

Gender and Resistance in Apartheid South Africa: *Come Back Africa, Mine Boy*, and *The Island*

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WRITER'S COMMENT: I intended this piece as a critique of three different anti-Apartheid texts that emerged as part of the native resistance movement to the Apartheid government of South Africa before its demise in 1994. The trouble with many of these kinds of texts, and their ideas and frameworks of resistance, was a consistently incomplete or complicitly oppressive treatment of gender that hindered each work's revolutionary potential. The three I focus on in particular are significant for the strides they each make in opening up creative and active space for resistance, in contrast to many earlier anti-Apartheid texts that shied away from these issues entirely. Nevertheless, each one also demonstrates an exclusion—some obviously, others more subtly—that limits the thinkable possibilities of black women's participation in resistance and social change. By addressing these exclusions, I hope to model how we might open up the discussions that revolve around other movements for change, especially struggles for equality and inclusivity.

—Brigitte Johnson

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I tend to remember students who speak up in class, and I remember even better those who write well. In a class of over 60 students, Brigitte stood out on both counts. She often responded to questions and volunteered carefully thought out opinions. It's hard to give a perfect score for an essay. There's always more that could be said, additional perspectives that could be explored. In Brigitte's case, I spent time thinking about what shortcomings to note, but there was not much to be added by way of criticism. The essay offered a nuanced and insightful study of gender and resistance in literature and film produced about apartheid South Africa over several decades. The draft essay already showed promise, and the final expanded version was excellent. I gave it a perfect score, and I'm delighted that the awards committee agreed about the quality of Brigitte's thinking and writing.

—Moradewun Adejunmobi, *African American & African Studies*

LIONEL ROGOSIN'S FILM *COME BACK AFRICA*, Peter Abrahams' novel *Mine Boy*, and Athol Fugard's play *The Island* each provide a dynamic insight into, and powerful critique of, the oppressive Apartheid system that governed South Africa from 1948 until 1994. Furthermore, each one offers representations of resistance and possibilities of challenging this system, which demonstrates a key break with the conventions of earlier anti-Apartheid texts such as Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, which fell short of addressing directly and *positively* the question of active resistance. However, all three works exhibit, to varying degrees, a crucial omission: black women are not represented in any of their visions for social change, activism, and resistance. In general, the concept of gender and the intersectional oppressions that it represents in conjunction with racial oppression are left, to a significant extent, unchallenged.

This is the theme which I will take up in my paper: the comparative representations of black women and/or gender in relation to black resistance in *Come Back Africa*, *Mine Boy*, and *The Island*. I am interested in what the different consequences and social significances are of each work's representation. It is important to recognize that all three productions make substantial strides in that they include representations of strong female characters who express their own claims to agency and subjectivity, their own hopes, dreams, fears, defiance, and resistance. Both *Come Back Africa* and *Mine Boy* portray women as the center of the family, and credit them with strength and perseverance in struggling to hold together and *redefine* family within their embattled environments, while *The Island* presents a nuanced critique of gender framed by the intersection of gender discrimination and the perpetuation of racial oppression. Yet each representation has limits and ultimately does not fully critique gender and realize black women as potential movers and motivators of social change. In this way the book, the play, and the film leave much wanting in their messages and calls for change.

In *Come Back Africa*, the primary female characters are Zachariah's wife Vinah, Vinah's deaf sister, a nameless woman who tries to seduce Zachariah in the beginning of the film, and a young woman who sings during the shebeen scene. Vinah's sister is a minor character, and her role is significantly limited by her disability; yet she is still shown as an invaluable member of the family who performs the important function

of caring for the children and helping with domestic chores in spite of her handicap. Vinah, furthermore, is portrayed as the center of the family—she ties all of the family members together and shoulders the responsibility for each one's well-being. She expresses hopes and dreams for her children's futures, and she works actively toward these goals, creating and maintaining the family structure despite the challenges posed by the trying social conditions of the crowded township. She is represented in this role as strong and capable—yet perhaps *because* of this role, this relegation to the realm of the family, she is forced to grapple personally with the issue of tradition. When Vinah suggests that she take a job as a domestic servant in order to help support her family, Zachariah stubbornly refuses. For him, Vinah must internalize and thus symbolize the traditional values of his culture, even at the possible expense of his family's well-being. In the culturally degenerative environment of the city slums, he feels that this is the last vestige of custom and tradition that he can maintain and that he must cling to. However, Vinah's obligation to tradition—to embodying and performing a *symbolic* function in the reproduction of culture—denies her the free and full exercise of her agency. Even when the family is driven to such desperation that Vinah eventually must take a job, she is still tied to a tradition and an institution (the family) that renders her dependent on her husband. When he is arrested, she is left vulnerable and she is—inevitably—assaulted and murdered, which constitutes the ultimate negation of her agency. This definitive moment in the film is representative of its overall negative tone and its eventual culmination in a vision not of possibility, hope, and change, but of bleak desperation and despair.

Contrasted with Vinah is the nameless woman at the beginning of the film, who is a member of the first group of people that Zachariah meets in the township when he is looking for a place to stay. Unlike Vinah, this woman is not tied to a family; she is portrayed as a “loose woman,” perhaps symptomatic of the city and its degenerative effect on the family. Nevertheless, she is not portrayed necessarily in a negative light; on the contrary, she is shown as self-assertive, capable, desiring, and able to pursue her desires. She is a minor character who disappears in the latter half of the film, but her example leaves a great impression that lasts throughout the story as a contrast with Vinah. Yet precisely because she disappears from the narrative, and because her character remains relatively undeveloped, she does not constitute a holistic or subversive

representation of black South African femininity or a powerful challenge to gender conventions.

Probably most disappointing is the representation of the other nameless woman who sings in the shebeen, played by a young Miriam Makeba, *in relation* to the black and coloured intellectual men around her, who socialize together by discussing complicated issues relating to Apartheid. The young woman who sings is not given nearly enough screen time to develop as even a minor character, yet even within this two-dimensionality she is denied certain forms of expression that are reserved for the male characters. While the male characters engage in intellectual and political discussion, she is merely shown singing and flirting—never once is she shown to participate, engage, or even react to the discussion taking place around her. Indeed, the song she is singing is a revolutionary one, and her simple act of singing it may be interpreted as a form of resistance. Ultimately, however, she is never shown to express political ideas of her *own*, in her own terms, as an equal with the men around her—she *performs* politics as a beautiful object to be looked at and admired, but she does not *participate* in politics as a legitimate subject to be *heard*. Since the political exchanges in the shebeen scene are the film's primary depiction of black resistance, it is significant that only male characters are demonstrated as taking part in this resistance to oppression, and that black women are excluded from this particular form of expression and subversion. Overall, with such few and cursory representations of black women, the image of black femininity remains relatively underdeveloped in the film, and the gendered dimension of oppression and resistance remains relatively unexplored. Instead, the focus and concern remains centered on the breakdown of the family and the experiences of black men—not the experiences and subjectivities of black women.

In *Mine Boy*, however, there are multiple, diverse, well-developed, three-dimensional female characters that create a much more nuanced representation of black femininity, a representation that sheds more light on the experiences of black women. Perhaps the most important of these is Leah, the first female character we meet in the novel, a Skokiaan Queen who sells illegal liquor to the black and coloured people of Malay Camp. Her representation is important because it constructs a direct challenge to traditional gender assumptions and gender roles that construct women as weaker and submissive and that relegate them to the private and subordinate realm of the family. Leah's character embodies such a *significant*

subversive representation because she is defined immediately as a character with agency and power; she is a strong, self-reliant, powerful woman at the center of several social networks—the two most important being the economic trade network of illicit liquor, and the unconventional family network she establishes among a select group of people that she has taken in, cared for, or supported. What is significant about this family is that Leah heads it; she does not simply reproduce and maintain it but she exercises power *through* it. These two sides to Leah represent the dynamic of her complex, multifaceted character and the intersection of subjectivities that render her an agent, and acknowledge her as such. She is a person who may be grappling with oppression and injustice, but who—more importantly—is manipulating the system in order to negotiate the best circumstances of her reality. This is her resistance. Leah is never portrayed as a victim, even when she is shown to face hardships and immense challenges. She ensures her independence and power by brewing and selling beer, and in this enterprise she is a highly capable, successful businesswoman—she manages her operation extremely effectively and uses it to secure herself enough money to have a better life. She then uses the resources she has created—her money and her security—to help other people, and in this way she creates a kind of family, a network of shared interdependence, in which she performs the function of both nurturer and provider. She precisely upsets the norms and expectations of gender by playing “the man’s role” in sex, business, family, and community, and her exercise of “masculine” power constitutes her own kind of resistance to social oppression. Leah’s character represents an acknowledgement of the harsh conditions of the city and the degenerative effect they have on traditional family life, but with an emphasis on the productive possibilities of negotiating these conditions and forging new families and—more importantly—new avenues to agency and power.

Nevertheless, even Leah’s character is conceptually cheated out of full realization and legitimacy; she, along with all of the female characters in the novel, are excluded from the novel’s *ultimate* vision for resistance and social change, which is couched in the idea of achieving a consciousness “without colour” and being able to lead others to fight against oppression on behalf of all people. This vision conceptualizes the ultimate achievement of individual consciousness as the ability to be, think, and *act* as a raceless person *before* acknowledging the secondary condition of race. Such a “raceless consciousness” is exhibited by Paddy,

the “Red One,” who is Xuma’s partner and overseer at the mines, and the story culminates precisely when Xuma learns from Paddy to stand up and *lead* as a “man without colour.” Yet the story’s black female characters are not represented as key players in this vision of leadership; instead, for instance, Leah remains a community leader who cares for and stands up for her own people—black people—but she does not *lead* them in the struggle against injustice as a *raceless* person. She is never shown to transcend race. On the other hand, the one black female character to exhibit a kind of transcendence of race in her consciousness—Eliza—is tormented by it and fundamentally crippled by it so that she cannot function in “normal” society. For her, the consciousness of a person “without colour,” an awareness of shared humanity, does not open up the possibility for leadership and resistance. Rather, it represents a burden that prevents her from ever feeling satisfied, instills in her self-hatred, and destroys her ability to relate to people. Xuma is contrasted with Eliza precisely in that, once he becomes a man without colour and finally is able to understand Eliza, he applies this understanding to a productive effort at resistance, whereas Eliza cannot cope with this consciousness and she simply fades away into irrelevance. In the end, *Mine Boy* only valorizes black women in relation to the family and the community, emphasizing their resilience and perseverance, but the novel falls short of including black women in the transcendence of race and the possibility of transformative resistance.

Athol Fugard’s *The Island* is interesting because it makes a significant, albeit implicit, critique of gender discrimination and the exclusion or devaluation of women, yet it represents no black female characters. Indeed, it doesn’t include *any* female characters, since the entire play is performed through only two male characters who are prisoners on Robben Island. However, the narrative of a play within the play complicates this statement: within Fugard’s play, the characters play out another play, within which there *is* a representation of a strong female character. This character is Antigone, from Sophocles’ play, portrayed by Winston, a character from Fugard’s play. So, in a sort of secondary, twice-removed, indirect way, *The Island* does contain a *reference* to the representation of a female character. And it is important to acknowledge that this female character is represented as strong, brave, and fundamentally resisting injustice by sacrificing her life in order to make a political statement. Antigone’s presence in Fugard’s play acts as a figurative model for the potential of women’s leadership, yet as a kind of pseudo-character she

remains in the metaphorical realm, in *comparison* with the oppressiveness of the South African Apartheid system that is critiqued in *The Island*. As such, she cannot constitute a representation or example of black female participation in *actual*, grassroots resistance in South Africa.

The more important message presented in the play, thus, is its critique of gender discrimination in intersection with racial oppression. Early on, the play takes shape around the two characters—Winston and John—and their preparations to perform the play *Antigone* at a small vaudeville performance that the prisoners have been allowed to put on for each other. In this play, John will play the king Creon and Winston will play Antigone in the trial scene in which Antigone defends her decision to bury her brother yet is sentenced to death because this act was against the law. During the trial, Antigone claims that she has obeyed a higher “moral law” by burying her brother and paying him proper respects, and that she is prepared to die in defense of her actions even though she is technically guilty under the laws of Creon’s kingdom. That John has chosen this play is overwhelmingly significant: it is intended as a direct comparison with the unjust laws of Apartheid South Africa, and the injustice that all of the prisoners face for having broken those laws in the name of a higher cause, of a “moral law.” Performing this play is an act of defiance and resistance, even within the oppressive and confined conditions of prison—and it has the direct and seditious political aim of provoking the prisoners to *think*, to understand the injustice they face, and to continue struggling against it.

However, John’s political message, his act of defiance, his struggle and resistance, are obstructed and seriously compromised by the problem of gender. Gender inequality becomes an intersectional issue with racial oppression precisely because Winston’s negative gender assumptions about women almost prevent the performance of the play and thus the manifestation of resistance. When John laughs at Winston dressed up as a woman, Winston explodes with anger, saying that he would rather keep his personal dignity than make a fool of himself by dressing as a woman. In this moment, Winston constructs his own personal dignity not as his humanity, convictions, or strength of spirit, but rather as his *masculinity*. He perpetuates gender inequality, the degradation of the feminine, and the exclusion of women because he finds it more repulsive to be a woman than to forego the opportunity to resist oppression—and thus he helps to perpetuate racial injustice by not confronting gender injustice.

Winston even takes this concept farther, when he asserts that he would rather allow Hodoshe, the cruel prison foreman, to make him a “boy”—to deny his legitimacy as a fully adult human being and a politically mature individual. He explains that he would rather be Hodoshe’s boy than be a woman—any woman—even a strong woman who is defined by her strength and courage in defying an unjust law. By saying this, he is further denigrating the feminine and completely negating women—particularly Antigone, as a woman—as potential leaders and political agents in acts of resistance and struggles for social change. In this way, he renders himself complicit with his own racial oppression by perpetuating this gender degradation, inequality, and exclusion.

The key turning point of the play manifests in Winston’s character transformation: in the end, he transcends his own gender prejudice, choosing to perform the play as Antigone in order to make his statement of resistance. By overcoming this gender barrier, he is able to fully confront the racial oppression of the Apartheid system. By portraying Winston’s struggle with his own gender prejudice, Fugard’s play makes a powerful connection between different forms of injustice, showing how it is necessary to challenge gender prejudice alongside racial discrimination. Thus, *The Island* makes the fundamental statement that all forms of oppression, discrimination, and inequality must be fought together in order to produce true lasting change. This statement acknowledges and values the revolutionary potential of women and is backed up by the figure of Antigone in the play. It constitutes a powerful provision for modeling and encouraging a reworking of traditional gender norms in order to include women in subversion and resistance and thus expand the power of social change movements.

However, in real terms, women—*specifically* the black South African women referenced in the play—are never envisioned as agents or potential political actors outside of a strong patriarchal tradition of either sexualized denigration or uncritical enslavement to the institution of the family. The only times actual, real women are referenced in the play emerge when John and Winston are talking about their wives or talking about the prostitutes all men hope to encounter when they are finally released from prison. In neither case do they appear to talk of these women as political beings with revolutionary potential, let alone even *human* beings with dignity and sense of self. In discussing their wives, John and Winston appear not to be talking of fellow human beings

within the common struggle against injustice, but rather units within the structural institution of the family—cogs in the wheel with no further purpose than to replicate and maintain the family structure that they assume will embrace them once they are out of prison. Similarly, the only other way that Winston and John refer to women is as sexualized objects to be used for the fulfillment of (male/masculinized) sexual desire. The world “outside” of prison is romanticized as a place of “family” in which wives uncritically obey and support men unconditionally, and a place of exploitative pleasure, in which prostitutes provide an unending and uninhibited source of “*poes*” for the satisfaction of a heavily gendered *masculine* vision of sexual desire. Reduced thus to the uncritical service of masculine-coded desire, women are not given the dignity of their own desire, choice, or agency in the play, even as the very gender system that denies them this expression is critiqued by the play. Ultimately, the contradiction between idealized treatment of gender on the abstract plane, and “realistic” exploitative treatment of gender in the literal plane, compromises the revolutionary message of *The Island*, and inhibits its imagination of black female participation in struggle and resistance as legitimate political actors.

Yet the film, the play, and the novel all fail to envision black female leadership and resistance against injustice and the system of oppression in South Africa. In Rogosin’s *Come Back Africa*, the women present at social gatherings do not join in political and philosophical discussions; they are more or less depoliticized. Moreover, these women are never presented as completely independent or self-reliant. In Abrahams’ *Mine Boy*, women are portrayed as independent and self-sufficient, but they are also implicitly depicted as unable to transcend race and assume leadership—they are excluded from being effective “men without colour.” The one woman whose consciousness has been deeply affected by understanding the injustice of the system is rendered incapacitated by this knowledge; she cannot fight, cannot even carry out a “normal” relationship. *The Island* does not even contain a legitimate representation of black femininity through an actual female character, and though it challenges the system of gender at an abstract level, it also reinforces the degradation and exclusion of women on a practical level through the representations of women presented through the male characters of the play. Although all three of these productions make significant strides in challenging gender and incorporating, acknowledging, and representing black women, ultimately, each

one also fails to fully develop representations of black female subjectivity and a vision for black female leadership.

Works Cited

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