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Apartheid in Athol Fugard's *Master Harold...and the Boys*

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Abstract:

My aim through this article is to propagate that Athol Fugard has shown that *Master Harold . . . and the Boys* consists all of thematic concerns like search for identity, cultural dislocation, isolation and alienation. The dramatist shows in his play that racism informs all aspects of black life in the South. As Fugard shows, many people did not finish school, and were instead to work at early ages. He also showed the troublesome life of many black southern people in the play. This is not amazing given that the play is based on events from Fugard's own life. Fugard obviously presents his hopeful ideas of society functioning as a whole to transcend racial barriers and end racism.

Keywords: Apartheid, Alienation, black Africans

Apartheid was a system of acts put in place by the white-minority government in South Africa. It forced discrimination and isolation of the black and "Coloured" majority, denying them their basic social and legal rights. This paper analyzes the implications that occur from the apartheid attitude in South Africa. The executive definition of "Apartheid" is a classification of separation or discrimination on grounds of race. In simple words Apartheid means apartness. Many countries have suffered from apartheid and still do. South Africa is one of apartheid's victims. The fair and white British came to South Africa planning to take control of the country. A bureaucrat policy of racial separation formerly practiced in the Republic of South Africa, involving political, legal, and economic discrimination against nonwhites. But in general it is any policy that segregates persons by using race or colour. In simple words Apartheid was based on segregating policies and laws. These laws classified people into three races: white; Bantu, or black Africans; and Coloured, or people of varied tangle. The laws resolute where members of each group could live, what works s they could hold, and what type of education they could receive.

Athol Fugard, (Athol Harold Lannigan Fugard) is South African great dramatist, actor, and director who became worldwide known for his incisive and cynical analyses of South African society during the apartheid period. The Play *Master Harold and the Boys* is Athol Fugard's confessional drama about young people beginning in the uses of racial power has come home to South Africa and the literary world and audience was obviously surprised and stunned.

Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys* doesn't solve any issues of apartheid; it is crammed with a chronological context to inform readers of issues in South Africa. Athol Fugard's attempt shows that he is against apartheid.

Of all his plays, none is more personal than *Master Harold and the Boys* because it tells a boyhood episode which involved him and which preoccupied him for years until he tried to atone by writing this play in 1982. As Fugard said in an Interview:

The sense I have of myself is that of a 'regional' writer with the themes, textures, acts of celebration, of defiance and outrage that go with the South African experience. These are the only things I have been able to write about. (Notebooks: 1960-1977).

Fugard's autobiographical play *Master Harold and the Boys* is intensely touching study of enduring open-minded guilt.

It is significant to note the system of apartheid which governed South Africa in the Year 1950's when the play's action occurs because it is at the center of the author's message. The division of black people existed in every layer of South African society where black men were forced into subservience to white people, even including children.

Athol Fugard's plays during the apartheid era document not just the social and political effects of this national policy but also the insidious and sometimes subtle ways in which hate corrupts peoples' psyches, souls, and relationships" (O'Neil p.365).

The play *Master Harold and the Boys* has been criticized for not openly acknowledging this truth, yet awareness of increasing racial tension may prowl in the background. If we see the play as reflecting the world as viewed by "Master Harold," he may not have absorbed the force of these changes. Fugard's characters naturally display strengths and weaknesses which make them unable to fit into what society requires. However, as Mair declares that:

...whites like to address non-whites with orders and insults. 'Normal' mutual conversation between the white and non-white group does not exist. Apartheid rhetoric makes it impossible to describe reality outside of its discursively imposed frame, and language becomes subjected to manipulation" (Mair p.308).

The scheme of the play is the soul of the play it is not to be mystified with the story line which is sequential. The *Play Master Harold and the Boys* one-act play opens in a tea shop in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in the year 1950. *Master Harold and the Boys* was first published in 1982. It is a play with only three (seen) characters Harold, Sam and Willie. At the opening of the play, Hally and Sam's conversations are apparently friendly. The three characters are Harold, the white son of the café's landlord, and Sam and Willie, two black employees who are maintenance up after the day's lunch business when the play begins. Willie and Sam, two black waiters who work there, are discussing Willie's dance steps for the ballroom competition he is entering in a couple of weeks. The two men quarrel and tease each other about Willie's dancing and his dancing partner.

Fugard critically focused most of his work on the injustices of the apartheid system of South Africa's government. The play has subsequently earned a place in modern world drama, enjoying frequent revivals around the world it is considered to be one of Fugard's masterpieces and a fundamental work valued for both its universal themes of humanity and its skilled drama craft.

The power of apartheid dialogue makes itself felt when Hally declares the right to define notions and imposes his views on Sam. He scolds Sam for “mentally polluting” his mind by reading comic books.

Hally, Sam and Willie speak affectionately and familiarly to each other. They act more as friends, even though Sam and Willie work for Hally’s family. Hally settles down to do his homework and have Sam serve him his lunch.

The play begins with Sam training Willie for a ballroom dance competition. “In its most simplified form, the metaphor [of ballroom dancing] attaches the harshness of ballroom practice and the necessity for an ultimate victory in the arena of global unity. The paper begins with discussion of Fugard’s use of ballroom dancing as a metaphor for a utopian society. While Sam and Willie are hopeful for a world that functions with grace and order like a ballroom dancing competition, Hally is cynical of such a utopia because of diverse members of society like his father.

In the following discussion, Willie struggles to clutch the beauty of ballroom that Sam is professing:

Willie: How can I enjoy myself? Not straight, too stiff, and now it’s also glide, give it more style, make it smooth....Haai! It’s hard to remember all those things, Boet Sam.

Sam: That’s your trouble. You’re trying too hard.

Willie: I try hard because it *is* hard.

Sam: But don’t let me see it. The secret is to make it look easy. Ballroom must look happy, Willie, not like hard work. It must... Ja! ... it must look like romance. (*Master Harold and the Boys*. p. 5)

The concept of ballroom dancing represents a melodious and racially equal society but while Willie stand for the harsh racial reality of the present situation, and Sam represents the immature hope for future racial equality. The character Sam acts as Fugard’s tone of hopefulness to define a racially equal society.

All the three characters see themselves through the eyes of white people and their worship of white beauty also has destructive effects on their own community. This is because, as Taylor argues:

One of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. ... The most prominent type of radicalized ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity (Taylor, 1999,p. 16).

Sam recognizes that ballroom dancing must look happy, easy, and natural for the viewers to observe its grace. Amusingly, the concept of Sam and Willie’s ballroom dancing competition maintains throughout the remainder of the play.

“Ballroom dance transcends language and cultural barriers, and its practitioners surmount international differences far more effectively than politicians.” (Gainor.p. 127)

No doubt, Hally is bitter toward his father throughout the entire play. His resentful tone further reinforces that his father isn’t his role model. (The targets of his criticism are desire, loss of values and broken human relationships. The playwright challenges the audience for a reform on

these demanding points. Fugard's characters also suffer from the uncertainty of existence. In fact, this concern is closely related to the strange identity of the individual.

In this type of drama, everything eventually becomes unreliable, even the language. Language, as a means of communication, becomes a medium of conventionalized, labelled meaningless exchange. Words fail to express the essence of character's experiences, not being able to penetrate beyond its outside. We can see it clearly in the play:

I seem to be the only one around here who isn't afraid to face it [the truth]. We've had the pretty dream, it's time now to wake up and have a good long look at how things really are. Nobody knows the steps, there's no music, the cripples are also out there tripping everybody and trying to get into the act, and it's all called the All-Comers-How-to-Make-a-Fuckup-of-Life Championships. Hang on Sam! The best bit is still coming. Do you know what the winner's trophy is? A beautiful big chamber-pot with roses on the side, and it's full to the brim with piss. And guess who I think is going to be this year's winner. (*Master Harold and the Boys*. p. 51)

The condition with Hally and Sam, Willie continually mirrors the situations of the times in South Africa. As this play shows in a very clear way, apartheid was a multifaceted system of domination, violence and scarcity. When Harold, a young white man, hears that his hard, handicapped father is returning home, his frustration turns into racist cruelty against the two black men who work for the family. While Sam efforts to quiet Hally down and protect his father, Hally doesn't seem the least bit regretful. Hally is full of such ill feelings because of his father's favorite to be an alcoholic rather than a loving and supportive father. Hally experiences another form of illness:

What Ettl Durbach calls "the psychopathology of apartheid... Growing up to be a "man" within a system that deliberately sets out to humiliate black people, even to the point of relegating them to separate benches, entails the danger of habitual indifference to the everyday details that shape black/white relationships and, finally, pervert them. It is not merely that racial prejudice is *legislated* in South Africa. It insinuates itself into every social sphere of existence, until the very language of ordinary human discourse begins to reflect the policy that makes black men subservient to the power exercised by white children. (Urban. p.320-1)

Although his father is much to blame, society's practices play an immense part in Hally's actions. Hally does not know how to act any different than what society has showed him during his youth. Although he never speaks in the play, Hally's father plays a dominant, negative role. Hally defines his character whether of sharing racist jokes with him, or by making demands on Hally's time and self-respect. Afterward, Hally's phone conversation with his mother discloses why he becomes so troubled when he learns that his father wants to go home. Hally states to his mother:

"... You know what it's going to be like if he comes home... Well then, don't blame me when I fail my exams at the end of the year... Yes! How am I expected to be fresh for school when I spend half the night massaging his gammy leg?" (*Master Harold and the Boys*. p. 33)

It is clear from this passage; it is obvious that Hally simply doesn't want to deal with his father. Clearly, his tone is that of bitterness and frustration.

In "*Master Harold*"...and the boys, Fugard turns the concept of traditional adult and child roles on its head. Hally is in fact only a child but because of his status as a white person in a racially divided society he is given the status of "Master", a title that holds a vast deal of power. The two workers Sam and Willie are referred to as "boys" in spite of the fact that they are both grown men. They have had more life understandings than Hally. Just as Hally is elevated to the role of "Master" because of his race, Sam and Willie are not given the respect of being "men", but rather "boys". For example it can be seen in these dialogues:

Hally: Just get on with your bloody work and shut up.

Sam: Swearing at me won't help you.

Hally: Yes, it does! Mind your own business and shut up!

Sam: Okay. If that's the way you want it, I'll stop trying.

Hally: Good. Because what you have been trying to do is meddle in something you know nothing about. All that concerns you in here, Sam, is to try to do what you get paid for keep the place clean, and serve the customers. In plain words, just get on with your job. (*Master Harold and the Boys*, p.53)

From the above passage, Hally's declaration of power over Sam is obvious.

Fugard reveals how the complaining and troublesome effects of apartheid challenge all concepts of traditional relationships. Hally views himself as Sam and Willie's teacher because he has been given more formal education than they have. Hally's childhood reminiscence is that Sam had to go to work, but because Hally was sitting on a "Whites Only" seat that day in the park, Sam would not have been permitted to sit there with him. While the social and political climate of South Africa has made it possible for Hally to sight himself as more well-informed than Sam or Willie. It is Sam who teaches Hally about the harsh realities of the world.

Hally lashes out against Sam as he never has before, reminding Sam of his position as a servant, not a friend or a father. In an effort to hurt and humiliate Sam, Hally sides with his father and makes a racist joke at Sam's expenditure. He insists that Sam refer to him as "Master Harold," and not as the familiar "Hally." Sam informs Hally that if he requires him to call him "Master," Sam will do as he wishes, but the result will be that their relationship is forever changed. They try to settle but realize that nothing can ever go back to the way it was.

More often it was of course the physical lightness of skin colour that decided a person's race and standing in the rigid social, political, economic and cultural hierarchy. On some of these criteria, Mandela reflects:

The arbitrary and meaningless tests to decide black from Coloured or Coloured from white often resulted in tragic cases where members of the same family were classified differently, all depending on whether one child had a lighter or darker complexion. Where one was allowed to live and work could rest on such absurd distinctions as the curl of one's hair or the size of one's lips.

(Mandela, 1995, pp 60-1, 70)

Hally is quick to forget his friendship with Sam as he faces his shame, and instead of confronting his own flaws, he demands to be treated with "respect and call him Harold", just as Willie has always done. He further insults Sam and Willie alike by sharing his and his father's favourite joke:

“Want to know our favourite joke?

He gives out a big groan and says: “its not fair, is it, Hally?” Then I have to ask: “What, chum?” And then he says:”A nigger’s ars”...and we both have a good laugh. What’s the matter, Willie? You always were slow on the uptake. It’s called a pun. You see, fair means both light in colour and to be just and decent. I though *you* would catch it, Sam” (*Master Harold and the Boys*. p.91).

The dramatist utilizes the method of memory and flashback to add depth to the story without the need for additional scenes. The kite-flying situation, the stories about Hally's time spent with Willie and Sam in the boarding house and the story about Sam helping Hally retrieve his drunken crippled father. All the history of these three characters and essentially defines the long-term relationship. It is ironic that a black man in apartheid South Africa has the internal heart and strength to teach living skills to advantaged white boy with more social and physical superiority. At the end of the play, when Hally realizes the allusions of how he has damaged his relationship with Sam. it is not only his pride, but society's voice in his ear that will not allow the boy to apologize to Sam, his mentor and friend.

The play *Master Harold. . . and the Boys* presents in bright detail what happens in a society constructed in institutional anger and hatred (apartheid). The policies of the South African government in the mid1950s legislated a certain amount of hatred and anger between whites and blacks.

The South African system of apartheid comes under heavy attack in *Master Harold. . . and the Boys* despite the fact that apartheid is not directly addressed in the play. Instead, it is the society that the system has created that is criticized. It is not only that racial discrimination is legislated in South Africa. The young Hally with the suitably immature nickname transforms into "Master Harold" in the background of the damaging attitudes promoted by apartheid. Literature is the mirror of society and it is responsible for social change as Fugard said in an interview:

Now I think that at the minimum theatre has been responsible for maintaining awareness and a certain conscience about the way things were developing. But, more importantly, I believe it has been a provocation in terms of social change.”

(Allen, Paul. Interview with Athol Fugard)

Master Harold . . . and the Boys subscribes to the school of realism in that the actions and dialogue of the three characters are very much as they would be in real life. *Master Harold... and the Boys* contrast the world of apartheid with the ideal world of "no crash" that Sam describes.

Although Hally did not change the system as a child, he grew up to be Fugard, a white playwright attempting to inform others of the atrocities of apartheid. As he mentioned:

“I have often described myself as an Afrikaner writing in English, and the older I get the more that seems to be the truth: that my English tongue is speaking for an Afrikaner psyche.” (Theatre Communications Group, 1997. Print).

Master Harold . . . and the Boys consists all of Fugard’s thematic concerns like search for identity, cultural dislocation, isolation and alienation. The dramatist shows in his play that racism informs all aspects of black life in the South. As Fugard shows, many people did not finish school, and were instead to work at early ages. He also showed the troublesome life of

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