

THE LASTING EFFECTS OF THE APARTHEID

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Abstract

The apartheid was an era of terror for black South Africans as they faced many challenges. Through literature, writers such as: Zakes Mda, Damon Galgut, and Nadine Gordimer used their voices to speak out against the poor treatment of black South Africans. The writers exposed these issues through highlighting the different treatment regarding jobs and housing. In my paper, I analyze and discuss their treatment noting The Excelsior 19, racism, segregation, and identity. In an effort show this, I explore these issues through novels such: *The Madonna of Excelsior*, *Ways of Dying*, *The Promise*, and *July's People*. The paper is written in sections: apartheid, transition, and post-apartheid. *The Madonna of Excelsior* by Zakes Mda discusses the early apartheid and notes the experience of mixed-raced babies and the hardships they faced. *The Promise* by Damon Galgut serves as a transitional piece that foreshadows the end of the apartheid. *Ways of Dying*—also by Zakes Mda marks, in my opinion, the post-apartheid era. Zakes Mda recounts the horrific aspects of the apartheid in a post-apartheid text. He tells the story through Toloki—a professional funeral mourner and Noria—who has lost her child and has endured much tribulation. *July's People*, by Nadine Gordimer is also a post-apartheid text. This text describes a utopic South Africa as Gordimer demands for a better South Africa. The novels discussed in this paper prove that no matter the period, black South Africans are still struggling to find their place.

The Lasting Effects of the Apartheid

According to *Britannica*, the word “apartheid,” in Afrikaans means apartness. It was a policy that controlled the affairs between whites and non-whites. The apartheid was heavily associated with racial segregation, along with political and economic discrimination against blacks. The apartheid laws were rescinded in the late 1990s, but the effects lasted well into the twenty first century. Black South Africans were forced into segregation by the laws of the apartheid—forcing them to live in separate locations and substandard housing, along with ill-suited jobs such as: working as maids, in meat markets, and in gold mines. Black South Africans were treated poorly during the apartheid, during the transitional period, and during the post-apartheid era.

Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa and civil rights activist. He served from 1994-1999. Because of his disdain for the horrible situation of his county—the apartheid, Nelson Mandela worked tirelessly to open a new chapter in South Africa—a peaceful one. He is highly regarded in his efforts in creating a “new” South Africa. His belief that politics should be moral caused him to try to obtain reconciliation and peace.

In the article, *Nelson Mandela: Decolonization, Apartheid, and the Politics of Moral Force*, Bogues asserts that “In the politics of moral force, the political personality is central... He devoted his life to ending the system; he had been jailed for his political practice.” Noting this point, Bogues argues that because Nelson Mandela suffered, “he had the moral authority to turn that suffering into a political force of change,” (Bogues 35). While I agree that because Nelson Mandela suffered, he has the moral authority to turn that suffering into a political force of change, I also agree that this is true for writers such as Zakes Mda. He is a Black South African writer, who also has the moral authority to turn suffering into political change. While his suffering was not in jail like Nelson Mandela, he still experienced and witnessed the harsh realities of the apartheid. He uses his literary platform to cause political change.

To that point, how strong is Bogues’ theory of suffering when discussing South African writers such as Damon Galgut and Nadine Gordimer? Both of these writers are white, but they see, understand and respond to the negative effects of the apartheid regime. I do not agree that suffering alone give one the moral authority to speak out against what is right. No matter the color, a person can see when something is wrong and use his or her voice to take a stand. “As a white novelist in South Africa during and after the apartheid regime, Nadine Gordimer takes an important place in post-colonial studies due to her attention on political and racial issues,” (Kızıltaş, UYSAL 169).

The beautiful aspect of literature is that it is a testament of the times. Looking back through history, literature tracks huge events and pivotal times that challenge society. Writers are responding to those issues whether they agree with what is taking place or not. They analyze and explore those issues, making their opinions open for all to see. With regard to South African Literature, I would argue that responding to issues is even more important when noting problems such as: racism, segregation, and apartheid. Ashraf Jamal asserts that this literature “captures the span of black struggle...” (Jamal 64). He was discussing literature in the *Africa Pulse*, which is a collection of different types of South African literature such as: fiction, drama, and poetry (Jamal). However, I would argue that his claim applies to many texts regarding South African Literature.

The Immorality Act, heavily associated with the apartheid regime, was first made in the 1920s. The purpose of the Immorality Act was to outlaw sexual relationships “between those classified as European and those classified as natives,” (Carolin 113). Due to horrid systems of the apartheid, The Immorality Act was amended multiple times between 1950 and 1988 (Carolin). I assert that the Immorality Act was yet another way to oppress blacks and treat them poorly. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Zakes Mda tells the story of the Immorality Act through The Excelsior 19. The Excelsior 19 is a group of people—whites and blacks, who were accused of violating The Immorality Act.

The Madonna of Excelsior highlights how poorly blacks were treated, especially women. It discusses important issues such as: rape and racism. Black women were imprisoned and blamed for having sexual relationships with white men. For many of them, babies were born. Unfortunately, the babies were subjected to prison like their mothers. Mda takes his readers on an emotional journey, noting the treatment of black women and the white Afrikaners urge to have them by any means necessary. According to Afrikaner beliefs, “The devil had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner. It was his fault that he had not been strong enough to resist temptation. The devil made him do it,” (Mda 85). The men, of course were not blamed for their short comings because they were men and most importantly, they were white. “These men are innocent. They have been framed by the black (Mda 74).

The Madonna of Excelsior is an important text because it is an apartheid text. It shows in explicit detail the tragedies and racism black South Africans faced and helping to prove the claim that blacks were indeed treated poorly. Even while discussing the horrors of the regime, I would argue that Mda hints about a better South Africa, and he uses Popi—the main character’s daughter to do so. Popi is mixed-race, and she is a product of the Immorality Act and the Excelsior 19. In my opinion, a fascinating aspect of South African Literature is that it offers hope. In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda foreshadows a shift, leaving the Afrikaners’ position in society in question. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Mandela will soon be free from jail. That fact alone suggests the end of the Afrikaner.

In addition, Mda creates the space for Popi and her brother Viliki to be on the council to represent the changes that will come. Viliki goes on to be mayor. This leaves the Afrikaner afraid as their future is no longer solidified. “President F.W. de Klerk was thinking only of the future of the Afrikaner people... He would never just hand over power to the blacks without making sure that the Afrikaner had a meaningful sake,” (Mda 142).

I submit that so much of the Afrikaner identity relies on their ability to oppress blacks. Without having anyone to oppress, bully, or otherwise treat inhumane, the apartheid system could not stand, thus would fall, having no one to uphold the implications of it. I would even argue that the Afrikaner or Boer is the oppressive figure or the antagonist in South African Literature and history. With each text that will be discussed throughout this paper, one will find that the Afrikaner is guilty of oppressing blacks and trying to dwindle their being down to nothing using the social injustices of the apartheid.

From reading and studying South African Literature, I know that the Afrikaners felt that they were God’s chosen people. They felt that they could do no wrong, and in many ways, they thought they were doing the Lord’s work. However, they were hiding behind their own twisted version of

religion and principles. In an article, Carolin includes a quote by J.G. Strydom—a former Prime Minister stating “As a Calvinist people we Afrikaners have, in accordance with our faith in the word of God, developed a policy condemning all equality and mongrelisation between White and Black. God’s word teaches us, after all, that He willed into being separate nations, coulors and languages,” (Carolin 116). This quote is also included in *The Madonna of Excelsior* on pgs. 29-30.

I understand and furthermore agree with Carolin including this quote from the former Prime Minister because it emphasizes why the Afrikaners behaved the way they did. To add, establishing the Afrikaner views about race, Carolin also includes a quote by Stokes mentioning “White supremacy is a fleshy ideology; it’s very much about bodies. An obsession with skin color is only the most obvious manifestation of this. Simply put, for all its fascination with color, white supremacy is perhaps equally driven by its fascination with sex. (Stokes 133), (Carolin 111). Stokes is quite right about the theory of race and sex. This proves why Afrikaners in other words, despised black, but they could not stay away from them. Afrikaner men loved black women—no matter how forbidden they were.

For example, in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda uses characters such as Father Claerhout, along with Stephen Cronje and his son Tjaart to symbolize the Afrikaner male identity and ideology. They all participated in exploiting black women by raping them, touching them, and by demeaning them in various ways. In addition, Father Claerhout, uses prostitutes to pose for his paintings. Of course, he only paints black women.

I assert that *The Madonna of Excelsior* is a very important text in establishing the treatment of Black South Africans. Mda calls the reader’s attention to several issues. Through his prolific and ground-breaking writing, he creates a space that calls attention to ending the poor treatment of blacks in South Africa. Furthermore, he exposes the horrible views and lack of morals of the Afrikaner people. Although Mda is exposing issues, he still provides hope to Black South Africans by foreshadowing a new era of freedom through Viliki and Popi.

The period between the apartheid and post-apartheid era could be called a transitional period. I use the term “transition” loosely because Black South Africans are still oppressed and fighting for equal rights. However, I argue that the word transition could also refer to the dwindling position of the Afrikaner. At this point, the Afrikaner principles are crumbling as many are beginning to realize the error of their ways. They are barely holding on and for the first time ever, their position in society is not solidified.

There are two texts that prove my claim. The first novel is *The Promise* by Damon Galgut. This novel, in my opinion is important to said transition because the apartheid ends in this novel. I would also argue that this novel is important when discussing a transition because of the main

character's mother, Rachel. She—Rachel, died in the novel, but her character represents the spirit of what is to come—freedom and equality. In many novels there are certain characters that foreshadow a change of views. In *The Madonna of Excelsior* it was Johannes Smit. He was an Afrikaner lawyer, but he realized what his people were doing was wrong and switched sides. Here, it is Rachel. I submit that her death is symbolic of the end of the apartheid regime and the dismantling of the Afrikaner.

Rachel is an intriguing character and Galgut uses her in a special way as she serves many purposes in the novel. In addition to being symbolic, she also represents alienation and isolation. When she was ill, Rachel's family left her alone in the care of Salome, the Black South African maid. Salome did everything she could for Rachel. She took very good care of her. I argue that Galgut creates this issue and isolates Rachel to emphasize the isolation of blacks. He allowed Rachel to embody issues of the opposite race to prove a point. In turn, he uses Salome to show goodness—proving that color does not matter, we should all help each other when we can. For these reasons, Rachel wanted Salome to have her home.

I argue that *The Promise* issues rewards and punishments. Because of the prejudices in South Africa at the time and with Salome being a black woman, it took forty years for her to obtain her inheritance. Rachel's family disregarded her wishes. I maintain that as a result of that, about every ten years a member of the Swart family died. In article named after the novel, *The Promise* by Nonhlanhla Dlamini, the writer argues "The Promise is not only a curse handed down to the Swart family by Rachel, but also a curse that haunts South Africa today in the form of failed and perverted transformations of the post-apartheid government...The deferred promise made to Salome does not only depict the hypocrisy of a Christian/Afrikaner "who goes back on his word (25), but it also shows the complacency of the ANC presidents who are not keen on ensuring that restorative justice prevails in the country," (Dlamini 139).

Those who may be unfamiliar with the apartheid and the issues surrounding it may be interested to know that the issues mentioned above and trying to keep Salome from what was rightfully hers basically boils down to the issue of color. The Afrikaner did not want to see blacks with anything, especially something left behind or given to them by someone white.

Finally, *The Promise* by Damon Galgut fit also proves the Prime Minister's argument mentioned above when talking about the Afrikaner wanting to separate "nations and colors." Like Mda, Galgut still provides a sense hope while exposing the Afrikaner. He does this by finally awarding Salome with her home. I argue that by "the promise" being fulfilled, it marks the end of a horrible era and ushers in a new one—equality, while disrupting the Afrikaner identity and principles. Salome's gift is almost hinting at the reward of freedom coming to all Black South Africans.

Another text that I would argue is included in the “transition” is *The Last Gift* by Abdulrazak Gurnah. This text is important because although it discusses the mistreatment of blacks, it also highlights the issues of identity and shame that blacks faced during this time. In the novel, the main character Abba suffers health issues. He has had a hard life and he does not really discuss his life until the end of the novel. In addition, he has a mixed identity—British and African. He is ashamed of who he was, and to make matters worse, his wife Maryam is an orphan and her origins are unknown.

As a result, their children had no idea of their family history. Abba virtually stripped his family of their history. On his dying bed, he opened up about everything. Then, his children were excited and wanted to know more about their culture and their people. Here again, like the other writers, Gurnah provides hope for the future—urging everyone to be proud of who they are.

The post-apartheid era refers to the period after the end of such a horrific and oppressive era—apartheid. A very important text in discussing the times post-apartheid is *Ways of Dying* by Zakes Mda. In my opinion, many of Mda’s text are important to South African Literature because he exposes political and social injustices. His novel, *Ways of Dying* explores a myriad of issues.

In an article titled *Zakes Mda’s Representation of South African Reality in Ways of Dying, The Madonna of Excelsior, and The Whale Caller*, Marita Wenzel makes many valid claims. She argues “Mda is able to consider all the options and to render the emotions, suffering, and the lives of the colonized people in South African history and society without bias... He allows the characters in his novels to express their own opinions, and thus redeem or doom themselves in the eyes of the readers. His verbal images serve to ‘explain,’ validate, and in some ways criticize the lives of the black people he describes,” Wenzel (126).

I certainly agree with Wenzel in that Mda allows his characters to express their own opinions, and his images do explain and validate the lives of black people. We see this in *Ways of Dying* through the main characters Toloki and Noria. However, I disagree with her claim in that in some ways Mda criticizes the lives of blacks. While I have only read a few novels by Zakes Mda, in the few novels that I have read, he exposes racism and unveils the mistreatment of Black South Africans. I consider him the voice of his people.

Ways of Dying, while written post-apartheid discusses all the ways that blacks died during the apartheid regime. Even at this time, things were still not equal for whites and blacks. Mda illustrates this through Toloki’s character. He is the protagonist of the novel and like many blacks during the apartheid he was separated from his community. His life was reduced to being a professional funeral mourner. In an article called *Black Everyday Life and the Burden of Death in Ways of Dying*, Mandisa Haarhoff argues “funerals are presented as so frequent or ordinary that a day without one is

remarkable for the community... Mda invents Toloki, who has fashioned himself as a professional funeral mourner in response to the constant state of grief in the community,” (Haarhoff 192).

Haarhoff is truly right in her argument about why Mda invented Toloki. There were so many deaths and so much hurt that families could not mourn. The novel even begins with a death of a young boy. I assert that Haarhoff is confirming and validating the issue of death in South Africa. Knowing Toloki’s function as a character calls attention to the injustices and mistreatment Black South Africans were still enduring.

Included in the article, Haarhoff included the notion of social black death. This concept was developed by Orlando Patterson—a sociologist (194). He describes his concept of social black death by noting “the concept of “social death” exposes how meaning is brutally extracted from the lives of black people,” (Haarhoff 194). I quite agree with Orlando Patterson because not only in this novel, but in many texts throughout the genre of South African Literature, many blacks had trouble with finding their way and trying to create a better life. To support that claim, Haarhoff compares the social black death to “the injury of life,” (194). She argues “This injury being the constant state of terror, death, and mourning, and the condition of *nothingness* that frames black life,” (Haarhoff 194).

Haarhoff’s theory of the injury of life is spot on because it emphasizes what life was like for blacks. Their lives were full of horrors and uncertainty—all because of the color of their skin. The title, *Ways of Dying* represents both a physical death and a social one (Haarhoff). Why? Well, I argue it is because blacks were hunted and made to live in separate housing—away from whites.

Finally, some argue that *Ways of Dying* is a “transitional” piece and not a post-apartheid piece. I can understand that claim because at this point, not much has changed. Blacks are still oppressed. I do believe; however, that this novel does provide a shift. I argue that recounting all the ways blacks have died in the way that Mda does in *Ways of Dying* is a call to action—demanding for an immediate change.

“Mda depicts a reality that offers no promise of reprieve; there is no halt, even pause, or change from what preceded the transition, and what will follow it. The notion of a “peaceful transition,” or a “transition” itself and “new” South Africa do not exist outside of the esthetic, abstract, and metamorphical national imagination that took root in white media and global world amidst such anticipation and fanfare regarding the birth of a new nation,” (Haarhoff 195).

Haarhoff offers a great argument here. I certainly agree with her and her stance on the transition. The term “transition” does only exist in an effort to show real change. I argue that after the apartheid era, the transitional period and post-apartheid period gets muddled. They share issues are seen during both times. Black South Africans are oppressed in every period: apartheid, transition, and

post-apartheid. The authors bring attention to many important issues and certainly make a case for blacks to be free and have equal rights. Unfortunately, the treatment does not get better. However, there are still hopes for a better South Africa.

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