

Athol Fugard's "Valley Song" and the Legacy of Colonialism

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For over 300 years, South Africa was colonized by foreign powers. The Dutch were the first to colonize South Africa, in 1652, followed by the British in 1815. Both of these imperial powers and their colonial legacy is still ingrained in modern South Africa. Afrikaans, the third-most widely spoken language in South Africa, is descended from the Dutch vernacular of the first colonists; it is spoken by Afrikaners, the white descendants of Dutch colonists, and "coloreds," the South African ethnic group defined by mixed racial descent. Both colonial powers attempted to erase native cultures and ways of life by imposing European ideals and subjugating native populations. They deemed native South African people "savages" and systematically ensured that white, European-descended people held all the power. One of the most consequential ways this was accomplished was through apartheid, a system of institutionalized, legal racial discrimination and segregation in South Africa enacted in 1948. The National Party of South Africa, which implemented the policy, sought to keep control of the country's socio-economic system in the hands of the white minority population. The effects of this system are still felt today.

South Africa gained independence from British colonization in 1961, but apartheid was not abolished until 1994, when the country held its first democratic elections and Nelson Mandela became its leader. The continuation of apartheid past the technical end of the colonial period ensured that European-descended whites maintained their power and native or colored peoples and cultures were still subjugated. Thus the process of decolonization and the period of post-colonialism could not really begin until 1994. Postcolonialism is characterized by formerly subjugated groups and individuals attempting to reclaim the land, culture, language, and history taken or suppressed by colonial powers. It must also include a cultural healing from the exploitation of colonized people.

The importance of culture to decolonization means that the arts play a central role in the process. Theatre rife with political and socio-economic themes and messages is typical of this period. In South Africa during apartheid, theatre was focused on resisting and protesting the oppressive regime. After 1994, the first generation of postcolonial dramatists sought to "create a national body of drama that could culturally support the political process of nation-building" (Bloomsbury). To do this, the effects of apartheid and colonialism on South African society had to be identified and eliminated, replaced by the "narratives and discourses" (Bloomsbury) of the indigenous people. Postcolonial theatre therefore allows those previously relegated to subordinate cultural positions to reclaim their heritage and find their voice.

Athol Fugard, a white South African playwright and actor, is known for his often politically-motivated theatre criticizing the apartheid regime and tackling the social obstacles of decolonization. Descended paternally from Manchester immigrants and maternally from Voortrekkers (those descended from the Dutch East India Company's original settlers), Fugard's heritage is rooted in colonialism. Born in 1932, he witnessed the rise and fall of apartheid. In an interview with NPR, Fugard recalled that "society was trying to make [him] conform to a set of very rigid, racist ideas" through "conditioning that was taking place on school playgrounds, in classrooms, everywhere." Fugard recognizes his mother as being responsible for making him challenge these societal pressures in his early life. Later, in 1958, Fugard worked as a court clerk in Johannesburg and saw the

discrimination of apartheid firsthand. These experiences and his friendship with many anti-apartheid leaders led Fugard to become an important voice of dissent during the apartheid period as well as a significant voice in postcolonial South African theatre.

Fugard's first play, *Rehearsal Room*, stood against segregation with a multiracial cast. Fugard worked to develop and sustain theatre groups opposing apartheid, learning enough about the law to find loopholes that allowed him to work with multiracial casts and dramatists despite enforced segregation. This did not always go unpunished, and some of Fugard's colleagues were sent to prison on Robben Island with Mandela. Fugard himself was punished following his first international success, *Blood Knot*, which opposed apartheid. In response, the South African government withdrew Fugard's passport. To avoid the censorship of the government, Fugard had many of his plays published and produced outside of South Africa, potentially gaining support for the anti-apartheid cause from abroad.

The first play that Fugard wrote after the end of apartheid was *Valley Song*, which tells the story of a young colored woman who dreams of going to the city to become a singer and her grandfather who wants to hold onto both his granddaughter and the land he has farmed for four decades. Buks' claim to the land is threatened by the Author, a white man who wants to buy the property that Buks lives and works on, but does not hold the deed to. The Author and Buks are played by the same actor; in the first production of *Valley Song* this actor was Fugard himself.

Both men are highly reverential of the land, the Karoo valley where the Author's colonial ancestors lived and where Buks has faithfully harvested food for three generations of his own family. The relationship between the two men underscores the importance of the land and its ownership in the play. Buks, who has been living and working on the land for his entire life and is deeply connected to it, could lose everything if the white Author decides not to let him stay. The Author "cannot pass up the chance to own a piece of [his] own native Karoo," (Fugard) despite the fact that he is only native to the land because his ancestors invaded it.

Although apartheid is never explicitly mentioned in the play, its legacy is apparent. It is the end of apartheid that allows the Author to move out into the country, and it is the years of segregation and domination by white people that prompts Buks to treat him with near painful authority. In an attempt to persuade the Author to let him keep his acres of land, Buks takes the other man a wheelbarrow full of produce from his fields as a gift, all the while referring to the Author only as "Master." This scene contrasts perfectly with the last scene of the play, when the Author brings Buks a handful of pumpkin seeds and invites the old man to plant the land with him. This last scene is an idyllic image of "colored and white South Africans returning to plant their common soil."

Although it ends with this peaceful image, the play does not suggest that simply because South Africa has been freed from apartheid it has suddenly become utopian. Buks' granddaughter, Veronica, is a "symbol for a brave new South Africa with the strength and fire to change the patterns of the past" (Winer), but she comes across as hopelessly naive, assured that dreams must always come true if you wish hard enough. She wishes to leave the land, begin anew, and feels sure that she will not fail. Her naivete is contrasted by Buks reluctance to leave his old way of life and gamble on the changes brought about by the new era. Thus even as South Africa strives towards a fully postcolonial and desegregated society, vestiges of the old system linger and the message is clear: it will take a long time for the country to be fully decolonized.