

My Children! My Africa!: Athol Fugard's vision for a non racial South Africa

Dr. Isam M. Shihada *

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore Athol Fugard's vision for a non racial South Africa after the end of apartheid and the beginning of a crucial stage of reconciliation with reference to his play *My children! My Africa!*. I will also try to examine Fugard's fight against the colonial education of his native South Africans as one of the most important steps needed to achieve integration and mutual understanding. Although most of Fugard's plays are set in South Africa, this paper maintains that they tackle transcendent and eternal human issues beyond the domestic sphere and envisage a society based on racial equality and reconciliation-a society that accepts the existence of the 'Other.'

* Department of English, Al-aqsa university- Gaza – Palestine. Mail: isams@hotmail.com

1. Introduction:

Athol Fugard's plays deal with South Africa and the psychological and physical barriers confronted throughout his urgent quest to overcome apartheid. He held the agonies of South Africa and kept thinking of the national worries to the point of obsession, a matter which he reflected in his writings and daily life practices. In recollecting his experience as a clerk in the Native Affairs court in 1958, Fugard records how he watched with horror as pass-law offenders by the drove were shunted into gaols on petty technical offences.¹ Fugard attempts to create a new cultural milieu for the black and white upcoming generations so as to accept to live together and lead a decent life under one law that controls everyone, regardless of their skin color, religion and sex as projected in *My children! My Africa!*. He declares "My life's work is possibly to witness as truthfully as I can the nameless and destitute people of this one little corner of the world." (Quoted in Benson 1993:455). Fugard plunges into the intricate question of ethnicity and the deeply rooted racial conflict between the whites and blacks. Freedom and racial equality represent his solution to the white vicious power meted out against the blacks. His drama presents the torture and devastation that befalls the simple, ordinary individuals, the deep and bloody scars that these atrocities leave not only on the body of the victim but also on the souls of both the victim and the jailor. Although Fugard's plays are set in his native land, Eastern Cape, they tackle transcendent and eternal human issues beyond the domestic sphere. Russell Vandenbroucke argues "Fugard will be called a South African playwright in the same spirit that Faulkner is considered a Southern novelist, for both are 'regional' writers who use the details of a specific time and place, and their experience in that place, to explore general conflicts and quandaries." (1985:14). It is also worth mentioning that his plays are steeped in South Africa's politics, Fugard says,

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Everything that I am ,good or bad , as man and artist , I owe to that country . In fact, I sometimes think of my writing as an attempt on my side, hopelessly inadequate ,to acknowledge ,pay back, something of the the colossal debt that I owe to South Africa. I said once I think the most important thing a human does with his life is how he loves in the course of it the little or the lot that I knew about loving was taught to me by South Africa , and South Africans, and you cant have a more profound tie to any place. (1993: 381)

Such attitude earned him the close attention of South African audiences, together with critical and popular acclaim from playgoers in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe. (Donahue:1995). Guy Willoughby comments on Fugard's dramatic achievement :

For the plays of Fugard– South Africa's finest playwright and arguably the greatest living English speaking dramatist – are intimately bound up with our recent past and are crucial to our grasp of the apartheid era. From the desperate vision of township life in *No Good Friday* (1958) through to the intricate cross-race dynamics dissected in *Playland*(1993),Fugard tackled every hidden corner of life under that grossest of sociopolitical orders , creating as he went a record of inestimable value. (2001:24)

We come to understand here that no artist can isolate himself from his time and place, especially in South Africa, where situation is oozing with political and racial overtones. Within this context, Alan Paton says "Race is not a plot, or a structural pattern, or an obsession; it is of the very stuff of our lives." (1975:140). Fugard himself observes that one cannot escape the political assumptions while writing about South Africa. "If you're a black person in South Africa, and an opportunity comes up to tell a story on stage , any real separation of arts and politics is impossible." (Quoted in Engstrom 1980:3). Furthermore, art is often called revolutionary if it represents a radical quality which means subversion. This lies in its potential to make us realize that things need not be the way they are. Denis Walder says "If racialism and exploitation seem natural, then it is the capacity of art to show us that this is not so." (1985 :10-11) . Therefore, in South Africa, under apartheid, theatre assumes an urgent and a vital role in conveying different meanings for both whites and blacks.To black audience, it highlights the nature of their sufferings. To the whites, it offers some of the first images of what it means to live beyond barriers and under a

constant segregation. It seems that the most dangerous opposition to the political establishment in South Africa comes from within theatre. Due to this, theatre was exposed to the official censorship because of the arduous efforts done by actors and directors to combat apartheid in their performances. Commenting on that, Andre Brink says that the mere possibility of a ban was usually enough to nip theatre in the bud or kill the dream in its early stages.(Brink , 1997). Nelson Pressley elaborates further “In nearly two years, more than a half –dozen of actors of the 21 Serpent Players were imprisoned.”(1998:24). The cultural boycott imposed by the ruling South African National Party had its tremendous effect on theatre since more playwrights of international repute failed to obtain permission for their plays to be staged in South Africa. This was particularly true of black theatre which was more targetable by the state’s agents. It was viewed as a threat to the white racist authority and was pounced upon with incomparable cruelty. To sum up, theatre becomes one of the very few vehicles through which Fugard communicates the black experience to white audiences.

2. My children! My Africa!

My argument is that Fugard aspires for a non racial South Africa for all people regardless of their religion, skin, color and political affiliation .These aspirations pose a serious threat to the South African aggressive political –social and economic system, a system that uses all inhuman and barbaric means to preserve his identity. In order to achieve his visionary hopes, Fugard did encounter numerous obstacles through his career as a playwright. In the case of his play *Blood Knot*, Fugard was officially prevented by the police from performing it in South Africa since his plays, in general, provoked the government due to their strong words and revolutionary expressions. Due to this, with every dramatic performance, he was interrogated and annoyed by the police. Even, he had his passport drawn from him for five years (1960-1965) to prevent him from traveling abroad. Within this context, Fugard recalls “plays were shut down. Actors were arrested. There was a period when they, the government, tried to harass us out of existence.” (1993:381).

In *My children! My Africa!* !(1989), Athol Fugard struggles by means of words to dismantle apartheid and establish a unified culture respected by everyone regardless of their color and ethnicity. It can be seen as recognition that apartheid’s days are numbered and a new generation of young people, black and white, stand on the threshold of future. They will

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soon get rid of the shackles of racism in order to forge a new society never envisioned by their parents. *My children! My Africa!* (1989), *Playland* (1992), *My Life* (1994), and *Valley song* (1995) are an eloquent record of Fugard's adjustments to the changes in South Africa and can be considered as great contribution to South African political discourse. In the 1980s, the dismantlement of apartheid seemed imminent and the crucial question arises how all people of all races must prepare for the soon-to-occur demise of apartheid.² Within this context, Albert Wertheim says "Fugard enjoins his audiences as well to reflect on how they will address the terrible legacy of more than four decades of apartheid and thus ill-prepared for the new, democratic, multiracial South Africa about to happen?" (2000:178).

The setting of *My children! My Africa!* is a classroom at Zolile High School in an Eastern Cape black township which reflects the teaching and learning nature of the play. The play opens with a debate between Thami Mbikwana, black student at the black township school and Isabel Dyson, white student from the town's all white Camdeboo Girls High School. It sounds that it will be the new picture of South Africa where black and white contends each other and debate after years of human and cultural segregation. There is no combat of physical aggression and violence but a reasoned verbal contention, a real example for life-like political negotiation. For Fugard, there is no one better than Thami and Isabel to practice racial reconciliation, members of the new generation, who will likely to be called upon to argue vital issues and forge a South African life after dismantling the shackles of apartheid.

My children! My Africa! decries the liabilities of the old pedagogical order and curriculum. It tackles the dilemma of South Africa's colonized black teachers who accepted the country's racialism and sought empowerment for the black through mastery of the white. It reflects the ambivalence in postcolonial societies like South Africa about the Western cultural legacy that shaped the colonial past and continues to play an important role in shaping their postcolonial future. Thami and Isabel prepare themselves for the English literature contest by testing each other in the area of nineteenth-century English poetry. Such contest is abundant with poignant references to the grim realities of Apartheid South Africa. Shelly's *Ozymandias* becomes an ironic commentary on the ultimate doom of the white apartheid regime's policy when read in a South African context. It is important to allude here to the historical fact that *Ozymandias's* oppressive

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rule left Egypt impoverished and suffering from an incurable decline. *Ozymandias's* memory is recalled home by Thami,

Thami : I had a book of Bible stories when I was small, and there was a picture in it showing the building of the pyramids by the slaves .Thousands of them, like ants, pulling the big blocks of stone with ropes, being guarded by soldiers with whips and spears .According to the picture the slaves must have easily outnumbered the soldiers one hundred to one....

Isabel: What are you up to, Mbikwana? Trying to stir up a little social unrest in the time of the pharaohs, are you?

Thami : Dont joke about it, Miss Dyson. There are quite a few Ozymandiases in this country waiting to be toppled. And with any luck you will live to see it happen. We won't leave it to Time to bring them down. (*My children! My Africa!* 1990 : 200-1). 3

Moreover, the most important issue, Fugard willing to raise here, is the futility of the use of canonical English texts to define an African-non Western situation. There is something out of order about the South African national literary contest that is based entirely on British writers. Within this context, Wa Thiong'o Ngugi says,

The African, through his colonial education, found his image of the past distorted. His colonial middle-class education and brainwashing told him that he had no history. The black man did not really exist, had slept in the dark continent until the Livingstines and the Stanleys woke him into history through a mixture of piety and violence. (1972: 41)

It is important to note here that the colonial system produced a kind of education which fostered self-hatred and subservience. It uprooted people from the masses (like Mr. M). "The educational system reflected this inequality and encouraged a slave mentality, with a reverent awe for the achievements of Europe." (Ngugi 1972: 14). There was also racial discrimination in allocation of schools and teaching facilities.⁴ Thami rebels against the old-fashioned, colonized mentality of Mr. M who privileges the European culture over that of Africa through chanting a Xhosa poem. Thami argues "that classroom is a political reality in my life- it's a part of the whole political system we're up against." (206). In regard to political

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reality , South African society is a racial pyramid: the white Afrikaners minority at the top, the Asian in the middle and the African at the bottom.⁵ John McLeod argues that “the teaching of English literature in the colonies must be understood as part of the many ways in which Western colonial powers such as Britain asserted their cultural and moral superiority while at the same time devaluing indigenous cultural products”. (2000:140). This may account for Thami’s defection from the Eurocentric colonizing culture of Mr. M whose teaching valorizes and glorifies. Thami’s rebellion is manifested in his lucid comments on the colonial education fostered by the whites, an education that seeks to erase black culture and history by replacing them with beautified white versions. In this regard, Frantz Fanon argues that “colonialism wants everything to come from it. But the dominant psychological feature of the colonized is to withdraw before any invitation of the conqueror”. (1967:63). Thami lashes out against the educational program of Uncle Dave, the regional Inspector of Bantu schools. Education which Uncle Dave and his colleagues foster is essentially the one that nurtures an image of the European world by claiming that Europe was the centre of the universe and Africa was discovered by Europe. Africa was also an extension of Europe, represented and defined by white Eurocentric culture. In regard to colonial education, Thami addresses the audience powerfully,

Do you understand now why it is not as easy as it used to be to sit behind that desk and learn only what Oom Dawie has decided I must know? My head is rebellious. It refuses now to remember when the Dutch landed, and the Huguenots landed, and the British landed. It has already forgotten when the old Union became the proud young republic. But it doesn't know what happened in Kliptown in 1955, in Sharpeville on 21st March ,1960, and in Soweto on the 16th of June ,1976. Do you? Better find out because those are dates your children will have to learn one day. We don't need the Zolile class-rooms anymore. We know what they really are....traps which have been carefully set to catch our minds, our souls. (212)

Thami’s words make us wonder why a black teacher (like Mr. M) encourages students’ participation in a contest whose very core subject denies the rich cultural heritage of the African nation’s black majority and replaces it with a foreign Eurocentric literature , a literature which represents the cultural heritage of only a relatively small handful of the South African population. Criticizing that, Ngugi argues that “in history

people learnt about the rise of the Anglo-Saxons as if they were the true ancestors of the human race. Even in geography, the rocks of Europe had to be studied first before coming to Africa". (1972: 14). Thami says "We have woken up at last .We have found another school...anywhere the people meet and whisper names we have been told to forget , the dates of events they try to tell us never happened , and the speeches they try to say they were never made."(212). These lessons, Thami eager to learn, are about his African history which is unjustly ignored and obliterated. Ngugi argues further "If there is a need for a study of the historic continuity of a single culture, why can't this be African? Why cant African Literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?." (1972: 15). To elaborate more , Thami's rebellion is a protest against the colonial educational policy which is meant to colonize the minds of the African people. It can also be seen as one of the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate politics, culture and their economy from Eurocentric stronghold to usher a new era of self –determination. (Ngugi 1981).

Mr. M seems to be a victim of the colonial educational policy to alienate educated blacks from their native history and traditions. Mr. M informs the official authorities about the rebellious political activities of his students and is consequently murdered by the very students whose intellectual lives he sought to nurture. One tends to claim that his action is done due to white supremacist brainwashing. He believes that he is doing it out of concern for his students.."I sat here before going to the police station saying to myself that it was my duty, to my conscience, to you, to the whole community to do whatever I could to put an end to this madness of boycotts and arson." (228). Emmanuel Obiechina comments on that "the supreme sin of colonialism was its devaluation of African culture and alienation of educated blacks from their native traditions and history."(1990:80). Mr. M becomes a traitor in the eyes of his own students and his people, a treason which makes him pay the price dearly in the form of execution. Beyond Mr. M's murder, there is also another side of the story which should have forcefully been elaborated by Athol Fugard. There is a regular shooting of unarmed students by police , the detention without trial , torture of hundreds of student leaders, the banning of student leaders and their organizations. Victims were repeatedly stabbed; their bodies were mutilated and then burnt. The main and principal responsibility for deaths lay on the oppressive policy of the apartheid state. (Visser : 1993). However, Mr. M's murder can be seen as a representation of the predictable outcome of South Africa resistance politics in general and school boycotts and other involvements of

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youth in politics in particular. Nicholas Visser argues "Mr. M's chief dramatic and ideological function is to act as a ventriloquist's dummy, uttering as if with his own voice what are actually the anxieties and perceptions and aspirations of middle -class white South Africans." (1993:494).

But, for Athol Fugard and the liberal white middle classes, he symbolizes 6, Mr. M represents a group of blacks who prefer words over resistance. Mr. M says, before the debate starts, "Shouting down the opposition so that they can't be heard doesn't comply with that definition. Enthusiasm for your cause is most commendable but without personal discipline it is as useless as having a good donkey and a good cart but no harness." (164). Mr. M can be seen as Fugard's mouthpiece and his visionary character who advocates dialogue and discussion among people in South Africa. He seems to represent an approach to struggle which is that both blacks and whites should sit together where they can build a future based on dialogue, mutual respect, racial equality and human dignity after long years of violence, ethnic cleansing and discrimination. Mr. M's approach is reinforced when he says after the debate , "In my humble opinion they are the real winners this afternoon. You two just had to talk and argue." (169). Within this context , Visser says , "words are the only weapons in social and political conflict clearly lies close to the centre of Fugard's thinking... language is what should happen between human beings. The alternative is bullets and bombs. And that is barbarism". (1993: 492).

At the final part of the play, we find that Thami and his revolutionary comrades replace the authority of Mr. M , whose most treasured possession is his English dictionary, with a new authority of resistance and discipline. Thami says, "The struggle doesn't need the big English words you taught me how to spell", to which Mr. M rebuts, "Stones and petrol bombs can't get inside those armored cars. Words can." (221). In their final confrontation, Mr. M retorts by offering his English dictionary to Thami who ,in turn, rejects it:

Be careful Thami. Be careful! Be careful! Don't scorn words. They are sacred! Magical! Yes, they are. Do you know that without words a man can't think? Yes, it's true. Take that thought back with you as a present from the despised Mr. M and share it with the Comrades. Tell them the difference between a man and an animal is that Man thinks, and he thinks with words. (220)

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Just before his murder, Mr. M stands in his schoolroom holding his dictionary in one hand and a rock that has been thrown at his window on the other. In fact, such scene reflects that there is a huge debate about the appropriate approach of resistance to be taken. Thami believes only in armed struggle to regain his own people's rights while Mr. M represents the Gandhian style that opts for non-violent means. He believes in the power of dialogue and communication to solve one's differences. Mr. M's speech continues ,

If the struggle needs weapons give it words Thami. Stones and petrol bombs can't get inside those armored cars. Words can. They can do something even more devastating than that . . . they can get inside the heads of those inside the armored cars. I speak to you like this because if I have faith in anything, it is faith in the power of the word. Like my master, the great Confucius, 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 .(221)

Mr. M's speech may reflect Athol Fugard's vision that only dialogue and words which should happen between human beings. Christopher Balme argues that "Fugard is liberal in seeking value in human nature -- rather than radical in seeking value in revolutionary action -- is undoubtedly true". (1999 : 363) . Fugard's liberal vision is a true reflection of the way he chooses to conclude his play with meaningful messages when Isabel and Thami take stock of what Mr. M stood for. Thami decides to go north and uses his mind to become a strategist for the black rights movement instead of remaining a member of the mindless mob . Isabel ends the play as one of Mr. M's children whose new role will be to work from within society for a social change and reform. She goes to Wapadsberg Pass, where Mr. M has his first vision of what dialogue could do "The future is ours Isabel. We shall show this stupid country how it is done." (187). Isabel assures him that his children can still save South Africa by saying back at the end of the play "I am going to try my best to make my life useful in the way yours was. I want you to be proud of me. After all, I am one of your children you know .You did welcome me to your family .The future is still ours, Mr. M." (240). One tends to take this remark as a sign of undaunted optimism ,a kind of last-ditch hope for the future, cautiously taking into account the great difficulties South Africans face and will encounter in the future. Fugard also shares with us his deep concern about such future by saying, "I am fifty-eight years old and am resigned to the possibility that, in my lifetime, I

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might not see the fully democratic society that I so passionately wish for my country and its people.” (1993:381). His words may be translated by saying that anybody who thinks that South Africa's journey to a just and decent society is going to be a short and an easy one is naive and terribly uninformed. Within this context, Michael Chapman believes that “apartheid should not too easily be forgotten. For the task of reconstructing the post-apartheid society is going to involve acts of massive interpretation, in which the historical memory will be a crucial factor”. (1996: 412). Hence, the continuing violence, unemployment and illegal immigration that still rack South Africa is a fair indication of the formidable hurdles that still lie ahead before South Africans have a just and decent society.

3. Conclusion:

To conclude, Fugard wants to convey that the British literature that Thami and Isabel study shouldn't be the privileged one, but it should be replaced by the African culture which is strongly advocated by other postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe, Wa Thiong'o Ngugi and George Lamming. One tends to think that Fugard plays a decisive role in fighting what Edward Said calls, “The draconian brutality of laws that were applied unilaterally by colonial armies to black-or brown - skinned races.”(1994:69). Fugard also tries to present us with a good lesson on integration and reconciliation. After the school debate, a model of a desirable social order, Thami and Isabel briefly exchange their biographies and their views about education and schooling. For Fugard what is most needed is not only an artificial integration of black and white students teaming up for a school contest but the more difficult integration of cultures, art and insight in the service of humanity, an integration that is based on mutual understanding and respect and not hegemony in which one culture seeks mastery over another. One comes to see that the lesson integration is not going to be easily accomplished but it is a real challenge that all must face in South Africa where people must learn to forgive and not forget. It is the same challenge that Fugard has set for his characters, Thami and Isabel working as young people, to accomplish a non racial society in their country. Moreover, Fugard seeks to make us understand the feelings of oppression felt by Thami and his peers but at the same time warning us that these feelings without dialogue and discussion will lead to a pointless violence. Finally, Fugard endeavors to diagnose the present situation in South Africa and increase awareness among his own people about the new future lying ahead. His commitment to the bright future of a non racial

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South Africa is summed up by Donald Lyons "Athol Fugard explores the central challenge of balancing duty to the past and the promise of the future." (2002:5).

Note:

- 1- All blacks sixteen years of age and over are required to carry a reference book, nicknamed a dom-pass(from 'verdomde'), meaning 'damned' . It indicates an individual's identity number , his employment history , where he is permitted to be, and what taxes he has paid. An employer must sign the book monthly, and no black can leave one job for another without a discharge signature. Anyone who doesn't abide by these rules, he will be subject to arrest since failure to do so is a criminal offense.(whites, colored, and Asians) have seven days to produce their identity cards. Please see Vandenbroucke , R (1985) *Truths the hand can touch :The theatre of Athol Fugard* . New York: Theatre communications Group.
- 2- The state of emergency (1985-1990) was the last desperate effort of the apartheid regime to manage the pace and perception of change. Please see Chapman, M (1996) *South African Literatures* . London: Longman .
- 3- All references will be henceforth taken Fugard, A (1990) *My children! My Africa!* . USA: Theatre Communications Group.
- 4- The colonial system produced the kind of education which nurtured subservience, self-hatred and mutual suspicion. Please see Ngugi, W. T (1972) . *Homecoming*. New York: Lawrence hill and company.
- 5- Central to the system of apartheid was the division and classification of "race" that developed historically with the clashes and migrations of different groups of people in South Africa. Please see Eades, L (1999) *The End of Apartheid in South Africa* . Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press.
- 6- This can be captured in Fugard's recent declaration: "I unashamedly describe myself as a liberal" (Television Interview) please see Visser, N (1993)' Drama and Politics in a State of Emergency: Athol Fugard's *My children! My Africa!*.' *Twentieth Century Literature*, 39, (p. 492) .

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