THE POWER OF THE STATE EMBODIED IN CORRUPTION AND BETRAYAL IN ATHOL FUGARD'S A LESSON FROM ALOES

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Abstract:This paper addresses the issue of how the power of the State in South Africa during Apartheid controlled every aspect of the life of each citizen no matter the colour of his/her skin, no matter the origins or experiences. Apartheid's only purpose was to divide, to separate and to control; to be able to do this, it had to sow doubt in the mind of the individual, to create suspicion and mistrust in order to destroy the group from the inside. A Lesson from Aloes is one of Athol Fugard's plays about the South African politics, about a man-made system that could only be changed through the actions of the people. It is a play focused on two relationships influenced and paralyzed by fear and the effects of corruption and betrayal.
Fugard's play Boesman and Lena is shaped by their status as the Other in a society controlled by the white man. The image of South Africa has never been defined by terms such as equality and human rights. The problem of identity in South Africa is even more problematic when it comes to the one of the Coloured people. Where does the identity of the Other stop and where does the identity of the One begin? What is their position in society? Are they allowed to pretend that they are white in order to benefit from the white privileges or should they embrace their status as outcasts?Boesman and Lena is one of Athol Fugard's small-cast plays that takes place in a society controlled by Apartheid, a system based on dehumanization, inequality and segregation. It is a play about two coloureds, about their status and their self-discovery. The South African mixed-race people are confronted with a terrible and severe identity crisis during Apartheid and this is what this paper is intended to analyse.

Keywords: Athol Fugard, Apartheid, power, betrayal, victim

Athol Fugard, a South African playwright, director and actor, believes that the world of theatre represents the perfect channel for a change in perspective in a society controlled by Apartheid. His plays and his characters came to be well known in the entire world as they became the voice of a society altered by a system based on separation, abuse and oppression. Some of Athol Fugard's most famous plays truly manage to expose the power of the State, the way in which the lives of his characters are controlled from the moment they were born. The State decides where they live, where they work, whether they can own land, it also influences the type of relationship they should have or not have with white women, their own brotherhood is controlled by the power of the State. Power is everywhere around us and man cannot escape the complex relations of power that constitute the society.

Antonio Gramsci, who is considered one of the most important Marxist thinkers of the 20th century, understands power as a consensus and an area of politics where there are rulers and ruled, leaders and led (1999, 347). Gramsci is known for introducing the concept *cultural hegemony* based on his belief that people do not control ideas, ideas control people; in other words, people do not wield power, power wields people. South Africa is the perfect setting for a discussion on power and domination. Whites in South Africa represented approximately twenty per cent of its population, while blacks and coloured were almost eighty per cent. How can a population who outnumbers any military force and all the white people in this country be dominated and discriminated? South Africa is not only an example of repressive power, but it is also a clear example of a normalizing power.

A deeper understanding of the concept power and its effects on the identity of the human being is offered to us by Michel Foucault's *The Subject and Power*. According to Foucault, every culture is defined and shaped by power and every human being is converted into a subject through power relations. Furthermore, Foucault argues that there are two kinds of power; one that is applied by the institutions of the country (police, church, court) and the other one which is enforced through discourse. Thus, discourse creates power in the form of knowledge which, in its turn, creates identity. Thinking of power makes one think of violence, either mental or physical, thus, sovereign power is the most visible form of power, which has an impact and people tend to rebel against this kind of power. In particular, the lives of the South Africans were shaped by sovereign power. They were forced to do what they did not want to do: to leave their homes and move into segregated areas, to accept humiliation and abusive language, in other words – to accept their condition as an inferior race. There was a visible case of sovereign power in South Africa; nonetheless, the disciplinary power is not missing from this scenario. Based on Foucault's belief that disciplinary power is everywhere, there is clear evidence that Fugard's characters were influenced by society and by what society wanted them to believe to be normal and right. Society's power that shaped their ambitions, desires, and ideas managed to penetrate the walls of Fugard's characters' space.

A Lesson from Aloes is one of Fugard's plays that are centred on the topic of power; a clear example of both sovereign and disciplinary powers and their effects on the society. Set in 1963 in South Africa, it is a play that Fugard began writing in the early 1960s, but which was not finished until 1978, when it was also first staged in Johannesburg. The play was brought to an end after a period of crisis for Athol Fugard as a writer and it explores the effects of power and betrayal on the lives of three characters. It is a play that received appreciation from the public and the critics as it won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best play of the 1980-81 season on Broadway. Robert Greig described it in his first review as "a major work. It's poetic tragedy, and the climax is as a harrowing piece of theatre as any seen in Johannesburg for many a long day" (qtd in Gray 1982, 101) and, furthermore, he reiterates his admiration for the play in his second review when he calls it "a remarkable work, the kind of play that, once over, begins living and growing within you" (ibid, 103).

Moreover, the two-act play can be interpreted as focusing on two relationships: the first one is between two friends who have different skin colour and the second one is the relationship between a husband and a wife. Both of these bonds are shaped and influenced by the power of

Apartheid to poison them. The first act presents the white couple, Piet and Gladys, in their house in Port Elizabeth doing their daily activities while preparing for a last supper with Steve Daniels, a coloured man, and his family before they live South Africa on an exit-only visa to England. In this first act we find out crucial information about Piet's previous life and the episode that led to his epiphany. He was forced to give up farming because of the drought and be became a bus driver until his encounter with Steve. This event in his life changed his perspective over life in general. He started to understand the black people's condition in South Africa and, consequently, the huge flaws of the Apartheid system and its legislation were at last visible to him.

> It had nothing to do with me. Politics! ... [*He smiles]* until I drove my empty bus through that crowd walking to work. Hell, Gladys, it was a sight! Men, women, even school children, walking and laughing and full of defiance. Bitter and hard as I was inside, I felt emotions. […] So as I stopped and got out, I got a little nervous at first with all of them watching me as I walked over. I was the only white there. […] The next thing I knew is they were cheering and laughing and slapping me on the back and making a place for me in the front row. [*He pauses.*] I don't know how to describe it, Gladys … the effect that had on me. It was like rain after a long drought. Being welcomed by those people was the most moving thing that has ever happened to me. Feelings about life and people, which I thought had withered away like everything on the farm, were alive again. (ibid, 241 — 242; emphasis in the original, ellipsis mine)

That particular event in his life made him understand that he could become an active individual and not remain a passive one as the society demanded from the white population. Therefore, he became the white individual that decided to react against this injustice, just as Athol Fugard decided to try and make a difference through his words and plays.

At the beginning of the first act, Piet tries to identify and name one of his specimens of aloes as he understands and accepts the unique features of every one of them. This attitude and actions are put in opposition with the mentality of the system that controls South Africa. Apartheid classifies every individual according to the colour of his skin and to his race; it does not take into account every individual's unique characteristics as Piet does with his aloes.

Gladys and Piet form a family of two and they are presented as two people having very little in common. Gladys, a wife of English stock, is a person who wants to protect herself from everything that she perceives as being a threat; she wants to feel safe and for this main reason she uses protective clothing and sunglasses in order not to be exposed to the outside world and to the cruel reality of South Africa. Her motionless and silent personality is opposite to Piet's, who walks bare-chested and is very active. Moreover, she has no intention of reacting to South Africa's social injustice; she only cares about her own personal world. Gladys feels helpless in front of the unknown, of the aloes and what they represent and, furthermore, she feels vulnerable when she has to be in contact with the black skin: "I'm going to be honest with you. They frightened me. Yes, thorns and bitterness? I'm afraid there's more than that to them. They're turgid with violence, like everything else in this country. And they are trying to pass it on to me" (ibid, 230). Gladys is a crucial character in the play. She is proof that the power of the system not only affects the black and the coloured people of South Africa, but also the white ones:

> I am just a white face on the outskirts of your terrible life, but I'm in the middle of mine and yours is just a brown face on the outskirts of that. Do you understand what I'm saying? I've got my own story. I don't need yours. I've discovered hell for myself. It might be hard for you to accept, Steven, but you are not the only one who has been hurt. Politics and black skins don't make the only victims in this country. (ibid, 267)

Gladys is the one that makes the reader and the audience understand that psychological wounds are deeper and some of them may never heal, unlike the physical ones. She had a very close connection with her diary and when it was confiscated by the Security Branch during a raid she was left with no purpose, no hope, and no perspective for the future. The system entered her private world, it took something that belonged to her and felt like it was part of her; apartheid and its laws took away her deepest thoughts and left behind a feeling of rape.

In the second act of the play, the focus transfers from the relationship of the couple to the relationship of friendship between two men, one with white skin and the other one with black skin. As the action moves forward, the audience and the reader understand that the colour of the skin is actually the only main difference between the two male characters. Piet and Steve share the same beliefs, ideas, values, they are both Afrikaans speakers and they both respect and love their native land. Their relationship is based on similar interests that they share unlike Gladys and Piet's relationship where the two partners are rather different one from another.

Steve is presented as a victim left without any hope for his future and for that of his family. This is what Apartheid does with its power, it takes away what you love the most, what gives you hope and leaves you paralyzed, unable to function anymore, incapable of fighting back and sometimes unable to survive. The same happened to Steve's father who was fond of fishing and who was removed from his house and relocated to Salt Lake. The system took away his home, but it also took away the sea, his passion, the one thing that offered him comfort in a cruel reality. Through disciplinary and sovereign power, the society accomplished its mission of controlling not only the bodies of its subjects, but also their minds, their ambitions and even destroying their hopes. Steve's father is described as a man whose main wish was to work and take care of his family, but in the end the system transformed him into a subject unable to react anymore and incapable of coping with the cruel reality, a defeated person: "Our generation … our race is a mistake" (ibid, 260).

The relationship between Piet and Steve is constructed around the feeling of betrayal. When they first met each other, Piet decided to betray his race, the colour of his skin and join Steve in his organization meant to make a difference and fight the system. Due to his race, Piet is suspected of betrayal, but this time of becoming an informer for the authorities. After his arrest, Steve was unable to resist the interrogation methods and in the end he started crying like a little baby and told them everything. The system did not use physical power, but it attacked the mind of the individual until he felt he could not handle it anymore, this kind of techniques made Steve feel vulnerable and even if his body was strong enough, his mind was not and it could not handle the pressure:

> I got no bruises to show you. That's all they ever did to me. Just laugh. But they kept it up. One night back in my cell, after another day of that, I knew that if they put me there once more … I'd

> jump. And I wasn't thinking of escape from five floors up. Ja! They had laughed at my manhood and every reason I had for diving out of that window. When they came to fetch me the next morning I was crying like a baby. And they comforted me like I was one. When they started their questions again, I wiped my eyes and answered … for the first time. I told them everything. (ibid, 266; ellipsis in the original)

Apartheid's main purpose is to control, to destroy relationships and to separate; to be able to do this, it has to create doubt and uncertainty so that it could abolish the group from the inside. The organization led by Steve represents a threat for the system and the best way to shake the unity of a group is by introducing doubt and the feeling of betrayal. Under the sovereignty of Apartheid, everyone can be suspected. Steve knows that he could not handle the interrogation techniques so he just wants to know if Piet did the same thing. This piece of information would make his departure much easier, but he does not receive clarification as Piet avoids answering the direct question concerning his betrayal. Gladys accuses Piet two times of betrayal. She believes that he betrayed her when he was not there for her and he did not protect her from the authorities and their invasion into her private life: "When they took away my diaries you did nothing" (ibid, 267). Furthermore, she tells Steve that Piet was the informer in his case, even if in the end she admits of having lied.

Meanwhile, Steve and Gladys discover that they have more in common than they first thought. Their personal stories, their sufferance and the humiliation they had to endure have created similarities between the two characters. She felt raped and he felt emasculated. Their lives were destroyed by a system that forced upon them the status of victims and they may not have sufficient power to survive. Gladys decides to go back to Fort England and continue to hide herself as she does not have enough power to cope with reality; Steve will become a victim of exile, a powerful separation to which there is no proof or suggestion that he may survive. Piet can also be perceived as a victim, he is left alone, without his best friend and his wife, but in his case, there is a powerful hint that he will endure, that he will remain alive: "The streets are empty and I imagine you wandering around looking for another survivor" (ibid, 232).

All in all, the play tells the story of Apartheid's power and its effects and impact on the lives of three characters: an Afrikaner, a Coloured activist and an English speaker. Two relationships, a friendship and a marriage, have been altered and destroyed due to the feeling of betrayal produced by the system's intrusion. Trust and honesty are necessary features in the development of a relationship; it is based on the primitive need to have someone close on whom you can rely and in whom you can have faith. These are the pillars on which the two relationships were founded and shaped, and these are also the pillars that were torn down by the Apartheid's power.

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