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شبكة المعلومات الجامعية



شبكة المعلومات الجامعية

التوثيق الالكتروني والميكرو فيلم

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التوثيق الالكتروني والميكرو فيلم

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El-Minia University

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

English Department

Apartheid and the Historical Context In Coetzee's Novels

MA Thesis

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE
POLITICAL AND LITERARY
BACKGROUND

Introduction to the Political and Literary Background

The world is a dangerous place to live in not because of those who do evil but because of those who watch and let it happen. (Einstein)

South Africa is a country of sharp contrasts; a country of charming natural beauty and violence, of rich resources and sabotage, of mixed races and oppression. South Africa is the most industrialised country in the region. It consumes about sixty percent of the total electricity production of the whole continent. In addition, it has one of the most consistent growth rates in the world. As for the natural resources, the South African economy depends on agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. The country is also endowed with wonderful landscapes, making it one of the most beautiful places in the world and opening another income-generating field in tourism. However, all this wealth has been wasted due to a cruel kind of racial conflict that destroyed the country's integration and isolated it from the civilised world. As a result of this racial policy that lasted from 1948 to the early nineties, South Africa has been isolated from the international community for almost half a century. It is only recently that South Africa started to resume its international role as one of the leading African countries.

The instability of the political scene in South Africa can be attributed to the country's mixture of races and ethnic groups that do not belong to the same origin. The historical background of this ethnic diversity dates back to the seventeenth century when the first European settlers arrived in the Cape. The first Europeans to put foot on South Africa were the Dutch who arrived as early as 1652 when the Dutch East India Company established a colony in Cape Town as a port for their ships bound to India. The area at that time was inhabited by the

indigenous Hottentot and Bushmen tribes who were pushed inland by the new settlers. Needing manpower to run their business in the new conquered land, the Dutch imported slaves from farther northern areas in Africa. Then the masters began to interbreed with the women of their imported black slaves giving rise to the group called now as coloureds.

In 1795, the British acquired South Africa as a result of the warfare in Europe. On their arrival, the British introduced a new policy to South Africa that freed all the slaves and gave them complete political and civil rights of citizenship. In response to this policy that gave the slaves equal rights as their masters, the Dutch got upset and started a ferocious war against the British in what came to be called the Boer-Briton war. Finally, the British won the war because of their alliance with the indigenous Africans who did not hesitate to help the people who granted them freedom. However, once in power, the British started to recognise the danger of the growing influx of the black people into their European areas. In order to control the movement of the black job seekers, the British introduced the so-called *pass laws* which confined the movement of the blacks and restricted their freedom.

In 1948 when South Africa got its independence from the British rule, the National Party, dominated by the Dutch Afrikaners gained control over the government once again. In order to regularise the relationship between the different races of the country the new government masterminded a system they called *Apartheid* (Schaefer 495-496).

Apartheid is a word derived from the Afrikaans language to describe the political system in South Africa. The word originally means "apartness or separation" and is used to describe the separate development policy adopted by the South African government.

According to the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language the word "apartheid" refers to:

The racial policy of the government of South Africa, under which white, Africans, Asiatic and coloured communities live separately in principle, so that each group may develop to the full its own society and culture. It is largely resisted by the segregated non-white communities and by many liberal white South Africans. (42)

Generally speaking, people in South Africa were classified by law (Population Registration Act, 1950) into four major racial groups: Indigenous Africans, or Blacks (74% of the total population); Whites (14%); Coloureds (9%); and Asians (3%). Each of these four groups was in turn divided into sub-groups. The blacks, for instance, were classified into ten ethnolinguistic subdivisions. Each of these ten groups was assigned, by virtue of the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951, one of the homelands called "Bantustans". The inhabitants of these Bantustans belong to four main ethnolinguistic groups: the Nguni, the Sotho, the Venda and the Tsonga.

The whites who form the second largest racial group that dominated the whole political scene of the country were also classified into two main sub-groups: Afrikaners (60% of the total), descended from the seventeenth century Dutch settlers in the Cape; and the English speaking group (34% of the total), descended from the British settlers who arrived in 1820. The coloureds are people of mixed race whose origins date back to the seventeenth century when Europeans interbred with local African women and Malay slaves. Finally, Asians form the most ethnically and linguistically diversified group in the country. They are small Indian and Chinese communities who live in Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, and Durban.

Under the apartheid system the country was divided into one white area and ten black areas designated for the ten black tribes. This division aimed at making each group develop its own economy and social system by its own means completely independent from the others. However, the allocation of the land was not fair as it neglected the numerical differences between the population of these groups. The white minority retained for themselves the richest soils and the most fertile lands, giving the blacks the poorest and most peripheral areas that could be used neither for agriculture nor for mining. Furthermore, the South African citizenship was dropped from the inhabitants of the Bantustans, according to the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970, as they were considered citizens of the nominally independent new states.

Through these laws and Acts of parliament, the life of the black inhabitant of South Africa was turned into misery. In one of her essays about life in South Africa Nadine Gordimer draws a comparison between the life of the blacks in their poor townships and the luxurious life of the whites in their cities. The comparison, though brief, gives a true picture of the unfairness of the division that retains all the privileges of the country to one race and completely neglects the others:

In terms of ways of life, conditions of daily living are sinisterly much the same for all whites, those who manage to ignore the crisis in our country, and those for whom it is the determining state of mind. Some go to protest meetings; others play golf. All of us go home to quiet streets, outings to the theater and cinema, good meals and secure shelter for the night. Meanwhile, in the black townships, thousands of children no longer go to school, fathers and sons

disappear into police vans or lie shot in the dark streets, social gatherings are around coffins and social intercourse is confined to mourning (Gordimer 26).

Although, oppression and violence are universal phenomena that cannot be restricted to a certain country in the world, what was really notorious in the case of South Africa is that the oppressing group was the minority. They enjoyed all the resources and natural wealth of the country while the blacks were treated as *others*, and consequently were denied any access to full rights of citizenship. They were not even allowed free movement from one place to another without a *pass permission* from the white police. Inter-racial sexual relations, including marriage, were also forbidden under apartheid by the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950.

On the other hand, all kinds of public expression, whether local or international, including writing, were subjected to severe censorship. Any work of art that implied criticism to the system was completely banned. The severity of censorship over literary production reached its peak in South Africa during the last three decades. Some writers such as Dennis Brutus were not only banned from publishing but also from writing. Ban orders, Susan Vanzanten Gallagher argues, were used as an effective method to silence "black voices" (32). This "wall of silence" (Gallagher 32), built to suppress the voices of the truth-tellers, played its role in the development of the South African literary canon in general, and was reflected in the publications of most contemporary South African writers. In addition, banning was imposed not only on the written word but sometimes it was extended to the writer himself. By virtue of a banning decree, a writer becomes an outcast and a threat to anybody who tries to break the barrier of silence between him and the public:

A banned person may not write or publish anything, may not be quoted or cited in any publication, may not be with more than one person at a time other than family, may not communicate in any way with another banned person, is confined to a location (a magisterial district or even a particular address), and must report to the local police station once a week. (Gallagher 32)

As a result of their anti-apartheid attitudes many South African writers and artists were forced to live in exile. Exiled writers included famous names such as: Breyten Breytenbach, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Can Themba, C.J. Driver, Dan Jacobson, Zakes Mda, Rose Ross, Mbulelo Mzamane, Dennis Brutus, Arther Nortje, Sheila Roberts, Lewis Nkosi, Alex La Guma, and Bessie Head - the last two died in exile.

In fact, exile is a horrible experience. In deportation people usually feel plucked out of the roots that maintain their equilibrium. In the case of the writer, the situation becomes more tormenting as it severs him from his audience, from the people to whom he writes and for whom he suffers. Besides, experience proved that some people cannot endure such a humiliating life; some of the South African writers preferred to put an end to their lives than to live in asylum: Themba, Nortje, and Nkatha all committed suicide. But, in spite of all the government's suppressive procedures the creative writer "survives, and will survive" (Gordimer 37), because, as Nadine Gordimer once said: "the word is prickly, but full of juice" (Gordimer 37).

In 1985, the silencing policy of the white South African government was extended a step further to ban all methods of media coverage in "emergency areas", areas of unrest. The banning orders at that time were not only restricted to South African writers; they were extended