

FATIMA DIKE'S *THE FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN*:  
A NEW STEP IN BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN THEATER

WRITTEN BY WOMEN

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One of the most striking differences between the United States and South Africa is the strongly felt absence of Black women playwrights in South Africa which slowly commenced to witness their appearance by the late 1980s. Only Fatima Dike's work received considerable attention in the seventies—at the peak of the Black Consciousness Movement, and Geina Mhlope's plays commenced to be produced at the end of the 1980s. A feminist consciousness grew out of the parameters activated by the Black Power and Consciousness movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The Black female playwrights manifested a double consciousness that embraced their cultural background and their gender.

The absence of Black women's voices in South African theater terribly hinders the development of a women's aesthetics which has recently started to germinate in South Africa. However, contemporary South Africa has begun to offer some rays of hope for Azanian women to abandon darkness and create an aesthetic of self-affirmation. Yet, this aesthetics is not completely shaped because it still remains in a developing process. Among these women playwrights who have already started this process, is Fatima Dike and her play *The First South African*, published in 1979.

The play remains open for the audience to decide what to do about their destiny which is in their hands. A reevaluation of their past and present is needed in order to take an action and to construct a future. The *First South African* equally cries out the need for Black South African women to speak out and continue to develop a new aesthetics that has already begun to grow and sparkle.

The political movements from the 1960s through the 1980s that emerged in the United States and in South Africa paralleled the theater movements that originated in the same time periods. Form and content rose

out of the artist's political and artistic stand against Western imperialism, colonialism and racism, both in its politics and its aesthetics. African-Americans and Black South Africans established, for the first time, a theater that validated both the past of African-American and African artists fused with the historical moment of the present in order to enlighten a future liberation for their respective communities.

The Black Theater Movement in the United States and South Africa shares specific elements and goals that should be comprised under the same Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the distinctive components of each country's conditions and socio-political milieus have equally generated specific features that have shaped African-American and Black South African theater in different and unique ways.

In contrast to the Black Theater Movement that emerged in North America, whose targets and artistic goals were registered in a written manifesto, the targets and artistic goals of the Black Theater Movement in South Africa have yet to be transferred into a written pronouncement. The continuous censorship and imprisonment of theater artists—actors, directors and playwrights, has restricted any official written declaration that belongs to the Movement as such. Every attempt to establish a theater group or movement was continuously hampered by the South African government. In spite of the absence of a written declaration formulating a theater movement, the playwrights and their works display an aesthetic, commitment and goals that are shared by most of the plays which appeared in the seventies and eighties.

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<sup>1</sup>In *The Black Theater Movement in the United States and in South Africa: A Comparative Approach*, the author states: "The Aesthetics of Self-Affirmation...embraces a heterogeneity that expresses the unique and particular components which have shaped Black theater in the United States and in South Africa. By self-affirmation, it is understood that a writer, as representative of her/his community, is asserting the specific characteristics that distinguish her/his culture and her/his gender. Moreover, theater, as a public genre became precisely the appropriate catapult to make public and voice the existence of a culture which had been continuously undermined by White rules and models" (10).

Furthermore, a division needs to be established between the plays written by men and women which demonstrates the existence of a differentiated aesthetics. The plays written by Black women have widened the narrower perspective offered by their male counterparts, for they have added the complexity of women's experience which was not included in the Black Theater Movement.

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It is really startling to notice the absence of Black South African women writers, especially in the genre of theater. Black South African actors have been impersonating women characters whenever it was required by the script or improvisational creations. Black South African women slowly began to appear on stage as actresses at the end of the eighties. And this absence of Black women's voices in South African theater terribly hinders the development of a women's aesthetics which has recently started to germinate in South Africa.

According to Christine Obbo and Seriti sa Sechaba, the primary and essential obstacles that these women playwrights have to face are a strong male dominant perpetuation—which preserves them from speaking out as well as the lack of an elementary education necessary as a tool to help them develop any artistic choice they might like to pursue (16, 8). Moreover, Christine N. Qunta blames the imposition of religions such as Christianity and Islam and Western values, institutions and morality which were brought to Africa and have deprived the African woman of their position of respect, equality and prominence (24).

Black South African women have always remained at the front of the struggle for liberation in their country. These women have continued to be

underground organizers and couriers, trade unionists, trained guerrillas and supportive mothers, whose names will never appear in the newspaper headlines or history books; but "they are the cornerstones of the national independence" (Qunta, 86). In "Women Writers Speak," Boitumelo defends that women's liberation "is beyond the relationship between man and woman. It is the first phase of [their] struggle to reaffirm [their] role in the struggle for total liberation". She also asserts that a woman writer must not consider herself out of her society but as a writer who originates from it (21).

But, if Black South African women writers must be totally committed to their community, most of their works observe the need of a private growth as a prerequisite for social change; thus, art and personal growth become closely intertwined. (Brown, 180-81). Geina Mhlophe insists her plays are not about politics, but about feelings. However, in Mhlophe's plays there is always hope, which is actually a political statement—even though her plays do not deal with governmental politics, for it addresses her community.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie believes that the African female writer "should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all three". She further argues that the African woman writer needs to be politically conscious (10). Moreover, it is absolutely necessary to break with the stereotypes about African women, so that they can be revealed in their full complexity. This complexity of characters is reflected in the African tradition in which women played a very important role within their societies.

Black South African women live under the pressure of a varied gamut of political and social problems which need to be observed in order to achieve a better understanding of their actual conditions and the absence of their voices in literary genres, especially in theater. These issues are presented in the plays by women themselves. Some of the more urgent problems which preoccupy the Black South African woman writer are: forced pregnancy—"from their employers, where some of them end up killing infants from that intercourse to avoid arrest for breaking the now repeated 'Immorality Act' " (sa Sechaba, 3); lack or total absence of accommodation; husbands who are indifferent or unsympathetic to the health

state of their wives; washer women who are paid low wages; and women deserted by their husbands who return home as corpses (Ibid.).

Contemporary South Africa has begun to offer some rays of hope for Azanian women to abandon darkness and create an aesthetic of self-affirmation. Yet, this aesthetics is not completely shaped because it still remains in a developing process. Among these women playwrights who have already started this process, is Fatima Dike and her play *The First South African*, published in 1979.

Dike's play directly deals with the problem of race and the absurd laws which separate people according to their skin color in South Africa—including children separated from their own mothers, as reinforced by the Groups and Immorality Acts. Dike raises the issue of a heterogeneous and complex society which exists in her country. It is significant to notice the different groups living in South Africa: the Cape Colored group, the Griqua Group, the Malay group, the Chinese Group, the Indian Group, and other Asiatic and Colored groups. This classification is presented by Gillian Booth, who asserts that the race "of an individual affects [her/]his life chances and dictates where [s/]he may work and live, whom [s/]he may marry, what the state is willing to spend on [her/]his education and what universities [s/]he may enter" (6). Booth insists the issues of race and color are synonymous and intertwined with each other.

Dike's play poses the question of what a true South African is, a question of identity. The playwright affirms that the story of her play is based on a real story of a man with blond hair and blue eyes, who grew up in Langa (Cape Town) and whose mother was Black and his father, White. He spoke Xhosa and, when he was old enough, was classified as Colored. Dike realized that this specific man, who looked like a White man and felt like a Black man, was considered a Colored person. In an interview, Dike stated that she questioned who this man was: "That man is not white; he's the shadow of a black man. And he's not coloured. What is he under the laws of the system? And that was the question" (29). Thus, in *The First South African*, Dike presents the absurd logic of apartheid, which is based on an absolute confusion.

In her analysis, the playwright does not stop at the race/color problem, but goes beyond. She examines the township life and presents

different characters. There is a shoplifter, who is considered a kind of Robin Hood in their community—and out of it he is considered a thief, for he robs the rich to help the poor. There is a mother figure, a very courageous and bright woman who fights for her son; and a father, a more passive figure, who accepts the system with no critical say.

Dike's consciousness about the present situation in South Africa and about her need to write in order to communicate to her people emerged in 1974, when she learned about the rape to death of a seven year old child in Guguletu, Cape Town, whose body was found in the garbage bins behind some shops: "From that moment I felt very frustrated. I wanted to push the walls of those shops away, and burst out, because I had something to say to my people for that. So I left the family business, and I went to work at the Space Theatre [in Cape Town] as a stage manager in 1975" (Interview, 24).

As a woman, Dike's social and political consciousness rising out of a child's rape and brutal murder, must be noticed. She did not present any relevant women characters in her first play (*The Sacrifice of Kreli*), though. It is in *The First South African* where Dike presents a courageous mother, Freda, who fights tooth and nail for her son, in spite of the problems caused by her son's skin color, even within the township itself. Freda's husband (who is not her child's—Rooi's—father) comments about her: "...[She] always says she will fight for the flesh of her flesh" (3). On the contrary, Rooi's step-father, and Rooi himself, are presented as weaker personalities. The father, Austin, is a passive figure, who accepts his life condition without questioning or trying to rebel against it.

Rooi symbolizes the *First South African* who has been born out of a multicultural family and has experienced the oppression and frustration created by the Group Areas and Immorality Acts. Dike's characters are devised with a complexity not observed in plays written by her male colleagues, such as *Gangsters*, by Maishe Maponya or *Woza Albert!*, by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon, in which the characters serve mainly as types to comment on a social situation under the system of apartheid.

Like in plays written by African American women, such as Ntozake Shange or Sonia Sanchez, Dike presents women who have had to fight alone, left pregnant by men who did not take responsibility for their actions. Thus,

Thembi, Rooi's girlfriend, is left pregnant by Rooi and he does not take any action to help her.

Thembi and Freda face hardship instead of accepting defeat. Women, then, are presented as the most oppressed and abandoned, and yet the most courageous and brave; whereas men seem to feel overwhelmed when trouble appear. These men feel defeated and turn to alcohol, drugs or robbery as the easiest way out—problems which are exhibited as evils to the Black South African community.

Moreover, the playwright combines a present situation in South Africa with the values and tradition which belong to the Xhosa and which should not disappear in their lives, in the manner she combines Xhosa and English. She does not forget either about music and song throughout the play. And, in spite of her respect for her traditions, Dike also exposes the sexism existing in some of them, as one of the elders tells Rooi in his ritual of initiation: "My son, today you're a man. With this stick protect your father's house. With this stick, beat your mother when she forgets that she's a woman in this house" (6).

Dike, then, penetrates into every corner of past and present asserting the need for the audience to engage in a retrospection and reevaluates the traditions of her community, as well as Western culture and values. She exposes the complexity enclosed in the township characters she presents, as well as in the system that rules South Africa. Dike unveils the lies and exhibits the contradictions, the absurdity of the laws and the self-inflicting pain within the Black community.

The play remains open for the audience to decide what to do about their destiny which is in their hands; they have a responsibility to which they need to commit in shaping their fate instead of letting it be in the hands of a twisted justice or God. A reevaluation of their past and present is needed in order to take an action and to construct a future. *The First South African* equally cries out the need for Black South African women to speak out and continue to develop a new aesthetics that has already begun to grow and sparkle.

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