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Investigating Racial Marginality in Athol Fugard's *The Blood Knot*

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Abstract

South African Literature of twentieth century exhibits manifold facets of racism. It is a powerful expression not only of how the black people are forced to live on the edges of marginality but also foregrounds multiple impacts of racial marginalization on the lives and psyches of the oppressed. The current research, in the same vein, attempts to investigate the impacts of racial discrimination on black people in the context of the play understudy and secondly, it analyses how marginality is psychologically deep-rooted in the non-white South Africans. Insights pertinent to the research objectives are gleaned from Critical Race Theory (CRT) as propounded by Richard Delgado. In the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study focuses on varied impacts of racism on main characters. The research findings suggest that the non-white South Africans face blatant discrimination on the basis of their race and it impacts their lives in negative ways. However, the racism is engrained to the extent of being naturalized. That is to say that the way they endorse this white supremacy, it indicates that they have internalized such social roles and the resultant racial discrimination.

Key-words: Racism, Racial Marginality, Internalization, Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Introduction

South African society has always been recognized as a racially segregated, economically exploited and politically oppressed particularly during the nineteenth century. At that time the environment was very repressive but, even in these repressive circumstances theatre played an important role in terms of highlighting the racial concerns and reformative measures. Although the artists had to work in a censored environment but they tried their level best to become the voice of the repressed majority. The greater the atrocities levied upon by the censor the more



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impressive the theatre became (Lombardozi, 2002). Athol Fugard remained an eminent playwright with his seven apartheid dramas which earned him international repute.

Just like the other works of Athol Fugard, 'The Blood Knot' is also a blend of the political and artistic elements. Athol Fugard is a white and writes about the atrocities committed against the black hence, he is a dissenting writer. *The Blood Knot* is an accurate portrayal of Fugard's dissenting nature as he becomes the mouthpiece of the Blacks (Colleran, 1988). His works center around the theme of apartheid which according to Augustyn (2020) is "the policy that governed relations between South Africa's white minority and nonwhite majority and sanctioned racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against nonwhites" (p.11). This system is also called "separate development". In simple words, apartheid means 'separation' or 'apartness' and it was carried out on the basis of race and ethnicity. Mhlauli et al (2015) describe the system as the "legalized system of racial discrimination". The non-whites were deprived of their basic right to express themselves and were forced to live with repressed hope. The quality of the lives of the people engendered many writers to express their rage in their literary works. Athol Fugard expressed his aversion for the apartheid system through this play *The Blood Knot*. The present study aims to dig out this racial marginality and its impacts on the lives of black characters. Following are the objectives and questions which govern this research.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate racial marginalization and its varied impacts on the lives of non-white South Africans in the context of the play *The Blood Knot*
2. To identify and examine how the discourse of racism and resultant discrimination are internalized by the black people.

Research Questions

1. What are the impacts of racial marginality on the non-white South Africans living in the apartheid with regard to the play *The Blood Knot*?
2. How are the South Africans internalizing the discourse of racism and discrimination in the context of the play *The Blood Knot*?



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Significance of the Study

Although the theme of racism and racial marginality has gained currency since the literature written about apartheid, there are, nevertheless, some aspects which need to be investigated. Athol Fugard's play *The Blood Knot* has been researched from few different angles but the one related to the current study has not been touched upon. There is a need for exploring literary works to see how they play a role either in strengthening or subverting a particular agenda. Approaching Athol Fugard's play *The Blood Knot* within the framework of Delgado's Critical Race Theory will be valuable addition to the existing academic research on racism and racial marginality.

Literature Review

Athol Fugard is one amongst the most celebrated playwright of South Africa. His works have reached zenith in terms of production and publication. Being a reputed playwright of South Africa, his works exerted great influence on the theater of the time (Gqibitole, 2018). Since 1960, Athol has not only gained reputation in South Africa but also the whole world. He lived in a society in which racist ideology was practiced. This racial ideology is termed as 'apartheid'. The non-whites in South Africa were legally marginalized based on this ideology. His plays reflect the pain through which the marginalized community goes through but with a ray of repressed hope. His plays serve as the voice for a voiceless society from the perspective of blacks, whites and the mixed-raced people. He projects the world from the lens of the downtrodden people of the society. The fundamental themes of his works include guilt, pain, survival and identity (Walder, 2015).

Why the people of South Africa went through these harsh circumstances involves the long history of imperialism over the region. Apartheid system has its roots in the settlement of Dutch East India Company around the areas of African Cape in the mid seventeenth century. The Dutch treated them brutally. People of the region were classified into three categories, blacks, whites and the colored. Then, came the English people who remained in the Cape area and their presence gained strong footing in the region for eighteenth and the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, Union of South Africa was formed as a part of the British Empire. The government of this region was run by the Afrikaners but the blacks were deprived of the right to hold elective office. 'National Party' when gained power in 1948 in South Africa, it officially declared this racial segregation with the title 'apartheid' under the Group Areas Act of 1950 (Brodersen, 2008).



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There were two levels of existence of the apartheid. These were the ‘grand’ level and the ‘petty’ level. The grand level was higher than the petty level. At grand level, the races were separated geographically in which they had separate working and the living areas. On the other hand, the ‘petty’ level of existence was miserable. These people were segregated to small daily life areas like the restaurant, beach, movie house, taxi, theatre, bus, train, hotel and the waiting areas on stations (Brodersen, 2008).

Wicker (2019) holds the same views and states that the apartheid system disfigures everything, including the self-identity and the relationships of family that keep on twisting. The daily routine of Zach destructed his soul but he is left with no option but to abide but the commands of Morris because he was perceived ugly outside the door of his house. This fear continues to persist and creates an insecurity in Zach as he picks a pen-pal who is a white. He is fearful of the retaliation by the pen-pal. Wicker believes that the atmosphere of the theatre remains filled with catastrophe.

Siegel (2018), on the other hand, not only highlights the racial marginality on the part of the non-whites but also tries to highlight the extent to which the whites are victims of racial superiority. Zachariah is made to do the tedious job while his white brother Morris stays at home to cook and clean. Among the two brothers, only Morris is educated. Morris lives in smokescreens. He is victim of racial superiority so much so that he opts to go out late at night as he lives in a black-majority area and possesses white skin. He fears the reaction of people when they see a white living in a non-white area of the place.

After the critical review of literature the researchers have observed that the play understudy may well be approached from the perspective of Critical Race Theory in order to investigate racial marginalization of the non-white South Africans. In addition, the way the discourse of racism and resultant white supremacy is internalized is also the part of this research.

Research Methodology

This research is based on Critical Race Theory. This theory examines the culture and the society through the lens of race, power and law. The theory has its roots in the race issues of America in the late twentieth century. The theory focuses on the racial power and white supremacy which is aided by legislation. The theory aims to transform this relationship between racial power and law in order to achieve anti-subordination and racial emancipation (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995). This research makes Delgado’s views about racism as the



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basis to conduct the analysis. Delgado (2017) believes that the system of race is like a two-headed hydra. One head consists of outright racism—the oppression of some people on grounds of who they are. The other head consists of white privilege—a system by which whites help and buoy each other up.

This is a qualitative research that makes use of textual analysis method. The rationale of selecting this method rests on the notion that it allows researchers to go out of the text and bring in the historical and contemporary culture to open up the text under study. The selected work is analyzed according to the Critical Race Theory. Critical Race theory helps the researchers to find out the role played by race in the play *The Blood Knot*. It unravels the unequal state created by the whites in the society for their self-interests. Drawing on the tenets of CRT, the research will focus on investigating the elements and impacts of racial marginalization on the lives of black characters. It will also foreground how the discourse of racism is internalized by characters living in the apartheid.

Analysis and Interpretation

The recurrent theme in Fugard's works is the projection of racial differences. He tries to highlight how the white supremacy is established and how the non-whites are compelled to live on the edges of marginality. *The Blood Knot* is no exception since it brings to limelight similar kinds of racial concerns. Through this projection, Fugard tries to hint at the effects of apartheid on the lives of the characters. This can be best described in the words of Foley (1996) who says: "The black man has his role chosen for him, and for the whole of his life he is a victim of that choice in whose making he had no part. The white man is his maker and his master" (p.37).

The play revolves around two characters who are half-brothers, named Zachariah Pietersen and Morris. Zachariah (Zach) is dark-skinned and Morris is light-skinned. There are many instances in the play that manifest the effects of apartheid on the lives of the characters and the racial marginality in the play. The setting of the play is a room. "One door, one window (no curtains), two beds, a table and two chairs. Also in evidence is a cupboard of sorts with an oil-stove, a kettle and a few pots." (Fugard 1991) The setting of the play portrays poverty of the brothers. "The shacks... enhances the poverty of its furnishings". (ibid) The play takes place in Korsten which is a "non-white location". "Non-white location" becomes a symbol and explains racist attitude of people living in that area that has led to the banishment and isolation of people based on the color of their skin. Moreover, the area is polluted because of industries. This makes the area unfit for human residence. This shows that blacks are not considered humans hence, the black locality is set in such miserable environment.



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Secondly, Zachariah works as a gatekeeper of a park. He suffers from footsore as he stands all day long. The entire amount earned by him goes under the possession of his brother – Morris, who is white and who mostly stays at home performing domestic chores. Morris is always after saving the money. It is he who does the planning for the future with the money that is not earned by him but by his brother. In a conversation with Morris, Zachariah thinks:

“So it happens to be my profit he’s making... I do the bloody work—all day long—in the sun. Not him. It’s my stinking feet that got the hardships”. (Fugard, 1991, p.13)

The act of Morris of saving the money by making his brother do the hard core labor merely because he is black reflects that he wants to gain the power over him. Zachariah doing the physical work and Morris doing the intellectual work reflects racial marginality and the effects of apartheid regime.

Thirdly, during his job as a gate-keeper of a park, many a times Zachariah falls the victim of insults, humiliations and beatings by other employees. He is not given any liberty when he informs his boss about his footsore because of all day long standing. He is even not allowed to use the washroom of the park as he is black. Zachariah expresses his anger by saying, “Prejudice and inhumanity in one sentence! ...When your feet are bad, you feel it, man.” At several points in the play Zach talks about the brutal attitude of his employer which shows racial marginality and the suffering on the part of Zach is the effect of the apartheid.

Fourthly, Zachariah is illiterate and Morris is literate because they belong to that section of the society where gaining education for a black is unacceptable. This becomes the reason for Morris becoming a wise man and Zach foolish. For instance, Zach checks the quality of the salt by smelling it. He passes his judgement about the difference between two salts packets of different companies based on the smell of them. Zachariah:

“(taking the second packet and looking inside) They look the same, don’t they? (smells) But they smell different. You know something? I think the old lot smells nicest. What do you say we go back to the old lot?” (Fugard 1991, p.28)

Morris, on the other hand, is educated and reads the description, on the packet, for Zach. This convinces Zach that the salt is suitable for his use. Another effect of apartheid regime and racial marginalization is evident here.

Fifthly, racial marginality is also reflected in the fact that it is Morris who even takes the life decisions of his brother. Zach is not even given the liberty of taking decisions for his life. When Zach complains to Morris that his life has changed since Morris came to his house. He says “I’m



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sick of talking. I'm sick of this room." He says to Morris that he wants a woman in his life. On this Morris compels him to keep a female pen-pal instead of asking him to get married.

Zachariah. I don't write letters.

Morris. I will.

Zachariah. Then it's your pen-pal. (p. 53)

When Zach says that he cannot keep a pen-pal as he doesn't know how to write a letter, Morris reassures him that he would write letters for him. This shows the extent to which apartheid affects the life of the marginalized class. They are deprived of their right to take basic decisions of their lives and are imposed with decisions by whites.

Sixthly, When Zach agrees to Morris' demand of keeping a pen-pal, Morris writes letters to Ethel Lange who is a "corresponding pen-pal of the opposite sex". When the conversation initiates with Ethel, both the brothers are unaware of the fact that that Ethel is white. Later on, when Morris informs Zach that Ethel is white and he should tell her the truth by saying "Dear Ethel, forgive me, but I was born a dark sort of boy who wanted to play with whiteness . . ." later on he further says "They don't like these games with their whiteness." These comments by Morris portray the utter racist nature of whites. They are willing to make any person their pen-pals through the newspaper ads but they have zero resistance for the blacks to be their friends. Here, we see the apartheid regime affecting the lives of the blacks so much so that they were hesitant to express the truth that they themselves were not born black but it was the nature that made them so, as Morris says "What is there a man can say or pray that will change the color of his skin or blind them to it." Such people were not treated based on the worth of their moral values but based on the color of their skin which was naturally given to them just as the fair tone skin is naturally given to whites.

Another incident that shows that whites in South Africa show radical black racism is through the comment of Morris who says: "...this white woman has written to me, a hot-not, a swartgat. This white woman thinks I'm a white man" (p.74). In a letter that Ethel writes to Morris she calls black 'swartgat'. 'Swartgat' is a demeaning term that is considered really offensive in South Africa (Al-Qarni, 2015). This is how the people in South Africa are marginalized with derogatory terms. The effects of apartheid on blacks are so hard that talking to a white woman can prove out to be disastrous for Zach.

Lastly, Zach convinces Morris to go and meet Ethel on his behalf. They go to market to buy a suit for Morris with the money of Zach. In the shop when Zach wears a suit and remarks



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“Do I look like a gentleman, Mr. Moses?” the salesman answers, “My friend, it takes all sorts of different sorts to make this world.” He hints at the black color of Zach. This shows that racial marginality was not a hidden construct but was publically expressed. There are tensions that are observed between the two brothers throughout the play where Morris represents whites and Zach represents blacks.

These instances of racism, racial discrimination not only establish that non-whites South Africans live on the margins but they also inkle toward the notion of internalization. That the non-whites rarely come forward to resist the racist ideology stems from the fact that they deem it natural to be inferior. Instead of viewing race as a socio-cultural construct, they take it as natural and hence remain somewhat content with their lot. In the play, Zach has internalized the inferiority of his race. He has been nurtured in an environment where he has observed his race as second-rated. Ever since his childhood, he has internalized the belief that whites are superior to black people. A very apt example of this is the incident in which he recalls his mother. Whenever he recalls his mother he indulges in pain because his mother always preferred her white son. In scene III, Zach and Morris recall the lullaby’s of their mother. The point that is to be observed here is that the mother sung different lullabies for both of her sons. The lullaby for Zach was:

“My skin is black,

The soap is blue,

But the washing comes out white.

I took a man On a Friday night;

Now I’m washing a baby too.

Just a little bit black,

And a little bit white,

He’s a Capie through and through.” (Fugard, 1991, p.121)

The lullaby that was sung for Morris was completely different. For Morris, the mother said, “Lullabye baby, you’ll get to the top.” In fact, the idea of superiority on the basis of color was very much deep-rooted in his psyche.

Another incident where internalization of racial marginality can be seen in Zach is when Zach is scared that what would happen if Ethel comes to know about his color complexion. He says:



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Zachariah: (severe and bitter) Ethel is white and I am black.

Morris: That's a very good beginning, Zach. Zachariah. If she sees me . . .

Morris: Keep it up.

Zachariah: . . . she'll be surprised. (p.167)

Here , it can be clearly observed that Zach has internalized that Ethel would not accept him as he is black and the comments of Morris suggests that he had a sense of superiority that he imposes on Zach. Similarly, when Zach goes to market to buy suit for the meeting with Ethel, the salesman accuses him of his complexion and he says “I’m the black sort”. This remark also reflects that racial marginality has been ingrained in Zach. So the latter being a representative of non-white South African populations, remains a victim of racial discrimination both inside his house as well as in the society at large.

Conclusion

The perception of people about themselves depends upon their environment and their relations with others in the society as is observed in the case of Zachariah and Morris. Zachariah, right from his childhood has internalized that he cannot be at a superior position as he makes comments like “help me God, I got sick of myself”. This makes him submissive. As he lives in present, he is not concerned about the future. He is satisfied with the low level job and limited amount of money. He has no aspirations to boost himself. Morris, on the other hand, represents whites and always plans for the future. He finds himself to be superior and is not satisfied in living at a shabby room. He desires for farms and a bright future but is unwilling to do hard work and relies on the pay of his brother like a parasite. This is what is projected through the Critical Race Theory particularly the idea of two-headedness given by Delgado. In the two headed hydra, Zach denotes the head that represents those who are oppressed based on their black identity and Morris denotes the other head as he possesses the white privileges. It can be concluded that apartheid regime and racial marginality miserably impacts the lives of non-whites South Africans and the worse part of it is that the non-whites have internalized the system of racial discrimination and they mostly accept it as natural. They are so much submissive that they don't think of rebellion or resistance.



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