurd theatre became the order of the day. Many writers tried to emulate Beckett and Fugard was no exception. He employed the tenets of absurd theatre in his plays efficiently. The coat stands as a brilliant example to Fugard's expertise in absurdity. The subtitle of the play is peculiar.

"An Acting exercise from *Serpent players of New Brighton*".

The play begins with a man being sent to prison for petty reason. The man gives his coat to a girl and asks her to handle it to his wife (He adds that he would be glad if his wife uses it). The play is an experiment and each character in the play comes out with an idea as to how the coat should be used. Finally they admit, "Boredom kept us objective." Ennui and boredom have been the main tenets of absurd theatre. Theatre of cruelty, Theatre of oppressed and *The Island* The theatre of cruelty is a Surrealist form of theatre theorized by Antonin Artaud in his book *The Theatre and it's Double*. By cruelty, Artaud referred not to sadism or causing pain, but a violent determination to shatter the false reality. *The Island* is an outstanding play of Fugard. It is a many layered incredible theatrical techniques like play with in a play, involving the audience etc., John Kani and

Winston Ntshona are the only two characters in the play. They are prisoners in Robben Island. They plan to enact a play for their fellow prisoners during a concert being arranged by the prison authorities for the inmates. The play chosen was Sophocles.

Antigone: Antigone was unlawfully punished by King Creon. She is guilty of giving a decent burial to her brother. In this play Antigone acts as the representative of the people and Creon acts as the representative of the state. Fugard adapts the play to suit black audience. Creon, the unjust king (White Government) is being opposed by the upright and helpless Antigone (Black people). At the end of the play, Winston who plays Antigone tears off his wig and confronts the audience. Brothers and Sisters of the Land! I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever. Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honored those things to which honor belong (227) Voicing the ideas of the voiceless is the major aim of the theatre of the oppressed. The theatre of the oppressed, a term coined by Augusto Baul, is a series of theatrical analyses and critiques developed in 1950s. In the theatre of the oppressed, the audience becomes active, such that as "spect-actors". The "Spect-actors" turned spectators explore, show, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living. The audiences are given a vital role in *The Island*.

Agit prop: Agitation propaganda is the systematic spreading and through explanation of political, philosophical, economic and historical ideas of a movement. Though Fugard never talks about it Kani, his associate discusses the importance of spreading ideologies through plays. Kani and Ntshona declared that every performance was an 'endorsement of the local and international call for the 'immediate release' of Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners and detainees.'

Ideals and Idealists: John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, generally regarded as a milestone in the post-war English theater sowed the seeds of a rebellious, iconoclastic hero often referred as the "Angry Young Man." Willie, Johnny, Styles are a few angry young men in the Township plays of the three, Willie is a staunch idealist. Though initially one comes across a sober, introvert Willie, after the death of Tobias one can understand that Willie's sobriety is not born out of self-centeredness. He is sober because he is disillusioned with life. Everyone advises him to not to act against shark Willie is unrelenting. There's no excuse like saying the world's a big place and I'm just a small little man. My world is as big as I am. Just big enough for me to do something about it. If I can't believe that, there is no point in living. (46) Conscience pricks Willie. Driven by his conscience,

he stands to oppose the unjust. Later he realizes that he is all alone in doing so. He loses everyone. His friends desert him not because of hatred. They leave him because they love him so much. They are all ordinary people who think about themselves only. As long as they are safe and unaffected, they will not complain. Willie is different. The murder of an innocent villager haunts him like a nightmare. Unable to cope with this, he prepares to fight Shark. As a matter of fact, it is quite easy to fight an enemy rather than to fight one's conscience. No Good Friday ends with Willie waiting for Shark. It is an open-ended play. The readers can come out with their own climaxes and interpretations. Johnny, the rag seller in Nongogo has been introduced as an exuberant and dynamic individual. Johnny wants to start a new life. He wants to forget his dark past full of black memories. He meets Queeny and together they plan to start a new business. Queeny impresses Johnny and vice-versa. If one reads between the lines, it is obvious that it is not just a new business but a new life. Queeny is happy about meeting a man who treats her like woman. She likes the polite words of Johnny. Thanks and sorry moves her a lot. She is generous and she gives money to Johnny to buy more rags. When he is away, she even buys him a wrist watch. In spite of the feel-good factor and positive vibe, the play turns out to be a tragedy. On knowing Queeny's past, Johnny ditches her. Johnny stands as a representative to many young men whose lives have been shattered by their ideals. Johnny wants to live a decent life. Queeny's past is not decent. His lofty ideals restrain him from taking a former sex worker

as his soul-mate. Queeny, though heart-broken, mocks Johnny. Johnny returns empty handed. He is an idealist who never compromises. Had he wished, he would have pretended to her. His inability to pretend in the world of pretensions severs their relationships. Idealists like Johnny, Willie always stand alone. For, it is impossible to be different and sensitive when everyone around is indifferent and insensitive. Of the various genres of literature, the most vibrant and lively genre is drama. Poems, novels and prose pieces need readers but drama requires audience. From time immemorial plays are used to create awareness, spread ideologies at times religion. If the history of English drama is analysed, it will be obvious that miracle and mystery plays have paved the way for modern plays. Modern playwrights like Bernard Shaw, T.S. Eliot, J.M. Synge, and Harold Pinter are all pioneers in dealing with social themes. Unlike modern plays that have a set of governing rules, post-modern plays operate liberally. Fugard belongs to the post-modern era. Complete liberty is the order of the day. Television and other gadgets have a definitive influence over the post-modern theatre. Writing plays during such a tumultuous period is challenging and Fugard's contribution to South African theatre is worth mentioning. Fugard has been a prolific playwright for some fifty years. His plays cover a wide variety of themes. Township Plays are produced when South African freedom struggle was at its peak and offer a bird's eye view of colonial South Africa. While reading the plays one could relive the past because the plays are pictorial presentations of truth.

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