

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND POLITICS IN “MASTER HAROLD”....AND THE BOYS

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Abstract

Through this article, my purpose is to propagate what Athol Fugard has shown in ‘*Master Harold . . . and the boys*’ regarding his personal experiences discussing incidents and events in his real life. Fugard demonstrates, in this play, many incidents that he experienced in his childhood, for example, his relationship with his two servants Sam and Willie, the spitting incident based on racism, the kite flying incident and his love-hate emotions for his natural father. Unsurprisingly, the play is based on events and incidents drawn from Fugard’s own life in apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: Autobiography, race and apartheid.

While the South African politics, especially apartheid, is the prime concern of Athol Fugard’s plays, the autobiographical elements offer a fascinating picture of his life. In his plays, Fugard has shared different kinds of experiences sometimes traumatic, sometimes triumphant. From the very beginning, his experiences prepare an impetus for his works. His first major play ‘*The Blood Knot*’ is one of the best examples that prove that Fugard has drawn material from his own experiences. Once upon a time, he was, at night, returning home from the University of Cape Town in order to celebrate his Christmas holidays, he reached late and found his brother sleeping. Looking upon his brother in restful manner, Fugard felt jealous in one way or the other. It is this image that set the backdrop for his play ‘*The Blood Knot*’. Moreover, the politics of South Africa helps Fugard to explore this relationship in better way. Fugard says about ‘*The Blood Knot*’:

It is basically myself and my brother... when I felt an enormous guilt thing about him, he was going through a hard time. There was just a sense of responsibility for another man, for another existence (Russell Vandenbrouke 37).

Apart from this there are a number of plays by Fugard that reflect his personal experiences. For example, *The Captain’s Tiger* reminds us of his months aboard the SS *Graiguar*. Similarly, in *Sorrows and Rejoicings*, Fugard accepts, in a 2003 interview, that Dawid, the protagonist, plays the playwright’s role in many ways. And *Exits and Entrances* reveals the playwright’s relationship with veteran actor Andre Huguenet, during the performances of *Oedipus* in 1950s and 1960s.

Though Fugard's most of the plays contain autobiographical elements, "*Master Harold*"...and the boys' occupies a distinguished place among them. We are acquainted with characters, places and incidents of the play in his real life. For example, St. George's Park Tea Room, the characters Willie, Sam, the mother, the father and Hally's spitting incident remind us of his personal experiences. Sam is the most significant character, whose identity is based on a Basuto man, Sam Samela. Sam is the servant who works for the Fugard family nearly for fifteen years. Samela works as a waiter for Fugard's mother at the Jubilee Hotel where Athol Fugard and Sam are living together. As a result, they become close friends. One of the most memorable moments in Fugard's life is when Samela makes a kite for him. As a child, as Hally in the play, Fugard remembers his frequent visit of his servants' quarters, that he describes as rooms of mystery. He recollects listening keenly to Samela's stories of ballroom dancing. Moreover, he gets information about Samela's life in township and about his wives. Apart from this, he is told the stories of Abraham Lincoln and that of Socrates. In this play, Sam and Willie, are supposed to be Hally's second family. Sam acts not only as a friend to Hally but also as a surrogate father to him. We often realize that Hally is more emotionally close to Sam than he is to his own parents. We observe in the play that Sam has done many things a father should do with his son, for example, (i) teaching him to grow up in order to be an ideal man, (ii) playing games of checkers with him, (iii) reading and (iv) making a kite for the boy. The point is to be noted that such type of emotional attachment between black and white takes root and grows in spite of the conditions of apartheid. Fugard was much impressed by Samela's this act as he himself states:

Sam Samela "radiated all the qualities a boy could look to, and recognise as those of a man. I thought, "I can model myself on that." As I started reading, Sam started reading. He and I evolved theories, such as one about the shapes of good heads and bad heads, with such relish and enjoyment things that a father and a son should do (Russell Vandenbrouke 185-186).

Later, Samela was rebuked by Fugard's mother for his carelessness at the Park Café. At that time, Fugard was thirteen years old. Still his friendship with Samela continued as Fugard wrote in his notes:

Realize now he [Sam] was the most significant – the only – friend of my boyhood years. On terrible, windy days, when no one came to swim or walk in the park, we would sit together and talk (Notebooks 25-26).

Samela was a man who possessed dignity, pride, compassion and wisdom. Still there was a conflicted feeling in Fugard regarding Samela. He recalls that in his relationship with Samela he had a love-hate thing. Though Fugard was Samela's friend, he did not compromise with black and white difference. In spite of being ten or eleven years old, he had a full authority over Samela who was about twenty eight years old. The reason is that Fugard was a white boy while Samela belonged to black community. The most remarkable incident occurred in Fugard's life during his friendship with Samela is the spitting incident. One day there was a quarrel between Fugard and Samela. Having finished his work, Samela was walking ahead of Fugard. Riding up behind Samela, Fugard called his name and when he turned to look behind, the playwright spat in his face. This was the incident that compelled Fugard to regret throughout his life whenever he remembered it. The event has been enacted in the play through the portrayal of Hally representing Fugard and Sam acting as the real Sam Samela.

The relationship between Hally and his natural father resembles the relationship between Fugard and his father in real life. Fugard says about his father "My father was a source of shame

in my life....Other boys had fathers who had jobs, who went away and fought in World War II"(David Richards p. G01).But Fugard's father neither had job nor fought in World War II. His father was addicted to drink and his mother had to support his family. Fugard recollects a shameful night when his father drank too much and laid down unconsciously. Fugard was too small to lift his father. Consequently, he summoned Sam Samela to bring the drunken elder Fugard from a Port Elizabeth pub. The difference between white and black is noticeable here in such a way that Fugard had to seek permission for Sam Samela to enter the bar. The employees allowed Sam half-heartedly to come in and carry his father home. Fugard followed Sam taking his father's crutches that for him was a crucifying experience.

In "*Master Harold*"...and the boys, Hally has two fathers in his life; but both of them are unable to fulfil the paternal role adequately. Sam can't perform the role because he is black and Mr. Fugard can't do it because he suffers from both physical and emotional disability. The two are opposite in nature: one is white while another is black; one is strong and another is weak; one is adopted and another is natural.

"*Master Harold*"...and the boys is primarily concerned with the damage done to Hally by the dilemma inherent in him about his two fathers, the real and the surrogate Sam. It tells a 'Tale of Two Fathers' revealing the best and worst of times in Hally's life. The setting of the play is in 1950 that was the worst variety of times for the oppressed in South Africa. However, there are some moments in the play that reflect the best variety of times, for example, when the friendship between Sam and Hally developed. Before the end of the play, their relationship is broken by a shameful act on behalf of Hally that is spitting incident.Hally is confused regarding his father. He thinks who is to be called 'father'. Sam as a surrogate father cares for him and has a friendly nature with Hally. As far as Hally's real father is concerned, he is not satisfied with him rather he feels annoyed with his own father. But, due to social convention, he does not dare to strike at a parent. He does not show his anger on his natural father, rather he diverts his resentment on Sam, the substitute father who is regarded Hally's trusty. Fugard expresses his view of the play thus:

I was dealing with the last unpaid ghost in my life, who was my father.

Our relationship was as complex as Master Harold expresses it in the play.

I had resentment at his infirmity, and other weakness but, as Master Harold says, 'I love him so' (Russell Vandenbrouke 190).

Though Hally's father never appears physically on the stage, still his presence in the background affects the action of the play. Fugard peeps in his own heart and expresses his painful personal truths through his plays. That is why his bitter experience is accepted that his life is littered with betrayals that, usually, generate the plays. However, the story of Hally is the story of Athol Fugard.

Racism is, as in Athol Fugard's other plays, a dominant theme in the play, because, it focuses on the relationship between Hally, a white seventeen year old student, and Sam and Willie, black men in their mid-forties. For many years, Sam has served as a kind of spiritual father to Hally. As the play reaches its climax, Hally demands that Sam and Willie must call him "Master Harold," not "Hally" because he is white and, therefore, their master (though he is a child before them). Moreover, he calls them "boys" (though they are as old as his father) because they are blacks and, therefore, his servants. This reveals the fact that most relationships established between blacks and whites in South Africa were those between 'master' and 'servant' or 'madam' and 'maid' during apartheid era. Although Hally feels loneliness much of the time, yet his mother does not permit him to let the servants get too familiar.Hally's demand to

be called “Master Harold” is a type of a proclamation of racial superiority, and calling the servants “boys” shows racial discrimination in apartheid South Africa.

Though Fugard does not directly raise the issue of apartheid in the text- there is hardly any discussion of homelands, pass laws, or racial violence- still he has demonstrated a profound impact of apartheid on the events of the play. From the socio-economic perspective, there is a clear demarcation between the races. The people from the black community (Sam and Willie) are the servants while the white boy (Hally) and his parents serve as the masters. There are a number of incidents that remind us of Hally’s superiority complex, for example, he speaks to Sam and Willie, using offensive language. He calls them children forgetting that Sam is the surrogate father in Hally’s life. Hally’s spitting at Sam reveals that he has adopted his father’s racist beliefs. Sam has a dream regarding reform and enlightenment. For this, he cites countries that have moved past racial discrimination - but this hope is unfortunately not fulfilled. In *“Master Harold”... and the boys*, Fugard makes an effort to show his audiences how apartheid had a profound impact on the lives of South Africans on a daily basis, though he does not explicitly point out political and legal effects in the play.

Thus it is evident that the play takes place in a racially stratified environment, though the playwright does not directly deal with the racial issues on a macro scale. Instead, he exposes the consequences of apartheid through the relationships between the characters in the play. Sometimes, it seems that the characters can look beyond apartheid society’s ideas about race, but, suddenly, it becomes apparent that they are not in a position to ignore the way the society views them. Hally is the suitable example for this. He is a white man who, unlike his father, does not vigorously express his racism. Yet, it is obvious from the text that, he has internalized the apartheid mind-set and expresses it, inconsiderately, in his words and actions.

Thus it is clear that Fugard has dealt, in the play, autobiography and South African politics simultaneously. He has discussed his relationships with his servants portraying the characters of Hally (himself) and Sam and Willie (his servants). He has also talked about his relationship with his father who was an alcoholic man not caring for his wife and child. Hally possessed all the merits and demerits Fugard has in his childhood. Hally’s attitude towards his servants shows the influence of South African politics. He always thinks of himself superior because of his white skin and his servants inferior for they are from non-white community. Hally uses offensive language for them and treats them like children. He calls them “boys” and demands himself to be called “Master Harold”. This shows the influence of apartheid on Hally’s mind, in one way or the other.

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