

Overtones of Objectification and miscegenation in André Brink's *Looking on Darkness*

1. Author: Dr. Samuel Babu Koppula

Assistant Professor

Department of Mathematics & Humanities

RVR&JC College of Engineering Autonomous

Chowdavaram

Guntur

Phone no: 8008121097

Email: koppulasamuel@gmail.com

2. Author: Dr. K. Sujatha

Assistant Professor

Department of Mathematics & Humanities

RVR&JC College of Engineering

Chowdavaram

Guntur

Phone: 9849541999

Mail Id: drskodali14@gmail.com

Abstract

South African racial order was distinctive among the world's racial orders in its rife-ness. Unseen and formless power had encompassed all communities based on their physical features with its heavy hand. Apartheid's ultimate rift had been seen in socio-political, cross-cultural, ethnic and gender identities in South Africa. In this situation, South Africa's voluminous writer, André Brink voiced the schism of apartheid in his political novel which was banned in the country. Therefore, in 1974 he translated his banned book, *Kennis van die Aand*, which was written in Afrikaans language into English with the title, *Looking on Darkness*. Brink clarifies that he tried to overcome the resistance for his book in his home country as a keen and responsible to his international audience with his translation. He began to love the process. He questioned himself about the consequences of the process. Thus this novel reflects the governmental influence on the personal lives of individuals in the country during the apartheid regime. Joseph Malan, a Coloured man, dares to love a British lady, Jessica in South Africa. He has to bear the brunt of miscegenation and objectification of his identity in his own country. This paper presents the objectification of coloured or black identity and severity of miscegenation in André Brink's *Looking on Darkness*.

Key words--- Apartheid, racial segregation, miscegenation, dissidence, detention, darkness, interracial relations.

Introduction

Looking on Darkness is completely a political novel and the first book in Afrikaans to be banned under the Publications and Entertainment Act No. 26 of 1963. Though government spokesmen and pro-apartheid Afrikaner newspapers had for years conducted an organized campaign against the freer spirit in contemporary literature and the more open discussion and realization of sexual matters, only writings in English had actually suffered censorship. Previously, traditional Afrikaner reverence for serious literature in the relatively new language (new for literary purposes, that is) had protected even controversial writings from state interference; indeed, official disapproval – whether by state or church – had often been sufficient to provoke self-censorship by Afrikaner publishers and writers, *Kennis van die Aand* changed all that: from that time on, censorship of writings in all languages became a regular practice in South Africa, with a correspondingly huge expansion of appropriate legislation, bureaucratic administration, and police surveillance. Banned in Afrikaans, though not before it had sold out its first print run, *Kennis van*

die Aand had been translated by Brink into a more robust English than he had been capable of for *The Ambassador* ten years earlier, as *Looking on Darkness*, it was published in 1974. This version was likewise banned in his native land, the dual ban being another undesirable “first” there.

It openly criticized the country’s political system by questioning the laws on racial segregation and the ban on marriage between coloured/blacks and whites. Jean W. Ross says that the theme of mixed marriage in apartheid South Africa was characterized as being “pornographic, blasphemous, and communistic and was described by Brink himself as being “one of the first Afrikaans novels openly to confront the apartheid system” (*Contemporary* 55).

The novel is a first-person narrative of the life of Joseph Malan, a Colored actor from the Cape Province. It portrays a Colored man (in South Africa, a man of mixed-race origins) as having an affair with a white English woman who comes to South Africa. The relentless and detailed descriptions of police brutality and of the routine use of systematic torture in South African prisons—then heatedly disputed by the authorities, though soon to be corroborated by several notorious instances in which political prisoners were beaten to death in police custody—were other possible targets for the state’s persecution.

Like Brink’s other novels, *Looking on Darkness* moves freely back and forth in time: the beginning of the novel is really the beginning of the end. Malan is in jail after his trial waiting to be executed. Most of the novel depicts the unfolding of Malan’s life, including a memorable historical account of his enslaved ancestors; a portrayal of his own childhood and early interest in drama; and his days in college and his years in England, working in repertory there until he becomes a regular member of the Royal Shakespeare Company. The condemned man’s narrative concludes with his return to South Africa, his valiant attempts to run a black theater Company there in spite of constant police harassment, and his fatal friendship with a white woman. The novel’s details of theatrical life and of Malan’s attempts to create a new form of South African drama (mostly by adapting foreign classics to relevant contemporary themes) are especially vivid, presumably drawing upon some of Brink’s own experiences in the 1960s, when he himself wrote and adapted several plays for the burgeoning Afrikaans theater.

Initially, Malan thinks that he can leave South Africa for good and make another country his home; like Brink himself when he was living in Paris, however, the actor discovers that he is inextricably bound to his native land even though it denies him many of the freedoms he enjoys abroad. In Cape Town he founds his own theater company to devise and stage drama with clear social and racial implications; for this he is systematically persecuted. Ultimately, though, he is destroyed because of his intimate friendship with a white woman, which is not merely forbidden but even criminalized by apartheid legislation. Unable to love each other openly, the lovers decide upon mutual suicide; Malan kills her but then is unable to take his own life, an act which he believes would signal his ultimate defeat.

Jessica is a Social Anthropologist who comes from England, has an extremely open interest in South Africa and meets Mr. Cole, her teacher and mentor. There develops a close relationship between them and she is introduced to Joseph and after sometime, Mr. Cole is jealous of Joseph’s relationship with Jessica. Richard Cole loves her and wants her but could not bear her relationship with Joseph as there is no future in her affair with him. He admits that he goes to warn Joseph to save him and to save her. He expresses the vexation with his country and its forced laws on people.

Joseph calls his lover, Jessica as “Little Miss Muffett” (*Looking* 372) and considers the apartheid as the spider which threatens and spoils their innocent love affair. He has been facing objectification throughout his life. When Viviers, his boss, comes back from war he introduces Nativity Play to be enacted by white children on Christmas Eve. But one of the wise men is black, however, Joseph is not allowed to take that role because he is not White. It rises the actor-cum-narrator in him and he prepares his own play. He gets a chance to enact the role of Prospero in *The Tempest*. He is appreciated by Dominee, a White visitor, and he says that it is very difficult for Coloured to act in Shakespearean plays. Then Joseph shares his achievement as well as his life goal to become an actor with his mother. But mother is so troubled and tries to persuade him not to go for it:

“So what? Tonight they clep hen’s fo’ you, en’ tomorrow they kick you unne yo’ arse. You trying to get into the light, thets what. En’ we people nus’ stay out, it’s not our place. The Lawd made us for’ his sheddows, we his night people”. (*Looking* 109)

Dulpert, Joseph’s roommate, dreams to marry a white girl which is a hard task given the unsecular situation in South Africa. In London, to find lodging turns out to be a difficult task for Joseph as the answers from most landladies advertising rooms ranged from a curt: “We don’t want any Blacks around”, to a condescending and hypocritical: ‘Of course, I don’t mind, but the neighbours...’ (*Looking* 153). He sustains from all the hardships of life in London.

It is the eighth year when Joseph joins Royal Shakespeare Company where he acted in *The Merchant of Venice*. He comments on Portia’s anti-Jewish and anti-Black world as the basic fault. Stage becomes his place of liberation, a focal point, of the blind thought and feeling of an entire society. He feels that the theatre has become a form of escape, of dilettantism, and an evasion of problems in London. He thinks for a long time that he has liberated himself from his country long back but it seems as a terrible shock to discover that he cannot, in fact, survive without it.

Joseph meets a greyish old man, Oom Sassie from whom Joseph knows about the death of Gran’ma Grace and sighs at the fate of Coloured. Sassie laments: “No, I say it’s time de Lawd come en’ take me away too, dere’s no place left fo’ a man who’s got a brown skin” (*Looking* 197). After Sharville, the Government takes over District Six to make the playground for White boys. Then Joseph begins to redefine his world, the only reliable reality is – through theatre. He goes to Derek and finds the situation in South Africa. Derek says, “No, it’s worse. Listen, Joseph. There are only three pastimes in this goddamned country: rugby, immorality, and death-on-the-roads. And in the entr’actes we call elections and transplant the hearts of Coloured on dying Whites. There is no time left for theatre. You’ll soon find out yourself” (*Looking* 201). South Africa is like a jail and he questions Joseph, why do you break into a jail. Further, he says that he tried to bring a ray of light to the Darkest Africa but fails such as ‘Life is a dream’ (*Looking* 203) for him. He suggests Joseph to go back to London but Joseph determines to stay back, believing,

“Surely the country wouldn’t refuse me that? My God, they couldn’t shut the door in my face, it was my own place. I had the seed and blood of many generations in me: Huguenot and Malay and Hottentot, Xhosa and Irish and Boer, White, Brown, Black, everything. Made in South Africa, not for export”. (*Looking* 204-5)

Joseph witnesses the sign boards above the restaurants, “Dogs and Natives not Allowed” (*Looking* 229) and unfair court punishment for natives. Brink focuses attention on the degrading language of apartheid via his narrator’s reading of signs such as those on lifts labelled “Whites” for the one and “Goods and Non-Whites” for the other. The text mobilizes the reader’s awareness in alignment with Joseph’s by drawing attention to these linguistic insults, which would normally be unthinkingly accepted. The political nature of language within South Africa is clearly drawn in Brink’s linking of the power of words with revolutionary acts and in a critical way Brink is writing back to his own Afrikaner people.

Shakespearean parallels are used to underline the tragic, doomed nature of the relationship between Joseph and Jessica through Romeo and Juliet to cross reference to Othello and its racial themes, and to emphasize the hamlet-like aspects of Joseph embodies, the “wise fool” character who tries to tell the truth through metaphor. Rewriting of the Shakespearean texts is done to illustrate the parallel and farcical aspects of contemporary South African society.

In prison Joseph denies their every lie and he is given electrodes which splint through his head like voices scream into darkness. It is like eating the pain and swallowing it. They ask him to sing for them and dance for them. He shuns the idea of suicide suggested by Simon. Death is sure for him but he denies the role assigned by his country to die but he accepts it and says,

“I shall say Yes to death. He is my brother. Through generations and centuries he has been born into me. But to you – to you I shall never cease to say No”. (*Looking* 267)

Actually, Jessica keeps their relationship as secret because of miscegenation act and it is considered the ultimate sin against apartheid. Love across colour bar is made sin in apartheid regime. Whenever he thinks about his brown colour, he feels it is destructive, a burden and a colour to suspect or hate like non-white, non-European, a shadow, a reverse, a flipside and a negative of all that mattered in his life and in the world.

At last Joseph claims, “My place is with her and the others. I’m not alone tonight, they are all with me, the long dark row” (*Looking* 393). His memoir ends with a glimpse of hope for a postcolonial world, “On the contrary notwithstanding” (*Looking* 394). Joseph while awaiting his infamous death after braving his country’s sensors for a long time, asserts that he has arrived and (remained) at a “final possible glimpse of truth” (*Looking* 8). His love for the white Jessica in the South African context, however, is treated as a mortal’s fatal aspiration to the forbidden love of a goddess, just as his gestures towards a responsible theatre are regarded as suicidal. The theme of “miscegenation” shows the equal and natural relationship of Joseph with Jessica. Joseph achieves freedom by choosing death at the end of the novel. “I am not the victim of my history. What happens, has been chosen by myself. I do not undergo it, I create it.” (*Looking* 393)

Brink’s insight in fact is that colonial myths harden into metaphysical facts and that their origins are imperceptibly obliterated in the colonizer’s consciousness. Diala says that “if imperialism is usually associated with inhuman violence and appropriation, a basic reason is that the colonizer soon forgets that myths of the Other’s sub-humanity are his own creations taken as truths.” (“Biblical” 82)

Richard questions Joseph as “You’ve got no right to be with her. You’re Coloured. Why don’t you stick to your own sort? You don’t know your place!” (*Looking* 383). At this point, Brink questions

the common human right to be in any place with anyone. The officer, who is in charge of the Joseph's execution, informs that he will send a church minister before Joseph's hanging and says that the coloured are different from the whites.

Conclusion: The relationship between Joseph and Jessica, a white woman, highlights the issue of the need to inhabit the "place" prescribed by apartheid. The intension of Brink is clearly seen through the intension of Joseph in selecting his own theatre and scripts, positive power of words as agents of change or revolution – the political power of the printed word. Brinks' adaption of the Shakespearean plays is to comment on the inhumanity of apartheid regime. Theatrical metaphor is used by Brink to show the doomed nature of the relationship between Joseph and Jessica and to convey political message. Also, it is used as a form of rebellion and a means to open the eyes of Afrikaners to the crude realities of South African situation.

For Joseph, apartheid's condemnation of his theatre and his relationship with Jessica became an invisible opponent, and has been watching and haunting him day and night throughout his life: "But worst of all was the agonizing knowledge of an invisible opponent watching us night and planning his moves against us with diabolic finesse" (*Looking* 366). Andon-Milligan comments that Joseph's tragic story provides the most eloquent yet darkest moments in Brink's art. ("Quality "26)

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