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**The inescapable bond with a predetermined heritage:
a phenomenon illustrated by representative
characters from three Athol Fugard plays.**

Abstract

This article has been gleaned from an MA dissertation on Fugard's portrayal of the Afrikaner. In determining which characters in the English-dominated Fugard plays can safely be categorized as Afrikaners, one is confronted with the dilemma of the Coloured Afrikaner, who shares the language and culture of the Afrikaner, yet is excluded from any real sense of Afrikaner identity. In this article the White and Coloured Afrikaner characters in three Fugard plays are analysed and discussed in accordance with their perception of their bondage to their cultura. I try to illustrate how each character's decisions and interpersonal relationships are, to a large extent, the result of the witting or unwitting adherence to a cultural identity. The characters discussed are:

Morris, the Coloured brother in *The Blood Knot*;
Frieda and Errol in *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*; and
Piet, Gladys and Steve in *A Lesson from Aloes*.

"Man is bound to space and time . . . a fact that one should never overemphasize or underestimate."

(J.H. Coetzee)

1 Introduction

Individuals, in belonging to a specific nation, are inescapably bound to the formative determinants inherent in their society. This ultimately results in a

representative culture, which establishes the norms and principles motivating the decisions of the individuals. When these individuals are represented within a definite social context in a play, their link with their formative influences cannot be ignored.¹

In this article the characters discussed represent something of the wide diversity of cultures in South Africa. Morris (*The Blood Knot*), Errol (*Statements*) and Steve (*Aloes*) are Coloureds, and their dilemma ranges from a feeling of guilt for their disloyalty to their people (Morris and Errol) to the alienation experienced by a people who have no acknowledged place in society (Steve). Frieda and Piet are Afrikaners, yet their plights are dissimilar. Frieda never openly challenges the principles of her culture, but under pressure her reaction reveals an unquestioning acceptance of them, although her relationship with a Coloured man would seem to belie this. Piet, probably Fugard's most self-possessed and steadfast character, is unwavering in his allegiance to his Afrikaner identity, yet outspokenly aware of the shortcomings of his culture. Gladys, although South African-born, is emotionally bonded to an idealized England, and displays a clinging adherence to the culture of a "homeland" she has never seen, which is in stark contrast to the hostility with which she regards her country of birth and all it represents.

My aim in this article is to explore each character's experience of his/her cultural identity and heritage as revealed in interpersonal relationships in specific spatio-temporal situations (c.f. own epigram: "Man is bound to space and time . . .").

2 *The Blood Knot*

It's that white something inside you, that special meaning and manner of whiteness that I got to find . . . this whiteness of theirs is not just in the skin, otherwise . . . well, I mean . . . I'd be one of them, wouldn't I? (Morris, p. 74)

Morris is the fairer of the two Coloured brothers in *The Blood Knot*, and in this lies his dilemma. Although having the physical attributes to "pass for a White", he is acutely aware of an irrational spiritual bondage to his less than pure White heritage. In an uncanny way this counteracts his attempts to pass himself off as a White.

Zach – the black brother – can, and does accept his cultural reality, because even the contemplation of escape is made completely impossible by his black skin. Consequently he has never even considered a reality different from his

1. In the three Fugard plays under discussion, the characters' racial and cultural identities are made explicit. Furthermore, the crux of each character's dilemma is his or her tie with a cultural heritage, whether he or she is overtly aware of it or merely unwittingly driven by it.

own. Morris, however, because of his fair skin, has been tempted to break the barrier of his Coloured identity and the mere possibility of doing so has resulted in an identity crisis:

Morris (quietly with absolute sincerity):

Zach! Oh Zach! When I hear that certainty about whys and wherefores, about how to live and what to love, I wish, believe me, deep down in the bottom of my heart where my blood is as red as yours, I wish that old washerwoman had bruised me too at birth. I wish . . . (p.63)

When Ethel, the White pen-pal, comes onto the scene – albeit somewhat indirectly – she forces the sensitive issue of skin colour out into the open. She becomes the touchstone against which the brothers measure their whiteness and blackness. She brings to the fore Morris's awareness of the cultural bond with Zach which he has been trying to come to terms with for so long.

Morris acknowledges to Zach that he is the one who has prevented Morris from carrying through his attempts to “try for White”. Zach is the physical reminder of Morris's limitations. He is the concrete representation of the reality of Morris's heritage. Morris confesses that he may possess all the necessary qualities to be accepted into the cultural society he is aspiring to, but realizes that he falls short in terms of a deeply embedded heritage that he was born into. He tries to put his awareness of the illogical yet very real tie to a certain cultural reality into words:

There's more to wearing a white skin than just putting on a hat . . . The clothes will help, but only help. They don't make the white man. It's that white something inside you, that special meaning and manner of whiteness that I got to find . . . this whiteness of theirs is not just in the skin, otherwise . . . well, I mean . . . I'd be one of them, wouldn't I? Because . . . I seen them that's darker than me. Yes. Really dark, man. Only they had that something I'm telling you about. (p. 74)

As dearly as Morris would – but cannot – belong to a cultural identity he has not been born into, as inescapably is he part of the one he has been born into.

Morris's identity dilemma has an added dimension in a society where racial discrimination is legally enforced. His already acute feeling of guilt for being tempted to betray his brother by deserting him is intensified by his aspiration to become part of a culture from which he is barred by law. Therefore, Morris regards his return home as a triumph over temptation which, if he had succumbed to it, would certainly have resulted in his eternal damnation: “I've proved I'm no Judas” (p. 80).

Yet, in denying himself the opportunity to “try for White”, no matter how

slim the chances of success, Morris realizes that he is consciously turning his back on his chances for a meaningful future in a racially prejudiced society. Ultimately, however, Morris is hardly faced with a choice, for his common sense intervenes in his awareness of a deeply ingrained bondage to his Coloured identity:

Morris: You see, we're tied together, Zach. It's what they call the blood knot . . . the bond between brothers. (p. 97)

The fair-skinned Morris speaks the language of the White Afrikaners, shares their culture, and even their skin colour, but he cannot share in their consciousness. And it is this realization which ultimately results in his relinquishing of any aspirations or attempts to be accepted in a society which he has not been born into.

3 Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act

Man: My adultery? And yours? Ja. Yours! If that's true of me because of you and my wife, then just as much for you because of me and your white skin. Maybe you are married to that the way I am to Bontrug. You sneak out of it the way I sneak out of my house to come here. Let me see you choose!! (p. 93)

This play is about an adulterous and illegal love-affair between a White Afrikaner librarian, Frieda Joubert, and a Coloured school teacher, Errol Philander. Fugard gives an interesting rendition of the emotional fluctuations between guilt and elation typical of any adulterous affair, but with an added and sinister dimension. Although their relationship is illegal, the play transcends being simply an indictment of the morality (or lack of moral justification) behind such a law. There is no overt response of bitterness against the existing legal and political system. The characters' personal clashes are the result of a void between them which is the result of their coming from two such widely divergent socio-economic situations.

Errol is more aware of the generic, social and historic differences between himself and Frieda. Frieda – although unwittingly – reveals these differences in her actions. She is trying to pretend that what they experience, that is, their love, can be divorced from cultural differences. Errol's fatalistic approach to the relationship reveals his more realistic view of life, while Frieda is surprisingly ignorant of the reason for his scepticism.

Although Frieda loves Errol, she does not understand the complexity of their relationship. It is not only the predicament of defying political and moral values that has to be faced, but also the difference resulting from two opposing sets of socio-political roots. There is a dilemma created by an institutionalized system of "structural violence".

In the suspended reality of Frieda's home, Errol occasionally reveals a relaxed and uninhibited state of mind. Being in alien surroundings so far removed from the reality of his life in Bontrug, he experiences an existential awareness: "No vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end . . ." (p. 84).

The luxury of being suspended from cultural awareness is, however, fleeting. When Bontrug and its problems enter the conversation, thereby intruding into the characters' consciousness, Errol is again forced to face stark reality, and his language becomes permeated with bitterness and aggression. One of the results of this renewed awareness is Errol's almost defiant support of his own people. He acknowledges a sense of shame for having been embarrassed by Bontrug, and is acutely aware of being undeniably part of it:

Easy to hate, man, when you suddenly find you're always walking back to it . . . and I am. Whatever happens I'm going to be there walking back to it. So I say to myself: "Careful, Philander. It's yours! It's all you can ever really have. Love it. You've got to. (p. 91)

In this fatalistic sense of belonging to a predetermined framework, there is an echo of Morris's dilemma in *The Blood Knot*. But Morris makes the mistake of trying to break through the barrier of his predestined existence. Errol, however, seems to be consciously forcing himself to acknowledge this barrier, thereby trying to prevent any attachment to an existence that can never be his. Consequently we find him being natural and loving to Frieda only when he has transcended the barriers of time and space in his recollections of an existence where there is "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end . . ." (p. 84).

He refuses the water she offers like a man who refuses cake because he intuitively realizes that it will spoil him for bread. What Frieda mistakes for exaggerated pride is in fact the tenacious self-protection of someone who is acutely aware of the threat of comparing what he has to what he never can have. Errol faces a cultural dilemma during every moment of his contact with Frieda. His love for her is irrevocably part of his bitterness at not being allowed to have all that she represents.

Errol is repulsed by his own people: "Rags, I don't mean their clothes. The people inside looked like rags" (p. 91). He is also ashamed of himself for his clear-eyed objectivity is born of his relationship with Frieda, who is firmly situated outside his social and cultural reality. Errol, in his association with a White, is forced to look objectively at himself and his people – and the result is that his shame is immeasurably intensified. His objectivity when regarding his people implies that he is in danger of moving outside his cultural reality as well. It is therefore with defiance that Errol tells Frieda of his desire to have wanted to confront her with himself and a neglected, vagrant Coloured family, as if masochistically emphasizing who and what he is. He painfully

accepts that he belongs to the same reality as they do: "I wanted to knock on that back door and stand there with them when you opened it. I wanted you to see me with them" (p. 91).

Errol's cynicism is due to his realization that one's socio-cultural environment is a reality which is woven into one's very fibre. In her naiveté Frieda has the illusion that to run away with Errol would be escaping their problem.

Ironically there is very little overt rebelliousness in Frieda, although her very relationship with Errol goes against the grain of the values and principles of her culture. However, there is never any hint of bitterness or indignation when they are surprised by the police in the most shatteringly humiliating way imaginable. Instead of justified defiance, Frieda reverts even further to the subconscious prejudices of her culture. Under the pressure of police confrontation, the reactions of Errol and Frieda are the result of the roles they have been conditioned to since birth. Notwithstanding all their previous attempts to understand each other, or to explain their motivations to each other, they now reveal the subconscious conditioning of their different socio-cultural realities. Frieda automatically protects, thereby unwittingly depriving Errol of the need to acknowledge his responsibility and guilt. In her unconsciously condescending reaction, she affirms that this relationship is not merely one between man and woman, but inescapably one between protector and protected. This is what Errol has been striving to escape all the time and has continually been trying to make Frieda understand.

Frieda unknowingly still belongs to a "White superiority" consciousness. She is as much a victim of her cultural heritage as Errol is of his. Her deeply-ingrained cultural sense of superiority is revealed in her paternalistic attitude which is one generally ascribed to Afrikaners.²

This sense of superiority is, of course, not at all blatant in Frieda, but it does unwittingly motivate her actions under pressure. It has been latent throughout the play – as in her offer of water – but under the stress of the confrontation with the police it blooms into an overwhelming but emasculating protectiveness.

Similarly, Errol reverts to the social role he has been conditioned to since birth. His constant plea for Frieda's respect for him as an independent individual, is replaced by an embarrassingly grovelling picture of servitude. It is ironic that the proud refusal of water is replaced by a repetition of:

"Miss Frieda Joubert! There's no water left . . .
There's no water left in Bontrug." (p. 98)

2. This is an aspect of the Afrikaner referred to by M.T. Moerane in a discussion called *Afrikaners as Seen by Africans*. Moerane acknowledges the often simple-hearted generosity of the Afrikaner, but also his acute awareness of superiority and demand for appropriate acknowledgement: "The Blacks know this vanity and 'superiority' of the Afrikaner, and will readily use it whenever they want favours" (Van der Merwe, 1975:68).

The latent sense of inferiority that Errol has tried to suppress throughout the play is now given free rein. His overwhelming emotion is embarrassment, while Frieda's is excruciating guilt.

Even more chilling is the realization that neither reacts in anger. Their situation is morally untenable, but politically they have the right to defend themselves. Frieda is not emotionally ready or strong enough for such a step. Her obvious lack of anger or bitterness is probably the result of cultural indoctrination. She accepts her guilt, never dreaming of questioning the moral rectitude of her accusers.

Errol is originally frightened into a parody of servitude. Finally, in the last monologue, he describes his situation with weary despair and resignation. He expresses the need to understand the justification of their injustice, but it is permeated with a sense of weary detachment. Ultimately both have become eerily stereotyped representatives of their cultural communities.

4 *A lesson from Aloes*

No, for better or for worse, I will remain positively identified as Petrus Jacobus Bezuidenhout; Species: Afrikaner; Habitat: Algoa Park, Port Elizabeth, in this year of our Lord 1963 and accept the consequences. (Piet Bezuidenhout, p.5)

Fugard has declared this to be one of his more overtly political plays, dealing with three characters who are all victims of the "repressive political system in that country South Africa – and have three different survival plans" (Anon., 1980:3). Von Holdt (1979:42) warns against categorizing the three characters as allegorical representatives of three of the cultural groups in South Africa. It is unfair towards the playwright to simplify his play to such an extent; however, in the characters' approaches to their situation, an obvious link to their differing cultural heritages and identities is revealed. This is also implied by Fugard's statement that in writing this play he intended "to return to a very strong orthodoxy" (Anon, 1878). Von Holdt sums it up in more sophisticated terms with his description that Piet, Gladys and Steve should not be seen as mere stereotypes of their cultural groups, but rather as embodying "different facets of our national psyche in their relationship with the country; in these terms they are certainly able to realise the reality we live" (1979:42).

In essence the play deals with the dilemma each character faces in trying to determine a relationship with the country, as well as in establishing a sense of identity. Inevitably, each character is influenced by his or her cultural heritage. Piet, Gladys and Steve all emerge as characters "orientating themselves in their given present situations according to their own personal subjective views of their past and future" (Bowker, 1983:53).

Gladys, Piet's South African-born English wife, is still very closely bonded to

England – emotionally, as well as culturally – although she has never been there. Her yearning references to England have actually convinced Steve that she was born there. He justifies his error: “Oh, your manners and the way you speak. Not rough and ready like Piet and myself” (p. 58). Consequently he asks her to describe to him what he can expect once he has emigrated. Gladys does not actively deny having been born in England, but answers ambiguously: “In a way I suppose I am from England . . . now . . . I’ve been there many times” (p. 58).

She “hates the country that she cannot call home and that destroys her, leaving only the dream of a softer England where one can live a life, not just survive” (Von Holdt, 1979:43).

As if to emphasize her strong emotional bond with England, Gladys not only feels hostile towards Africa, but experiences the landscape as becoming an antagonistic force, actively intruding upon her privacy. She withers under the hot African sun like an English rose in a foreign climate. She is physically as unequipped for Africa as she is emotionally: “I hope I’m not getting too much sun . . . My skin can’t take it. I learned that lesson when I was a little girl” (p. 6).

Because there is no possibility of her leaving the country physically Gladys leaves mentally. At the end of the play, she returns to Fort England, a mental home, the name of which must be one of Fugard’s most poignant touches of verbal irony. Fort England houses a beautiful picture titled, “Sunset at Somerset”, depicting the mellow beauty of the English countryside, representing for Gladys her cultural and spiritual home.

Steve, being a Coloured, and allowed only limited legal rights, experiences the dilemma of his people. Like Piet – the Afrikaner – he has one homeland, the land of his birth and his origin, yet he is allowed only a stunted sense of belonging. Steve’s relationship with the landscape – in his case more specifically the seascape – is as strong as the Afrikaner’s experience of the land. This is embodied in his father’s love for the sea.

So flimsy is Steve’s father’s cultural sense of belonging in the wider context of the South African socio-political situation that a narrower physical setting (surroundings) is needed to act as catalyst for the establishment of identity. When Steven’s father is evicted from the newly-declared White’s only coastal area, and moved inland, he feels deprived of the foundation of his existence. When all his attempts to be reinstated in his old home fail, his final comment on the Coloured race is the defeatist cry that: “Ons geslag is verkeerd” (p. 64).

Steve’s life story is an echo of his father’s. He faces the same prospect, i.e. of leaving behind a home and a past. But he is prepared to take this overwhelmingly big step, because like Morris and Errol, the future prospects for his race

in this country are bleak. He has been bequeathed the cultural heritage of the Coloured people, which is one of a predetermined rôle of servitude, inferiority and guilt for coveting more than is by “rights” theirs as Coloureds. If he is not prepared to resign himself to this state of affairs the only solution is to leave. Yet, the emotional struggle and inner conflict which result from his decision, reveal the inescapable bondage to a cultural heritage, which can never be totally severed. This is Steve’s dilemma: the choice between belonging to a culture with a very limited scope for a fulfilling future, and facing the bleak prospect of the future in which ties with one’s culture are seemingly broken (for the emotional ties can never be totally denied).

Piet Bezuidenhout is probably Fugard’s most stable, wise and perceptive character. He is a man whose every facet of existence is permeated with the stability of a strong awareness of a secure cultural foundation. This is manifested in his preoccupation with names. Piet is preoccupied “with names in general, as for him a name is a key to a person’s identity . . .” (Bowker, 1983:53).

Piet quotes Shakespeare on the importance of a name when elaborating on his need to find the name of the anonymous aloe. Quoting the specie-names of the aloes that have been identified, he says:

An impressive array of names, isn’t it? And knowing them is important. It makes me feel that little bit more at home in my world. And yet, as little Juliet once said: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet . . .” Alas, it’s not as simple as that, is it? Names are more than labels.
(p. 4)

In naming his world, Piet is also implicitly making it his own – in a mythical sense. In defining that which is around him he succeeds in establishing a sense of security, so that Gladys says to him, “. . . in spite of all that has happened, you’ve still got a whole world intact. You seem very safe to me” (p. 22).

J.M. Coetzee ascribes the notable tolerance in the new breed of Afrikaner to the fact that they “are typical of the generation after 1948, a generation that, having grown up under Afrikaner hegemony, can afford to be self-assured, less belligerently nationalistic than its fathers” (1986:66).

Piet Bezuidenhout has turned radical activist when the play starts. Nevertheless, his awareness of his identity as an Afrikaner, and the pride which he takes in this awareness is fervent despite his liberal ideas. This is emphasized in another of his quotations on the significance of a name:

Then deny thy father, and refuse they name! Hell! I don't know about those Italians, but that's a hard one for an Afrikaner . . . No, for better or for worse, I will remain positively identified as Petrus Jacobus Bezuidenhout; Species: Afrikaner, Habitat: Algoa Park, Port Elizabeth, in this year of our Lord; 1963 . . . and accept the consequences. (p. 5)

In this strong sense of Afrikaner identity and destiny, Piet is the fictional representation of that which is described by a real-life Afrikaner:

We are welded to our nation and to our language; we have a strong consciousness of identity, and the will to survive. We are a proud people, tempered through suffering in the past and strengthened by present ostracism in our tenacity and desire for self-assertion. We are willing to become the white tribe of Africa, part of Africa's toughness and mystery. (De Klerk, 1979:93)

Even though Piet is proud of his Afrikaner heritage, he does not cling to it in the exclusivity so typical of the Afrikaner. He does not reveal the "laagermentality" which J.H. Coetzee describes as a characteristic trait of all minority groups, a tendency to "close their ranks in times of crisis" (1979:135). Piet consciously clings to his cultural roots, and takes pride in them, but not to the exclusion of the rights of others. In becoming socially and politically aware and committed, he is striving to enrich not only all communities of his country, but especially his own.

Piet Bezuidenhout represents the new Afrikaner who combines an awareness of his roots in African soil with consideration for those with whom he co-exists.

Like his aloes in their jam tins, Piet is in limbo: he is once more experiencing drought in his personal relationships. He could well be a pathetic figure, but like the potential flowering of the aloes, Piet's "fortitude, persistence and courage are examples of human potential in the face of overwhelming odds" (Vanderbroucke, 1986:77). And these attributes are born of a strong sense of cultural belonging – the recognition of the sustaining power of a cultural heritage.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated in this article how the influence of a bondage to a cultural identity – whether experienced consciously or subconsciously – is reflected in the decisions and actions of the characters discussed. Fugard's

claim of privileged insight³ appears to be justified by his portrayal of these fictional characters and the complexities of their realities. Although one should not overemphasize the social implications of literature, it would be naive to deny the significance of the definite time and place which serve as settings for these plays. Fugard's plays stimulate one's sensitivity to the realities portrayed by means of an arresting literary and theatrical medium, and this has been his expressed purpose:

"Now I have never, in anything I've said, claimed to be on about art. All I've ever said was that I am a South African, alive, at this moment, in this country. What I want to do – you could call it bearing witness to what happens in my time. (Fugard, *in* Wilhelm, 1972:40)

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3. "I'm a regional writer. I've mastered, or think I have, the code of one time and place. When I see a little girl with a bottle of paraffin under one arm and a loaf of brown bread under the other I make certain guesses, assumptions. By the large these are right because I have a certain intimacy with that world. I couldn't do the same in Baker Street or in Times Square. Yes, I'm a regional writer." (Fugard, *in* MacLennan, 1981:219)

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