

Social Stratification and Sense of Belongingness in Athol Fugard's *The Island*

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Abstract

*In discussing social stratification, one is tempted to turn to the interesting and much debated structural problems like nature of man, the role he plays in society, and composition of classes. The important question here is: Who gets what and why? This is the question, that underlies all the discussions of classes, strata and their structural relationships; this question, has been related to the distributive process that in turn has lead to inequality that prevails most of the societies in the world. No known society has ever enjoyed a completely egalitarian social system. From the ancient times to the modern ages, inequality has been prevailing in the world. However, this social inequality has been condemned as unjust, unwarranted, and unnecessary. An attempt is made in the present article, to trace the afore-said inequality and degeneration of humanity in Athul Fugard's *The Island*.*

Keywords: Stratification, degeneration, Fugard, the Island, inequality.

INTRODUCTION

From the root of the word “strata,” we can recognize that social stratification refers to a ranking of people or groups of people within a society. Nevertheless, the term “stratification,” was defined by the earliest sociologists as something more than almost universal “inequalities” that exist in all but the least complex of societies. Social stratification refers to a system with rather predictable rules behind the ranking of individuals and groups; the theories of social stratification are meant to uncover and understand. The existence of a system of social stratification also implies some form of legitimating of the ranking of people and the unequal distribution of valued goods, services, and prestige. Without belief of the systems justifying the inequality and unequal ranking, it is unlikely that a stratification system would remain stable over time.

An important issue essential in the emergence of social stratification is believed to be the nature of man. There are some conservative scholars who believe that social stratification is necessary for society; their ideas are opposed by other radical scholars, who reject inequality and stratification. The conservatives have been distrustful of man’s nature and thus have emphasized the need for restraining social institutions, while the more radical pioneers, by contrast, have been distrustful of these restraining institutions and have taken an optimistic view of man’s nature. Man is a social being, obliged by nature to live with others as a member of society; social life is essential not only for the survival of the species but also for the maximum satisfaction of human needs and desires. To say that man is a social being is to say that the society into which he is born shapes his character and personality in ways over which he has no control and over which he is often unaware. Peter Berger refers to this point and states: “society not only controls our movements, but shapes our identity, our thought and our emotions. The structures of society become the structures of our own consciousness. Society does not stop at the surface of our skins. Society, penetrates us as well as envelopes us” (Berger, 1963, 45).

Social stratification is a concept involving the "classification of people into groups based on shared socio-economic conditions and a relational set of inequalities with economic, social, political and ideological dimensions” (Berger 58). When differences lead to greater status, power or privilege for some groups over the other is called “social stratification”. Society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy by a system. Social stratification is based on four basic principles: (1) Social stratification is a trait of society, not simply a reflection of individual differences; (2) Social stratification carries over from generation to generation; (3) Social stratification is universal but variable; (4) Social stratification involves not just inequality but beliefs as well.

In modern Western societies, stratification is broadly organized into three main layers: upper class, middle class, and lower class. Each of these classes can be further subdivided into smaller classes. Stratification may also be synonymous with castes. For Max Weber,¹ social class is distinguished from a class based that, in turn, is based on such variables as honor, prestige and religious affiliation.

Anthropologists identify egalitarian cultures as "kinship-oriented," because they appear to value social harmony more than wealth or status. These cultures contrast the economically oriented cultures in which status and material wealth are prized, and stratification, competition, and conflict are common. “Kinship-oriented cultures actively work to prevent social hierarchies

from developing because they believe that such stratification could lead to conflict and instability” (Deji, 2011, 93).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Berremman is amongst those who use the term “social stratification”. He claims that regardless of its characteristics in a particular society, stratification is based upon three primary dimensions: class, status, and power, which are expressed respectively as wealth, prestige, and the ability to control the lives of people. Berremman suggests that, from an international perspective, social stratification systems present everywhere in the world share these crucial facts:

- the identity is regarded as being a consequence of birth or ancestry and therefore is immutable;
- the identity confers upon its possessor a degree of societally defined and affirmed worth which is regarded as intrinsic to the individual; and
- This inherent worth is evaluated relative to that of all others in the society; that is, those of different birth circumstances are inherently unequal and are avoided, while those of similar birth circumstances are innately equal and are sought. (Berrman 1972)

On the other hand, Max Weber derives many of his key concepts on social stratification by examining the social structure of Germany. He notes that, contrary to Marx's theories, stratification is based on more than simple ownership of capital. Weber examines how many members of the aristocracy lacked economic wealth yet had strong political power. Many wealthy families lacked prestige and power, for example, because they were Jewish. Weber introduced three independent factors that form his theory of stratification hierarchy, which are class, status, and power:

- **Class:** A person's economic position in a society, based on birth and individual achievement, Weber differs from Marx in that he does not see this as the supreme factor in stratification. Weber notes how corporate executives control firms they typically do not own; Marx would have placed these people in the proletariat despite their high incomes by virtue of the fact they sell their labor instead of owning capital.
- **Status:** A person's prestige, social honor, or popularity in a society. Weber notes that political power is not rooted in capital value solely, but also in one's individual status. Poets or saints, for example, can have extensive influence on society despite few material resources.
- **Power:** A person's ability to get on his way despite the resistance of others, particularly in their ability to engage social change. For example, individuals in government jobs, such as an employee of the FBI, or a member of the United States Congress, may hold little property or status but still wield considerable social power. (Stark, *Sociology*, 2007)

Indeed, an inseparable aspect of stratification is racism. The first step to understand racism is a true understanding of the concept of race. Wolfreys (2006) defines race as:

A family, tribe, people or nation sharing a set of common interests, beliefs, habits or characteristics. Race has become a troupe of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief system. Thus, as a discourse, political and ideological term, race functions frequently as a means of definition based on binary oppositions between self and other, civilized and savage, and so on. (Wolfreys, 2006, 82)

Ali Rattansi (2007), also points out to another definition of the term “race”, when he states: “We must pay close attention to the ways in which the notion of race, and its association with skin color, facial features, and other aspects of physiognomy, has been intertwined, amongst other things, with issues of class, masculinity and femininity, sexuality, religion, mental illness, and the idea of the nation” (Rattansi, 2007, 12). Bill Ashcroft (2006) refers to the importance of the term “race” and its significant influences on colonialism and racism, and in the last century on postcolonial cultural studies. He asserts:

It is hard to think of a significant debate within the field of post-colonial cultural studies in the last century that has not felt the impact of this term. Yes, few terms have been contested than race. It is not beyond contest that race, as it was conceived in the high period of imperialism -as a set of irreducible differences within the human species- it is a scientific fallacy. However, as social phenomenon, its continuing force resides not in its existence as a meaningful scientific taxonomy but in its undoubted effects on behavior and on policy in many societies. (Ashcroft, 2006, 211).

Racial discrimination involves treating someone unfavorably because she or he is of certain race or because of personal characteristics associated with race (such as hair texture, skin color, or certain facial features). Color discrimination involves treating someone unfavorably because of skin color complexion. Race/color discrimination also can involve treating someone unfavorably because the person is married to (or associated with) a person of a certain race or color, or, because of a person’s connection with a race –oriented organization or group, or an organization or group that is generally associated with people of a certain race.

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phenotypic characteristics or geographic ancestry, but often influence by and correlated with traits such as appearance, culture, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Racism is a belief that attributes characteristics and abilities to people based on their race and privilege some groups of people over others according to their race.

DISCUSSION

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, Fugard turned to more autobiographical themes that would have previously felt indulgent. However, in many ways, his work is still concerned with the same issues that preoccupied him during the apartheid era. “Telling stories about me and my country has led up to this moment,” he says:

In our sunny South Africa, with its rainbow nation and promise for everyone, it's an act of such total despair that it speaks for itself. I haven't directed a play for at least 10 years, and had said I wouldn't ever again. But this play is tremendously significant for me personally; it's the emotional journey I've travelled in dealing with my inherited legacy of South African prejudice, and what you do with that blinkered vision of reality. (Benson, 1990, 75)

It seems odd, given Fugard's intense attachment to the landscape and languages of South Africa, his deep identification with its past and present histories, that today he lives mostly in San Diego, California, though he returns frequently to his house in Nieu Bethesda in the Karoo. “The reason I'm in San Diego is not because I want distance from South Africa but because I want proximity to the people I love,” he says, referring to his wife, daughter and grandson. “But I don't envy growing up in America. As ugly as aspects of it were, my biggest blessing was to be born a South African” (79).

Growth and development of Fugard in the hot sun and his life in the wild nature among people, who die like butterflies in the steel clump of deprivation and poverty, made Fugard a writer who was not concerned with anything except human and human dignity. Fugard represented the voice of those people who had been deprived and their voice had only deafened their own ears, but Fugard let the world hear the voice through his plays. He was the first white playwright who broke the persisting taboos, and introduced black actors on the stage, thus manifesting a new commitment to art. He untied the blind knots of apartheid, and depicted religious, economic, racial and cultural differences of Africa for the audience.

In the case of *The Island* (1974), racial issues are given force by those moments of self – discovery and self – recognition through racial conflict and stratification. For those with strong political agendas, like Mshengu, a writer's work must, necessarily, be diminished when he or she fails to consider the exploitative and destructive nature of capitalism.

In *The Island*, two black prisoners, John and Winston, are men whose political stands against the state have caused them to be incarcerated, sentenced without determinable end in Robben Island prison. They are dressed in shorts to look like the boys their keepers would make

them. However, clearly, the authorities wish them to be far, far less than boys, for the prisoners are treated with extreme brutality and are given the sorts of tasks meant to reduce them from men to beasts, to annihilate the last shreds of their humanity.

The Island is indeed an actor's play, for acting is its central metaphor and idea: acting as a means for the acting out of one's life, acting as a form of survival, and acting as a basis for political action.

Fugard takes a further step by introducing the device of play within a play; he has the prisoners enact the classical play *Antigone* in his play, *The Island*. It is an attempt by John to bring some sense of sanity in their insane world; it provides a subtle overture to the events that crystallize the structure of *The Island*, wherein a play is presented in a theatre about a play being presented in a prison, but where the audiences for both plays are ironically the same. Fugard made a deliberate attempt to expose the bitter realities of the terrifying prison the island.

Playwrights have often used the device of a play within a play to provide an element of irony or metaphor to their dramas. In some plays like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, such device produces the climax of the main work, and somehow creates tension between characters. But, there is a difference between the effect, this device has on the audiences and characters of both *Hamlet* and *The Island*; in the former, Hamlet who organizes the play tries to awaken the conscience of the king, the murderer of his father, whereas in the latter, John and Winston are not able to awaken the conscience of the kings of the masters. However, the characters of the play, *The Island*, have tried to show how a theatre becomes a prison and a prison becomes a theatre.

John and Winston play in the presence of the other prisoners and the prison guards, but they keep on imagining that the audience, consist of more people belonging to outside world, people who understand the message the play *Antigone* has; this gives John and Winston some comfort. As Winston tears off his wig and reveals his real identity as a trapped prisoner, not as Antigone, he addresses the audience in a convincing manner, as if the latter is the real audience of a proper theatre: "Gods of our fathers! My land! My home! Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honored those things to which honor belongs" (*The Island* 227). However, the real audience, are greatly affected by the performance, for they live the same prison world, the world of the theatre with some guilt. The measure of guilt the audience feel, depends upon the extent of understanding they have of the situation in the prison.

The apartheid-era drama, inspired by a true story, is set in an unnamed prison clearly based on South Africa's notorious Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was held for twenty-seven years. It focuses on two cellmates, one whose release draws near and one under a life sentence, who spend their days at mind-numbing physical labor and at night rehearse for a performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which they have been asked to present to their fellow inmates by the wardens. One takes the part of Antigone, who defies the laws of the state to bury her brother, and the other takes the part of her uncle Creon, who sentences her to die for her crime. The play examines the parallels between Antigone's situation and black men imprisoned for political reasons and the tensions that arise as the performance approaches, especially when one of the prisoners learns that he has won an early release and the men's deep friendship is tested.

When John learns his sentence is being reduced, the men's friendship is tested. Fugard plays the parallels between Antigone's fight against political and patriarchal boundaries of the imprisoned men's fight for their dignity. *The Island* is a testament to the resiliency of the human heart. The play proceeds with the plan made by the characters to enact the confrontation of Antigone and Creon in order to entertain the other prisoners. Fugard turns the playhouse into a prison, and by doing so, he gives his audience their own painful taste of what it must be like to be incarcerated on Robben Island. The prisoners possess meager belongings in the poor looking prison cell. They don't even have beds.

The characters are engaged in a Sisyphean labor of pointlessly digging sand at one end of the stage, filling a wheelbarrow with it, pushing the wheel borrow to the other end of the stage, and emptying the sand. It is here that we realize "their labor is interminable" (47). The essence of *The Island* is contained between its Sisyphean beginning and its Sophoclean end. The picture of old Harry resembles that of Camus' picture of Sisyphus: "Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing" (Camus, 1969, 120). The last exhausting mime scene makes the audience feel the dehumanizing pattern of life in South African prison. Although it takes ten minutes of boring time for the audience to witness the hard labor undergone by the two prisoners, but it takes a whole life for the latter; this is exactly what Fugard intends to convey. He is able to show the audience's failure to understand why such punishments inflicted upon the prisoners make the theatre a microcosm of the prison world. The audience thinks the same way the prisoners do. The prisoners are inclined to endure the monotony and pointlessness not for ten minutes but for the rest of their lives. Fugard portrays the subhuman race with the stage directions: "They start to run ... John mumbling a prayer, Winston muttering a rhythm for their three-legged run" (47) the process of animal degradation occurs. Rather than reducing them to the level of animals, Fugard tries to evoke the very thing that raise men above bestiality, i.e., a reliance upon the spirit, manifested in John's prayer, and a reliance upon reason, manifested in Winston's creating a rhythm so that the two men may with dignity run in unison.

In their short traffic on stage, the actors representing the two prisoners are meant not only to enact but also to undergo what hundreds of men were undergoing every day of their lives in South African prisons. *The Island*, shows the backfiring of a system that wishes to rob the two prisoners who serve as the main characters, of their humanity by reducing them to beasts. This condition of men reminds us of what Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* points out: "the Panopticon is a royal menagerie; the animal replaced by man, individual distribution be a specific grouping and the king by the machinery of a furtive power" (Foucault, 1977, 203).

Fugard decides to show John and Winston appear on stage constantly affirming their brotherhood. On the other hand, the white guard is not seen at all; the only thing heard is his irritating noises and the sting of his blows. It is in this way that John and Winston remain triumphantly human. The irony here lies in the fact that the prison guard's humanity is reduced into animal behavior, whereas the prisoners, John and Winston, create their humanity out of the very bestiality that has been forced on them. It is the prisoners' attempt to care for each other like two brothers that maintains the trace of humanity. The prisoners are treated with extreme

brutality and are given the sorts of tasks meant to reduce them from men to beast, to annihilate the last shreds of their humanity. Their humanity, however, remains intact. The two men continue to act as humans by using dramatic acting as the means for sustaining their humanity. Acting becomes both shield and sword to the two prisoners, a means for taking action or acting against their captors and state. Fugard thus asserts that acting is not confined to an idle art, but an active essence of life and humanity.

The two characters survive through acting. They intend to enact the classical *Antigone* through mime. The audience takes the actions of the two prisoners in playing *Antigone* seriously. As John and Winston play Creon and Antigone, they feel the immediacy of the Greek Legend. The audience, however, begins to realize that John, the prisoner who directed *Antigone*, and Fugard have chosen the *Antigone* story because it is a legend that embodies the history of protest; it is the audience that understands the relationship between Winston's fate and that of Antigone. At the first sight, the Island seems to be about incarceration, and as Fugard believes about "a loss of life, as a Living Death" (*Notebooks* 209). However, Fugard turns the wheel around and turns the play from a depiction of imprisonment to a consideration of the meaning of freedom, i.e., freedom against the absurdity of incarceration. Although Winston is not able to achieve freedom from prison physically, he achieves spiritual freedom. Fugard and John both know that once the audience has had its laugh at the comic figure Winston cuts, the joke will be over and they can move beyond their laughter to perceive the tragic classical Antigone, no longer a comical scene; to take the meaning of *Antigone* seriously.

One of the prisoners, John, is to be freed shortly, whereas the other one, Winston, is destined to serve a lifetime in prison; this creates a sense of jealousy of the latter for the former. For Winston, John's release serves to underline the pointlessness, and the absurdity of his own lot. It is here that Winston realizes his own absurdity. It is due to this kind of feelings that his temporary joy for his friend turns into temporary jealousy and hatred. It is here that he even desires to attack John. Winston, who has dismissed his friendship with John, creates a monologue to express in feeling of hatred for John.

The Island, shows the ultimate fate of those who rebel against the apartheid strictures. It is a manifestation of a theatre of absurd. Once the audience witnesses the sufferings of the prisoners, it begins to experience the madness and the insidious nature of a pointless experience that goes on until the time when the audience is on the verge of screaming.

Once his rehearsal of *Antigone* is over, Winston understands his fate, and almost seems "to bend under the weight of the life stretching ahead of him on the Island. For a few second he lives in silence with his reality, then slowly straightens up. He turns and looks at John. When he speaks again, it is the voice of a man who has come to terms with his fate, massively compassionate" (*The Island* 72). It results in the repeated exultation of brotherhood and a renewed commitment, "Nyana we Sizwe!", brother of the land. Winston violently states:

This is preparation for stage fright! I know those bastards out there. When you get in front of them, sure they'll laugh...Nayah, nayah! ... they'll laugh. However, just remember this brother, nobody laughs forever! There'll come a time when they'll stop laughing, and that will be the time when our *Antigone* hits them with their words. ... You

think those bastards out there won't know it's you? Yes, they'll laugh. But who care about that as long as they laugh in the beginning and listen at the end. That's all we want them to do ... listen at the end! (*The Island* 62)

Brian Crow, in his article "Athol Fugard," points out to the significance of acting in Fugard's *The Island*, and states: "The ability to act, to assume new identity however temporarily, is here as in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (a play by Fugard), a form of self protection and a strategy for survival, allowing its exponent as well as its audience to achieve an understanding and a renewed commitment to struggle in spite of the horror of the situation" (Crow, 1992, 127-128).

Prison writing, whether the literary works composed by the detainees during their incarceration, as in *the Island*, or the works because of which they are arrested in the first place, serves as a sustaining link between the prisoners and those outside. This creates a solidarity among the people suffering the same pains. The island is not merely Robben Island but South Africa itself, an absurd prison with absurd rules imposed by the absurd officials. South African people are as much imprisoned as either Antigone or John and Winston.

Most of Fugard's characters look for justice and freedom in the face of the State's indifference; this sense of freedom is exactly what Winston feels in the Island:

The only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the State. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action. Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man's availability. (*The Island* 56-57)

The introduction of mime in *The Island* has been a deliberate attempt by Fugard. The two prisoners are not allowed to speak but to interact with the people through mimed dumb show of useless labor for fifteen minutes. It is through their silence that they are able to show their protests. In this regards we are inclined to refer to Peter Brook's comment on the importance of mime scenes in *The Island*:

Not a word spoken, nothing on the stage, for 40 minutes – just two men ... with imaginary wheelbarrows, in an imaginary space. Gradually the audience went through a whole cycle. First amazement, then the beginnings of irritation – 'we are an audience. We've come for something, what's going on here?' – Then impatience.

And then suddenly the whole audience was transformed by a deep feeling of shame for having dared to think to themselves, 'Come on, get on with it.'

When one saw the reality of their sweat, the reality of the weight of the imaginary objects they were lifting, the audience dropped any expectation of the play 'starting'. They realized this was the play, and waited, with respect and absolute involvement, for whatever was coming next. (Brook, 2000, 1)

To sum up, we need to point out the importance of the play in introducing the theme of Brotherhood. The prisoners, Winston and John, seem to be stronger than rock that forms the fortress of Robben Island, thanks to the brotherhood between them

Fugard intends to make *the Island* as a reflection of twentieth century South Africa. Indeed Antigone is found guilty because she has broken the law, which Creon insists is meant to protect such people like Antigone. Nevertheless, in South Africa the law only protects the privileged minority, and certainly not the prisoners of Robben Island. Winston represents the same Antigone who gains spiritual victory over the white masters in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Race and apartheid in South Africa has been Fugard's concern and his dramatic output. They are the important concerns of modern South Africa. His great achievement is to see into the depths of the human mind and soul, portraying the force of human interactions in their often-tragic dimensions.

Athol Fugard is no reclusive, ivory-tower playwright. He is an engaged, consummate genius of the theatre who has struggled with the staging of each production. He fought the authorities to produce his plays; striven to end the racial stratification in South Africa on the stage and in the seating areas of the theatre. Most of his works deal with resistance. The kind of resistance Fugard seems to demand is one not of storming the barricades but of existential courage. A deep reader of Camus, Fugard seems to suggest that real revolution, real distress, real dismantling of racial and economic injustice come from individual existential self-realization. One should also notice that the imaginations and dreams are close to the heart of Fugard's plays. Above all, Fugard is concerned about human relationships, about those epiphanous moments when characters reveal their secrets to themselves and others. At those times, characters gain insights into themselves, their lives, and their situations in a disturbing situation. For Fugard, the drama comes from sharing the secrets and the insights with themselves and the audience.

These features can be traced in the play, *The Island*, a play concerned with miserable conditions of blacks in the white dominated society of South Africa; the plight of two prisoners whose main concern is freedom and survival. In *The Island*, racial issues are given force by those moments of self – discovery and self – recognition through racial conflict and stratification.

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