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A Sociosemiotic Analysis of Fugard's My Children! My Africa!

This essay presents a sociosemiotic analysis of *My Children! My Africa!* (1989) by Athol Fugard. By considering the characters' views about self, community, education, and time, it points to the Fugard's anxious attempt to offer liberalism as the solution to apartheid in South Africa instead of oppositional politics, especially blacks' calls for activism and communalism. Sociosemiotics is suitable to plays overtly political; it holds that political writers are troubled by political changes that do not correspond to a firmly held ideology—a tension between what a playwright believes is absolute and what s/he senses and perhaps fears is happening. Keys to the analysis are contemporary texts, including essays from leading Black writers and journalists and from studies and essays from attendees of a 1986 conference on liberal solutions to the unrest in South Africa.

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Marked by growing black resistance movements and stringent governmental counter measures, the mid-1980s was an anxious time for all South Africans. After the partial state of emergency in July 1985, the first since 1960, gave police more power, violence erupted across South Africa. Eager to end apartheid but troubled by what they felt was a dangerous polarization of ideological extremes from the black leaders, South African liberals argued instead for incremental change. As circumstances only seemed to worsen by the summer of 1986, leading liberal scholars and writers held a conference in Cape Town to discuss how to bring about the end of apartheid through liberalism. In the introduction of book of essays that arose from that conference, the editors argue, "Many South Africans of all classes, races, and ethnic affiliations might, given the chance, opt for models of liberal and social democracy taken from the West, rather than totalitarianism models from the East or one-party models from Africa. Consequently, it is the job of liberals to argue the advantages of democratic liberalism in season and out" (*Democratic Liberalism* 17).

Sensitive to the confusion and turmoil of that time, the South African playwright Athol Fugard echoes that liberalism in his 1989 play *My Children! My Africa!* Much that has been written on the play focuses on Fugard himself, his white liberal views, his use of a young white student, Isabel, and a black township teacher, Mr. M, as the mouthpieces for South African liberalism as well as the historical and political contexts of the play and the "realities" of those contexts, especially the issue of violence.¹ In his provocative, thoughtful, and unabashedly

¹ See Visser; Andrew Foley, "Fugard, Liberalism and the Ending of Apartheid," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 9:2, October 1997, 57-76; Marcia Blumberg, "Fragmentation and psychosis: Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!*," in *Madness in Drama*, ed James Redmond, *Themes in Drama*, 15, Cambridge: Cambridge

scathing criticism of the play, Nicholas Visser maintains that Fugard sought to establish South African liberalism as “no longer as the cutting edge of advanced social thoughts but now as the sensible and respectable middle way between the apartheid regime and liberation politics” (488). To do so, Fugard had to distort the political and historical realities of the time, “For it is not enough for liberal values to be shown to be resurgent; ideally they must be shown to be permanent, never seriously threatened, uninterrupted in their occupancy of the ideological high ground” (494-95). By considering the views of the male student Thami, something that heretofore scholars have overlooked or downplayed, as well as those of Isabel and Mr. M, I hope to suggest that Fugard’s play might not display his confidence in the resurgence or restoration of liberalism in South African society but, instead, an anxiety about the rejection of liberalism.

I rely on and adapt the approaches that Jean Alter sets forth in *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre*, an examination suitable to plays overtly “political” and “philosophical” as critics have long regarded Fugard’s dramatic works. Alter holds that “political” and/or “philosophical” writers are “sensitive individuals [who] are perturbed by social problems that neither they nor their society have as yet clearly identified” or what he describes as a “certain tension between a changing social reality and a lagging adjustment of ideology” (16-17). Writers turn to “fiction” to ease, offset, counter, deny, and contradict that tension arising from the conflict brought about from some emerging ideology, often the opposite of what writers believe to be true, appropriate, and just. Alter argues that the playwrights create “fiction [that] does not offer a mediated or distorted picture of a state of affairs acknowledged by the artist to be true . . . but as disguised picture of a state of affairs that has not yet been acknowledged to be true” (18). These writers feel what Alter calls an “unconscious malaise” which is particularly evident “when social and cultural changes occur at a particularly rapid pace, leaving behind the much slower adjustment of ideology, values, or art forms” (20). A sociosemiotic analysis of *My Children! My Africa!* reveals, I believe, an anxiety many South African liberals felt as blacks came to view liberalism in the 1980s not as a means to end apartheid but as yet another agency of white racism. Visser argues that Fugard seeks to restore or reinstate liberal values yet displays an “ignorance of oppositional politics” (496). A sociosemiotic analysis suggests that he fashions his play with an ideology he felt true, appropriate, and right, yet the attitudes that Thami expresses about community, education, self, and time expose an anxious, fearful awareness of what the playwright felt as a sensitive writer, that unconscious malaise that Alter notes. As a liberal, Fugard should be expected to offer liberalism as the solution to apartheid. So sure in his beliefs, he does not need to dramatize what Visser sees as “a liberal rejection of collective politics” (496); instead he predicts that elite blacks must and will come to reject collective politics once they see that liberals are right about the consequences of black activism.

In this essay, I focus on the characters’ attitudes about self, community, education, and time as signs of an inherent dichotomy in the play as Fugard privileges liberalism and questions oppositional politics. In this way I hope to show how sociosemiotic analysis considers characters and issues that indicate the tension between what a playwright believes is absolute and what s/he senses and perhaps fears is happening. Keys to my analysis are contemporary texts: essays by leading Black writers and journalists appearing in for example *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, published by the African Studies Association, and essays by liberal thinkers from *Democratic*

UP, 1993, 241-253, and Albert Wetheim, *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 2000.

Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect, a collection of twenty-four essays arising from the Cape Town conference in the summer of 1986.

Set “in a small Eastern Cape Karoo town in the autumn of 1984,” *My Children! My Africa!* traces the conflict between a township teacher, Mr. M, and his prized student, Thami Mbikwana. Ultimately, both must decide whether or not to support a boycott of the schools, and the play explores each character's reason for his decision. The action begins with an inter-school debate between Thami and Isabel Dyson, an Afrikaner girl. Excited by their debating skill and hoping for a scholarship for Thami, Mr. M arranges for the two students to form a team for a literary competition. As they study for their competition, Thami and Isabel become friends, and she learns more about life in the townships than she would have ever imagined. Political tensions rising in the township, however, force Thami, Mr. M and Isabel to abandon their plans. Thami withdraws from the competition after the leaders of the boycott order no further contact with whites. When he learns that Mr. M is suspected of being an informer and thus in danger, Thami tries to warn his teacher and to convince him to support the boycott. Yet Mr. M refuses and admits that what Thami has heard is true: he has given information about the boycott leaders to the police. Considered a collaborator, Mr. M is killed and burnt by a mob. Then Thami and Isabel confront each other about Mr. M's death, and he tries to explain to her the reason for the death. By play's end, Thami has travelled north to join a revolutionary force, and Isabel pledges to Mr. M's memory that she will work to change her country.

In the 1980s tensions in South Africa continued following the violence of the Soweto uprising (June 1976) and the government's bans of groups associated with Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Despite the government's attempts, many features of the BCM continued to influence black thinkers; scholars of South Africa signalled a change as early as 1979, for example Gail M. Gerhart who notes in *Black Power In South Africa* that “An ideological crossroads [had been] reached” (315). Black leaders in the 1980s, with the ideas of Stephen Biko and Frantz Fanon in mind, called for action. In the keynote address at a March 1986 conference on education, for instance, journalist Zwelakhe Sisulu stated that the time for “empty slogans” is over as the people working to end apartheid were “prepared to take action on [their] demands” (18). The social reality was changing as more “elite” blacks (especially educated professionals) came to adopt various beliefs of oppositional politics, by that time loosely associated with the United Democratic Front (UDF). This emergent activism fostered polarization as a strategy conducive to radical change, a key idea of both Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon, and in turn changed racial identity in South Africa. In “The Definition of Black Consciousness” Biko puts forth these two fundamental tenets of the political philosophy he calls *black consciousness*:

1. Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude.
2. Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being. (12)

Biko's definition of being black points to an essential concept of African ontology, one that comes into play in Mr. M and Thami's decisions about the school boycotts. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti writes that unlike “most Western views of man [which] abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic,” the African view “denies that persons can be defined by focusing of this or that physical or psychological characteristic” but holds that “the community . . . defines the person as a person” only after one goes through a “process of incorporation with the community” (157-68). Menkiti calls this African view “the processual nature of being” (158). Personhood “is not given simply because

one if born of human seed" (158), but it must be "attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations" (162). Therefore, if personhood is something one must attain, then individuals must choose whether or not to incorporate and how to incorporate, and significantly one can fail to become a person according to the community.

African communalism underscored the polarization that black activists argued was the appropriate method to end apartheid in South Africa. To be black was to choose African ideas instead of white ones, especially individualism. Blacks who chose not to join the struggle were labelled as collaborators, or as Mbuelo Vizikhungo Mzamane and David R. Howarth describe "Non-White" that is, "blacks who aspired to white values or were deemed to be serving the white power structure" (181). As a consequence, various groups associated with UDF tried blacks considered collaborators in "people's courts," and often the punishment was "necklacing," a method of executing someone by forcing a tire filled with accelerant around their chest and arms and setting the accelerant on fire.

With black leaders calling for blacks to reject all ideologies deemed "white" as patronizing and racist, they particularly attacked liberalism as yet another means to maintain the status quo in South Africa; little wonder then that liberals were anxious. African communalism and polarization threaten individualism, a key value of liberalism, and liberal solutions for progressive change. Many liberals failed to realize that as more blacks heeded the call for activism, more blacks rejected liberalism. F. Van Zyl Slabbert posed this issue in "Incremental Change or Revolution" by arguing that liberals risk being dismissed by blacks by "plead[ing] the merits of incremental change" or what he calls "the politics of stability" instead of "the politics of freedom" (409). He argued that liberals had to rethink the traditional role "of mediator, negotiator, conciliator [working] for a society in which the freedom of the individual [is] the basic source of stability and freedom was a basic contradiction that could be resolved by rational people of goodwill" (402). What Van Zyl Slabbert sensed was that black leaders viewed liberalism as "white" and thus working to maintain apartheid. Nearly a decade before, Gerhart warns liberals that keeping "a paternalistic view of race relations" in which whites help blacks mature through assimilation and acculturation no longer spoke to blacks. She goes on to say that many blacks dismiss liberals' argument that "the outer limit of action" should be "verbal protest and symbolic racial mixing" (260).

Fugard sets most of his scenes in a township classroom, an important sign of the conflicting ideologies as contemporary texts make clear. Three 1987 essays illustrate this. In "People's Education for People's Power," Zwelakhe Sisulu epitomizes the black argument to boycott government schools and demand education by the people, writing:

We are no longer demanding the same education as whites, since this is education for domination. People's education means education at the service of the people as a whole, education that liberates, education that puts the people in command of their lives. We are not prepared to accept any "alternative" to Bantu Education which is imposed on the people from above. (26)

The school boycotts puzzled most liberals, especially as liberalism holds education as obvious, certain method to make life better for blacks. In "Liberals and the Education Crises," Jane Hofmeyr warns fellow liberals that for blacks schools have "become contaminated by association" as yet another instrument of control used by the government and apartheid (306). She ends her essay by pleading that "Liberals cannot be passive" and "Liberal principles must be

translated into action" (317). Heribert Adam expresses his opinion that the views of education that Hofmeyr tried to convince fellow liberals of:

So, too, the black education system is in disarray. The initial slogan "liberation before education" has given way to notions of alternative "people's education." The education system is increasingly used for overt political purposes. A new curriculum, stressing political relevancy, has emerged. Unsympathetic teachers are harassed and unable to continue in the old authoritarian style, and pupils often teach themselves. Classrooms have become the new sites for mobilization for liberation. Many school are guarded by soldiers. (322-23)

In other words, the activism that many liberals feared threatened for liberals one of the certain means for reform and progress.

In the very way some liberals advise not to do, Fugard polarizes and thus distorts the complicated issues and situations in black townships: the classroom symbolizes steady if slow progress toward reform; the "streets" as the dichotomous "outside the classroom," violent lawlessness. Uneasy that blacks are growing impatient with arguments for incremental changes, Fugard wants to stress that education is a solution for apartheid because it fosters rational goodwill. To that end he wants his play to dramatize the dangerous, tragic consequences of the black education system being in disarray; the probable, natural conclusion for liberals who view education as a key to change is violence culminating in the death of blacks like Mr. M and the loss of the intelligent and influential students like Thami.

Two key liberal promises, education and race mixing dictate the first part of the play, and accordingly Fugard highlights those promises through the figures of Isabel and Mr. M. The play begins in the township classroom with a liberal "victory": Isabel winning the popular vote after she and Thami debate differences between men and women. Mr. M is pleased that his black students, who give Isabel, a white outsider, the victory, are "the real winners" as "They had to listen. . . . intelligently!" (7) Fugard seems to want Isabel to represent the identity many South African liberals held at that time, especially white English-speaking liberals, a fiction that the editors of *Democratic Liberalism* articulate in their introduction:

[Liberals] have defined themselves as reasonable people occupying the middle ground between implacable extremes. This position has resulted in part from the Christian emphasis on peace-making and reconciliation, in part from the fact that many liberals were English-speaking whites with weak connections to the contending forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism, and in part from the comfortable and vulnerable middle-class status of most liberals, blacks included. One outcome of liberals' identification with the middle ground has been their emphasis on compromise and accommodation, and the adoption of stands seem conservative from today's perspective. (7)

A self-described "rebel in the family," with opinions of her own, Isabel comes forth for much of the play as self-directed, quick to express those opinions, and ready to consider others' beliefs while holding steadfastly to hers. A third-generation "Sober, sensible, English-speaking South African," she embraces the liberal ideals of slow, steady resistance and progress through education and cooperation (9).

The debate with Thami becomes a realization for Isabel that the blacks "had no intention of being grateful," (16) leaving her feeling exposed. Until she goes to Thami's school for the debate, she admits that the black location was, in her words, "on the edge of my life, the way it is out there on the edge of town" (15). The debate becomes her discovery, a lesson about all the locations in the country, of how little she knows and how much she can learn. That experience

and that discovery become “so exciting” (17). When Mr. M proposes the team competition, she is quick to agree with him that “Knowledge has banished fear” and she and he are “kindred spirits” (23).

Once she senses the tension between Mr. M and Thami and in the location, she tries to understand her peer, yet she seems never to grasp how the political is more important than the personal, something liberals warned others to avoid. Instead of being friends with Thami, she attempts to take the role many South African liberals adopted, namely that of a mediator, negotiator, and conciliator. Isabel fails to understand Thami's decision as he chooses what he feels is right over personal relationships and any personal gains he might have enjoyed as diligent, smart, and elite student. With her liberal bias, she never appreciates that he chooses the political over the personal. When Thami explains that “Mr. M has chose to identify himself” with an education system that the Comrades believe maintains apartheid, Isabel advises that he does not allow that to interfere with his relationship with Mr. M because something going “wrong between the two of” them is “just about the worst thing [she can] imagine. We all need each other” (44-5). Before the scene ends, she harangues Thami about friendship, “If we can't be open and honest with each other and say what is in our hearts, we've got no right to use [the word friendship]” (45). Again, Isabel assumes the role of advisor—expressing the liberal preference for the personal over the political.

In Act II, when Thami decides that he must resign from the competition, as it symbolizes cooperation with whites, Isabel then lectures him on the definition of freedom:

Other people deciding who can and who can't be your friends, what you must do and what you can't do. Is this the Freedom you've been talking to me about? That you were going to fight for? (57)

In their last exchange, after the death of Mr. M, Isabel confronts Thami, demanding an explanation of what she considers a murder, the “madness [that] drove those people to kill a man who had devoted his whole life to helping them,” a man she describes as a good person and “one of the most beautiful beings [she has] ever known” (71). Despite Thami's efforts, Isabel does not understand and seemingly rejects his explanation. Instead of listening, she argues, at times intensely, that Mr. M acted “as a matter of conscience,” that a “mad mob” murdered “one unarmed defenseless man,” and his death was “so wrong! So stupid” for the entire country needed him (73; 75). Here, she expresses the outrage and fear many liberals felt about black activists' retribution against “collaborators,” viewing it as harmful, senseless, and unruly violence against good people.

Isabel can only promise to Thami that she will try to understand all that has happened, especially the death of Mr. M and her friend's decision to “go north.” Fugard gives the last monologue to her; it seems to suggest that she mourns Mr. M's death still as a murder, another wasted life lost to the “madness,” the irrational chaos, the ugliness, and the stupidity, all the labels liberals used to describe the results of the black activism of the 1980s. Despite the death of Mr. M and the “loss” of Thami to “fighters in the north,” She restates an enduring faith the liberal hope that rational people collaborating can and will reform South Africa. From that faith, Isabel vows to Mr. M to make her life useful in the way she feels he was. In short, despite all that happens in the play, Mr. M's fear about South Africa “arriving too late” and Thami's resigned, mournful admission that “the most terrible words in” English are “Too late,” Isabel assures Mr. M and the audience that hope exists for South Africa—presumably when Mr. M's prediction that

when the “boycott comes to an inglorious end like all the others” (59), the liberal ideals dismissed as “old-fashioned” will prevail.

In Mr. M Isabel finds a kindred spirit, for while he may describe himself as a black Confucian, he seems as liberal as Isabel. Fugard's Mr. M embodies many of the qualities of black teachers activists were quick to consider as working to secure apartheid. Mr. M maintains, “Respect for authority, right authority, is deeply ingrained in the African soul” (24). Mr. M assumes that, as his favourite student, Thami trusts his judgment of what is best. In their serious discussion about politics, Mr. M cuts him off sternly; refusing to entertain the young man's views, Mr. M says, “If you want to do something ‘revolutionary’ for me let us sit down and discuss it, because I have a few constructive alternatives I would like to suggest” (40). Moments later, and without conferring with Thami, Mr. M enthusiastically accepts Isabel's invitation for tea at her parents' home as “a pleasure and a privilege” (40). Her invitation and his gracious acceptance are revealing. Afternoon tea had by that time become politically significant in South Africa; Biko specifically points to tea at white homes as a symbol of how liberals patronize “intelligent blacks” (24). In Act II, frustrated and fearful by Thami's hardening stance, he exclaims “I will ask you all the questions I like . . . Because I am a man and you are a boy” (60).

Convinced in that “right authority,” Mr. M fails to appreciate the changes in the township, especially the new attitudes about education. He ardently believes that his favourite student Thami must remain in school; as he explains to Isabel, he feels that his responsibility is to make sure that Thami becomes the “real” leader as “Powerful forces are fighting for the souls of . . . young people.” Thami is what his generation needs, a real leader and not a rabble-rouser. He embodies the prevalent liberal attitudes towards the township riots. Education is a means for stability, and the equal footing that black leaders demand comes through education. He holds on the classroom as a space for hope, and for him, anything outside of it is chaos. Whites can and will empathize with blacks as Isabel symbolizes, and for this reason, Thami must work in the system, go to a university, to become a “real” leader. Even during the riots, Mr. M desperate to “Do something” and “Stop the madness” can only think to return to his schoolroom, imaging that “ringing his school bell wildly” will turn his students away from chaotic violence in the streets and back to the rationality of the school building (62).

Revealing a liberal confidence in progress and perfectibility, Mr. M is obsessed with the future as he implies in his first monologue:

The people tease me. “Faster Mr. M” they shout to me from their front doors. “You'll be late”. They think it's a funny joke. They don't know how close they are to a terrible truth . . .
Yes! The clocks are ticking my friends. History has got a strict timetable. If we're not careful we might be remembered as the country where everybody arrived too late. (29)

His anxieties that South Africa will be “too late” signify Mr. M's acculturated *concern for*, but also *confidence in*, the future. Those ticking clocks he hears warn him that his country is wasting an allotted amount of time to solve its problems; thus, he considers time as a commodity not to be squandered, an essentially liberal view. In this way, to me Mr. M embodies a liberal and European view of time. A faith in the future meshes well with liberal assurance for progress in that since the nineteenth century Western cultures have viewed time as “linear,” a chain of events, as Anthony F. Aveni describes, “a sequence that began billions of years in the past and is likely to extend for an indefinitely long period in the future” (63). Aveni states that the Western view is that we live in “a universe in transformation, and today's questions and time and creation emphasize process, not stasis. Our intent lies in change. What we really want to know is how the universe progresses” (150). Furthermore, his metaphor that history has a timetable also suggests

his acculturated conception of time in that a timetable lists events expected to take place. He believes that his country must adhere to the schedule if it wants to progress towards its goals.

Mr. M sees the literary competition as an opportunity for Thami to fulfil his future role and to demonstrate positive race mixing; if the two students win (as Isabel assures Mr. M they will), he will demand a full university scholarship for Thami. Moreover, on a symbolic level Thami and Isabel's cooperation and subsequent victory, Mr. M believes, will represent to their country how blacks and whites can work together to achieve a goal. He first imagined them as a team after their debate, when they so skilfully engaged him and thought: "They shouldn't be fighting each other. They should be fighting together! If the sight of them as opponents is so exciting, imagine what it would be like if they were allies. If those two stood side by side and joined forces, they could take on anybody and win" (20). His fears that Thami's education will be wasted drive Mr. M's ambition for the literary competition, for he worries that Isabel and Thami will be "another two victims of this country's lunacy" (21). His answer is cooperation and education. Mr. M fully embraces the educational system because for him it offers the best opportunity for Thami and the other special students to forge a society based on cooperation. As Mr. M explains in one of his monologues, he keeps the savage animal Hope alive by feeding it his young people, and explains that is why he teaches. Thus, the literary competition means so much to Mr. M because it will reward his special student – his favourite, for whom he has waited, "that one eager and gifted young head into which he can pour all that he knows and loves and who will justify all the years of frustration in the classroom" (24-25). When Isabel agrees to join the competition, Mr. M tells her "The future is ours Isabel. We'll show this stupid country how it is done" (25).

Mr. M refuses to act, for that means changing the system he embraces. When Thami confronts him with his willingness to teach in the system, Mr. M argues that he has educated his students by working within the system. Nevertheless, his fears of lawless violence and his hope for black assimilation reveal his doubts about blacks. He believes that the only consequence of the boycott is chaos, and if Thami joins, he is lost. It cannot lead to change, i.e., freedom for blacks. In their final exchange, moments before he is killed, Mr. M tells Thami why he fears the boycott. He describes an image he saw on television:

An Ethiopian tribesman, and he was carrying the body of a little child that had died of hunger in the famine. . . a small bundle carelessly warped in a few rags. . . .

He held that little bundle very lightly as he shuffled along to a mass grave, and when he reached it, he didn't have the strength to kneel and lay it down gently. . . . He just opened his arms and let it fall. . . .

The tribesman and dead child do duty for all Thami. Every African soul is either carrying that bundle or in it. (68-69)

The Ethiopian famine resulted from civil wars as factions struggled for power, and Mr. M fears that change can only lead to a similar situation, a world that "wastes" his children and his Africa. The infant the tribesman carries represents a wasted future; the tribesman a generation holding only death and slowing starving. To Mr. M change threatens to make "mockery of all [his] visions of splendor" he once found in Africa (68).

Instead Mr. M hopes for integration, but he implies throughout the play that blacks must prove themselves to whites, and he sees Thami as his "project" to show whites and perhaps blacks that blacks can succeed in the white world. Mr. M does not realize, however, that to the young protesters Thami's success, for example in the literary competition, would only demonstrate his assimilation into the white world. The students believe, as Biko argues, that by

continually having to prove themselves to whites – by assimilating to an “established set of norms and code of behavior set by and maintained by whites” blacks do not force integration but merely uphold a “superior-inferior white-black stratification” (24). As a teacher in the Bantu education system, Mr. M can only hope to create a black elite that can enjoy some rewards under apartheid, yet despite his faith that “using only words, a man can right a wrong and judge and execute the wrongdoer” and that Thami has the potential to be a leader, as long as skin pigmentation remains the basis for white racism, whites can never consider blacks as equal.

If Fugard intends Isabel and Mr. M to represent liberal values, then he wants Thami to represent the consequences of rejecting liberal values for polarization. BC ideology is a threat, as it distracts elite blacks like Thami from sure if slow progress that liberalism assures, a distraction that only brings about confusion and thus violence, lawlessness, and loss as it had in the 1970s. Apartheid is not the cause; black rejection of liberalism is. Fugard's sincere intent is to end apartheid, yet his play presents the emergent black activism as a danger.

As a youngster, Thami loved school; he remembers in his long monologue that his school reports describe him as “a most particularly promising pupil” (46). Eager and bright, Thami excelled, and he wanted to become a medical doctor to help his people. Yet now his “praiseworthy ambition has unfortunately died,” after he concludes that “what causes most of [the suffering of his people] is not an illness that can be cured by the pills and bottles of medicine they hand out at the clinic” (47). He recognizes that apartheid causes their sufferings, and he sees as well that education and the future provide only individual fulfilment for bright young blacks in South Africa.

Thami's unselfishness led him to want to be a doctor, but now that unselfishness makes him see that the rewards of Bantu education are available – to a limited degree –only to a handful of blacks, the elite. Thami loses his ambition to excel in the institutions defined by apartheid for those institutions are open to a select few, and he could find no satisfaction as a doctor. He will not participate in this system that allows restricted and unequal integration for a few elite blacks. His education and achievements in the white world would benefit only him, but at the same time he could never be equal to whites, only superior to most blacks. He decides that personal ambition and achievement of young intelligent blacks do not lead to true integration, but only a mock integration built on the suffering of the majority of blacks.

Fugard has Thami express the African communalism associated with the BCM. The African belief that personhood must be earned by participating in communal endeavours helps to explain Thami's decision to reject education and join the boycott. During one of their practice sessions for the literary competition, Thami assures Isabel that Africans “won't leave it to Time to bring . . . down” oppressive cultures (39). Mr. M breaks in, and he and Thami confront each other:

Mr. M: Who is the we you speak of with such authority Thami?

Thami: The People.

Mr. M: Yes, yes, yes, of course . . . I should have known. “The People” . . . with a capital P. Does that include me? Am I one of “The People”?

Thami: If you choose to be.

Mr. M: I've got to choose have I. My black skin doesn't confer automatic membership. So how do I go about choosing?

Thami: By identifying with the fight for our Freedom. (39)

Mr. M expresses the basic premise of white racism – that skin color is the measure of human beings. He questions Thami's argument that one must identify with the fight for freedom by

implying that his black skin should include him. In other words Mr. M claims that since he is not white, he wants what blacks want. Yet Thami counters with the argument that if he wants what blacks want, he must act. And for the good of the community, Thami willingly forsakes what personal achievements he might enjoy from apartheid. He argues that his people must oppose acculturation:

We have woken up at last. We have found another school--the streets, the little rooms, the funeral parlors of the location--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 were never made.

Those are the lessons we are eager and proud to learn, because they are lessons about our history, about our heroes. (50)

Thami comes to see Bantu education not as an opportunity but as a form of control that imposes white culture on blacks, and he denounces the classrooms as “traps which have been carefully set to catch” the minds and souls of South Africa’s young black elite (50).

Thami also comes to reject the liberal faith in the future. He reconsidered the rewards of education when he listened to a speech by the Inspector of Bantu Schools who tells Thami and his classmates:

you are special! You are the elite! We have educated you because we want you to be major shareholders in the future of this wonderful Republic of ours. In fact, we want all the peoples of South Africa to share in that future. (48)

Thami cannot reconcile the ideals of Bantu education with the reality he finds in the township; when the inspector continually mentions “the future,” Thami is no longer the inspired student he was:

my head was trying to deal with that one word: the Future! He kept using it . . . “our future,” “the country’s future,” “a wonderful future of peace and prosperity”. What does he really mean, I kept asking myself. Why does my heart go hard and tight as a stone when he says it? I look around me in the location at the men and women who went out into that “wonderful future” before me. What do I see? Happy and contented shareholders in this exciting enterprise called the Republic of South Africa? (49)

Striving to understand his country and its ties to European ideology, Thami questions the faith in the future whereas Mr. M seems liberal. While the traditional African view looks to the past, the European view is to the future. As John Mbiti demonstrates, in African thinking the “future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot therefore constitute time” (17). Therefore, the future is only “potential” time, not “actual” time. For this reason, African time “moves ‘backward’ rather than ‘forward’ and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place” (17). Unable to look past the present situation in South Africa and towards the future, Thami embraces the African conception of time, with its emphasis on the present as actual time and its disbelief in the future as potential time.

Fugard has Thami grow angrier for much of the second part of the play after being gracious and friendly before. The young student in particular resents his teacher’s assurance of “right authority.” In his first exchange with Isabel, he reports, “I changed. Things changed. Everything’s changed” (12). When Mr. M exits, Thami explains to Isabel that his teacher “is out of touch with what is really happening to us blacks and the way we feel about things. . . . His

ideas about change are the old-fashioned ones" (42-43). Thami has come to embrace the ideology of the BCM, rejecting liberal faith in the future and individual achievement, and Fugard suggests that the activism has distracted a promising and bright young black man.

For much of the play Fugard has Thami voice the beliefs many black activists expressed at the time, yet after Mr. M is "necklaced," Thami regrets what has happened. In his confrontation with Isabel, Thami admits feeling that he is "too late." He regrets not expressing his love for his teacher and not attempting to explain the boycott to Mr. M. He says to her, "I'll never forgive myself for not trying harder with him and letting him know . . . my true feelings for him. Right until the end I tried to deny it. . .to him, to myself" (76). Thami's moment of recognition that he is "too late," an echo of Mr. M's anxiety about South Africa, is a warning of the consequences of the emergent activism: blacks like Thami will realize that the violence and the loss arising from black activism only hurt blacks.

True to the beliefs held by the majority of liberals in South Africa in the 1980s, Fugard envisions only one possible consequence of the school boycotts. Saying that the play was "between me and my country" (xx) Fugard wants it to be a tragedy, a lesson about the rejection of progressive liberalism: whites should be like Isabel, and blacks should be like Mr. M, not like Thami. Its overt political argument is that blacks must understand that black activism must lead only to violence. The tragedy mostly arises when Thami realizes that he is "too late" to stop the consequences that led to the death of Mr. M. If the play has a villain, it is BC ideology as Fugard and other liberals of the time misunderstood it – a threat that distracts elite blacks from the sure if slow progress that liberalism assures and as a danger that only brings about polarization which in turns brings about confusion and chaotic violence and loss. Fugard's sincere intent to call for the end of apartheid, and Isabel's final assertion that the future is still hopeful suggests that the end is near, for Isabel seemingly comforts the audience that the emergent black activism is indeed dangerous yet short-lived.

Jean Alter's argues that "problems that . . . inspire and inform fictional stories result from a tension between, on the one hand, rapid changes in society and, on the other hand, an ideology that lags behind" (240). Fugard failed to realize that elite blacks like Thami were now choosing communalism over progressive liberalism, and sincerely and fully committed to emergent activism, they viewed the deaths of black collaborators not as personal tragedies but political executions. In my understanding of sociosemiotics, I believe that analyzing political plays that dramatize fundamental cultural conflicts focuses on what Alter calls the "conflict between the ideological bias of the text and the reality that it seeks to reflect" (19). In short, expectedly Fugard attempts to affirm liberalism, a purpose that critics like Visser condemns, yet to do so, Fugard has to fashion a fiction that denies or diminishes the threat to liberalism.

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