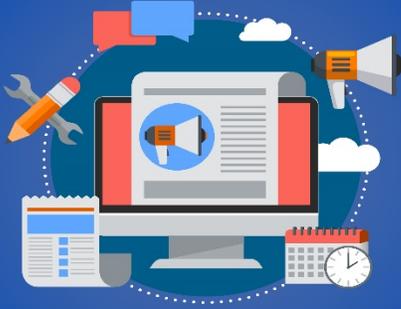


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## **Social Mission in Drama: A Study of Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*" ... and *the boys***

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### **Abstract:**

African history, cultures, traditions and truths are reflected in various performances of African drama. African Drama sternly places its stance on its social mission instituted to galvanize the mass consciousness since it turned into a cultural project in the creative hands of dramatists and critics alongside grounds of western superiority. Consequently, forming canonical masterpieces unveiling the status of the domination and the African response. Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*" ... and *the boys* has identified its association with apartheid, autobiographical components, racism and other features exclusively. However, its social aspect – that connects every dot - is yet another area of study. Deducing this play only as autobiographical or associating apartheid is utterly underestimating the social vision and mission of the playwright. This paper therefore differentiates itself on the ground of its social subtext and attempts to discover its socialness embedded within South Africa. This study critically identifies the social mission of Fugard behind writing this drama.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Performance, Post-Colonialism, Racism and Social Mission.

## **Introduction:**

African Literature in general and modern African drama in particular articulates many occurrences and adopts many artworks to bring alive its history, culture, tradition and reality. It unveils the status of the dominating force and the reaction of Africans in this process. African dramatists especially the modern playwrights like Athol Fugard, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o internalizes and incorporate the social mission as part of their theatre's structure. They assimilate the evident label of colonial subjugation and its impact on African society in their plays resulting a mission to represent and convey the intended balanced truth.

Modern African drama is inextricably linked with history of African colonialism. Modern African performances occupied themselves to disapprove colonial subjugations becoming anti-imperialist in their practice besides defending and upholding their own culture. Etop Akwang affirms,

"In spite of its modest achievements, the colonial experiment, especially in Africa, has been stridently condemned, on most counts, for abounding more in rapaciousness than in the actual task of civilizing and transforming Africa." (59)

Underscoring his views determines that the colonial mission to improve and transform African lives became a failure and harshly criticized for the same. These anti colonial contexts are the obvious temptations for the writers as they provided them with the perfect and contemporary conflict, theme and plot for preparing plays for hooking their audiences.

"*Master Harold*" ... and the boys is a play emotionally involved, autobiographically attached and one of the significant plays by Athol Fugard. Critical studies on the play have identified its association with apartheid, autobiographical elements, racism and other features exclusively but its social aspect – that connects every dot - is yet another area of study. To deduce this play only in terms of autobiographical elements or its link to apartheid is utterly underestimating Fugard's social vision and mission as a playwright. This study therefore differentiates itself on this ground of its social embeddedness and attempts to find out its socialness in and as a play of Athol Fugard set in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. This as well aims on critically appreciate the social mission of Fugard behind writing this drama.

### **Social Mission of Drama:**

Drama has emerged out of man's social, cultural and communicating needs as it is originated from the miscellanies of traditions or rituals and social life of human race. Drama is not merely a form of entertainment rather it engages a society to see itself that what it stands for and contemporary social life. John Conteh- Morgan in his article "*African Traditional Drama and Issues in Theater and Performance Criticism*" clearly points out that theatricality is an important and inherent feature of traditional African societies. It needs no justification to say that the plays of this land, performances consciously or unconsciously represent the same social status of its past and present collectively.

Drama is a combination of various art forms. It not only interacts with other art forms but also brings them close and mix them with the performance. Drama affects and sometimes mingles with other art forms and develops the aesthetics of theatre. Like drama, other art forms have their fare part to represent the society and becomes a part in the history. So together with drama, all the art forms mission their representative performance that influences the society.

Any African drama that highlights its social issues and other art forms is not merely representing those social aspects but safeguarding them forever. Every performance of a drama that represents Africa is a constant reminder to the colonizing eyes that the play is, as the people of Africa keep their social existence alive and protect the culture of Africa on the stage. It also reminds the colonizer who destroyed and invaded into the African space that how much important values, customs, rituals are and how broadly the whole society they threatened and executed colonialism.

### **Social Mission of Athol Fugard as a playwright:**

No previous play by Athol Fugard was premiered outside South Africa before "*Master Harold*" ... *and the boys*. This play provides such paradigms to be a play with social mission that it became the first play that premiered outside South Africa. This play was first produced in March, 1982 at the Yale Repertory Theatre and premiered on 4th May, 1982 on Broadway and staged for 344 times there. This play is set in 1950, South Africa but staged elsewhere initially and made its way inside South Africa. The intrinsic moral responsibility of a playwright that is to stage a play for its target audience might have been broken by the initial ban but could not stop it from staging

in front of the South African societies. The tremendous success of the play remains proof of the fact that the social mission of Modern African Drama not only penetrated into the social life of the targeted spectators but it became an exemplary play worldwide for its universal meanings and social mission it crossed over.

### **Social Mission in portraying Racial Discrimination and Colonization:**

Racial discrimination as a social evil shattered the societies of different countries, which has been a theme for playwrights. However, apartheid system in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 (until the dawn of the democratic dispensation in 1994) is one of the most controversial theme in the dramas of many playwrights of Africa. The constant state of living alongside the colonial forces along with the irreparable damage caused by colonialism trends and manifests in Fugard's drama. Fugard never accepted the fact that the critics considered him a "political playwright" that his solitudes came out during his speech at Rhodes University in 1991, "I find myself very frustrated by the label 'political playwright' which I have ended up with." (42) It is very unfortunate to shadow a playwright's vision and mission behind one straightforwardly matching outline. Albert Wertheim comes forward and pass on that Fugard is a "world-class playwright who often uses the South Africa he knows so intimately as a setting for more universal examinations of human life, human interactions, and the powers of art." (XI)

Fugard's play exchanges everywhere the concept of race in South Africa. This social situation strikingly dramatized with individual circumstances of the black and white characters within it that leads the conflict and ends with a universal-social moral. Living under such circumstances, the individual lives confront this racial discomfort and reach for an ideal situation at the end as beheld by the three characters. There is no doubt that racial discrimination and colonization are strongly connected playing the role of social impurities in the colonial African societies. The drama in modern African societies however, plays the role of a social event that brings in colonial practices and their implications on the society and culture of the African traditions to the stage.

### **Drama: A social mission beyond race and color:**

Drama is above race and color. It would be wrong and undermining its vast horizon if a play is called as black play or white play. For mere convenience of speech or differentiating one

from another, it would be wrong to mention one stereotype as “Black Theatre.” Cedric Callaghan rightly said, “Black Theatre is not an abnegation of theatre that is not Black. The human theme has no color.” (82) A play might be a product of a Black playwright, but it is not necessary that he/she is only capable to represent his/her color. There might be an advantage of representing one’s own self or own native place and nation, which are first hand, lived experiences. A writer can provide personal perspectives to represent his/her own people. However, there are exceptions and if only one can provide an exception, than the whole idea of representation falls into the hands of others too. A second or third eye can also see what the first may miss. Therefore, it is better not to limit a universal model like theatre in terms of race or by color. Callaghan rightly provides an example of Fugard, a white playwright who consciously lived and represented South African social reality in his plays:

“That a nationally conscious playwright like Athol Fugard does not have to be Black before he can bring about a truly South African situation proves to us, Blacks and Whites, that only a common basis placed on a common consciousness can ever build South African theatre; i.e., theatre based on the South African experience and on forms of artistic expression particularly/peculiarly South African.” (82)

Callaghan further explains, “It is equally true that social and political concerns alone do not make for good drama. The writer is not writing for himself alone but with an awareness that he is the nation’s conscience.” (83) It is indeed a matter to investigate the ways in which Athol Fugard derive part of his dramatic impact in the exercise of social imagination by examining the dramaturgy as employed by the playwright as an individual and how is it related to contemporary African society through his dramatic representations.

**“*Master Harold*” ... and *the Boys* and its social mission:**

Many critics argue that the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa after independence have faced innumerable social, political, economic and cultural ills. However, they also admit that somehow art has flourished miraculously, especially the theatre arts. In spite of all these difficulties dramatists in Africa were able to resist and question the colonialist intervention. In this connection, a body of literary works and their criticism in the area of modern African drama are available. It should also be mentioned that critics have focused on the exploration and analysis of theatre

performance in their criticism of African drama. The memory of the recent past is fresh among the audience providing a suitable plot for the playwright to complete his mission to represent the social reality experienced and witnessed by the people themselves.

Every social drama is written for a certain society; recreating the events truthfully situates the playwright's accomplishment successful. Prior knowledge of the historical background and cultural aspects of African theatre limits the capacity to critic such a social drama. Without any pre-conceived notion and prejudices, the presence of African and European elements in this play enables Athol Fugard with the kind of negative capability that visibly intertwined the social realities of South African and European social and cultural values. "I really do think I write plays because what I want ultimately is to be involved with actors and a living experience of the theatre." (Fugard 525) It is evident from the words of Athol Fugard that he involves himself in theatre in order to involve with actors and experience life through theatre.

The final production of any drama is the point where it reaches the target audience. The playwright's primary mission is to make it reach the target audience. Secondly, other missions follow and depends upon the first one to be accomplished successfully. The process involves the dramatic characters or actors in between the social reality and performance space. The dramatic characters have to play their role as defined by the structurally attached script determined to them with contextual social relations that is the then South African social set up. Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*" ... *and the boys* missions to represent the social situation of South African people at various scales. Firstly, it is a dramatized plot on the racial status of South Africa. Secondly, it journeys from the situation of the individual victims of racism to the universality of humanity beyond the limitations of race and colour. Thirdly, and most substantially the play missions for the possibility of an ideal world as "a world without collisions" a well-specified version of Utopia.

### **Autobiographical venture as a social mission:**

Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*" ... *and the Boys* makes a perfect example of an author's journey that his personal life experiences and characters converted to fictional characters and these dramatized - as a part of the social mission of the dramatist's vision – reaches the spectators. This play connects the original life of the playwright himself in South Africa. Fugard connects his personal experiences in this drama and efforts to portray the social status of a white man among

blacks and vice versa. Rather simply reciting the lived experiences of the past like any autobiographical narrative, it appeals universal human values. There is always a connection between our individual lived experiences and social equation. Fugard not only equates this equation but also embeds the social with his personal. The inherent autobiographical elements in “*Master Harold*”... *and the boys* gives a personal touch for the dramatist’s point of view. There is a combination of autobiographical, political and social elements in the play, which makes it a farrago of personal, social, political and historical missions accomplished by the dramatist. Although *Master Harold and the Boys* contains autobiographical elements but “it is never a retreat from social into personal concerns” as opposed to many critic’s views. Private life is not always distant from social life. Autobiographical texts contain the history of someone’s life and social situations. No doubt, this play reflects the life of South African society under apartheid, it also says about the solicitude of the writer himself with the autobiographical mode. It not only attacks the social evil of apartheid but also missions to test the social affairs under the collective influences of black and white upon each other. “*Master Harold*” ... *and the boys*, is considered as the most autobiographical among all the works of Athol Fugard. There is a clear intention behind writing an autobiography for any writer to depict the firsthand experience of his individual self. Nevertheless, it complicates itself entangled in other genres when the intention is not clearly prioritized.

### **Social mission in Collaboration:**

“*Master Harold*”... *and the Boys* is a jointly produced collaborative work. This socio-cultural joint venture made together by Fugard, Kani and Ntshona. Collaboration in itself is a social activity for a social cause. The integral social concern has made the collaborative effort with John Kani and Winston Ntshona a successful play.

### **The Social Story:**

The story of *Master Harold* advances in a social space that is a tearoom in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 1950. “The simplicity of the setting and plot belie the complexity of the characters and of Fugard’s images and themes.”(Cummings 71) Fugard chooses the tearoom to be the setting of the play, which is a place where social interaction between people is expected. The rain however is a clever background gesture on the part of the dramatist as well as it provided the privacy

required to the characters inside the tearoom to perform. This social set up of the play strives to create a real account of the happenings that it successfully establishes. The impeccable intertwining of metaphors of the dance floor and flying kite could be the desire for independence and coherence in an apartheid social system.

This is a play having a single setting, which holds only three characters. These three characters are capable enough to portray all kinds of relationship like master, servant, parent, friend, enemy, teacher, guide, philosopher, and so on and so forth to be every relationship they could establish in a social set up. Mark Cumming rightly says:

“It does what all great literature does – unsparingly shows us our latent capacity for harmful action yet also gives us room to hope that we can learn the necessary steps to dance life like champions and to create “a world where accidents don’t happen.”(73)

### **Conclusions:**

Master Harold and the Boys is not only autobiographical but it also delineates events and experiences in a way that illuminates the social parameters of Fugard's life. Furthermore, is politically linked to South African social conditions. The inherent struggle between the power and the art is inevitable and performance in general and theatre in particular is prone to this constant fight. Performance represent the social, cultural and humanity before the emergence of any nation. Human learned to represent and passed it to the generations through the numerous narratives, rituals, sports and all other communal activities. “This is the real magic and power of performance. It incorporates the architectural space of material and immaterial walls into itself and becomes a magic sphere made still by its own motion, but it is potentially explosive, or rather, it is poised to explode.” (Thiong'o 436) The performance space is not limited to the stage only. It struggles to be present in every cultural symbol and activity in the society. Once a play is performed, it walks out of the performance space along with the audience's mind into their social life. The actors become the audience and the performance space widens. This play clearly represents the subaltern and the existence of the marginal in the society. Many representations inside the play put forth the reality of the uneven distribution of the social and economic spaces keeping the poor people at a disadvantageous position.

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