

## ***I See You: A Divided Nation***

**Essay by Mongiwekhaya**

Playwright

### **What is the Cost of Freedom?**

The South African Apartheid Regime was one of the world's most reprehensible and racist administrations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst much of Africa fought for liberation against old colonial powers<sup>1</sup>, South Africa's situation was unique.

South Africa began its journey towards independence from British rule in 1910. Over the years, until 1961, the control of the country's political and economic structures was passed to the white minority of English, Dutch, German and French settlers. These settlers (except the English) relinquished their cultural heritage, renaming themselves Afrikaners and in 1948, the National Party took power with the slogan of Apartheid ('apartness or separation' in Dutch) as their political goal. Black South Africa would spend the next 56 years fighting against a white government who believed the country was theirs by God-given right.

Our study of the emancipation of South Africa will come from the position of young people. What is it like to be young under an authoritarian government? How does it affect and change your world view? And, in the context of South Africa, does political freedom equal total freedom? Do we know the price of freedom?

### **Apartheid in South Africa: How to make someone a slave in their own country**

Imagine being born during the earlier years of apartheid to a white father and a black mother. Imagine the government instituting a law that said it was illegal for your parents to be married, to live together. And imagine that you are not allowed to live with either of them.

This is the essence of Apartheid; it shattered communities, broke families, took away homes, businesses, personal wealth, education and the ability to go anywhere

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<sup>1</sup> Mozambique was liberated from Portugal in 1976; Congo from Belgian Rule in 1960 and so on.

in your country. It not only separated the Whites from the non-whites, it also separated Black South Africans from each other by establishing Ethnic boundaries. So if your father was Zulu and your mother was Xhosa, they could not live together.

The Population Registration Act of 1950 provided the basic framework for apartheid by classifying all South Africans by race, including Bantu (black Africans), Coloured (mixed race) and white. A fourth category, Asian (meaning Indian and Pakistani) was later added. In some cases, the legislation split families; parents could be classified as white, while their children were classified as colored.<sup>2</sup>

Mixed race families suddenly found themselves criminalized and forced to live separately with children becoming orphans. More than 80% of the land was given to the white minority. In 1953, the Apartheid government, in their most heinous act of all, instituted the Bantu Education Act, which centralized all education of the black population to the white minority's control. The government had a specific role for Black South Africa, to fulfil the country's economic and cultural life. This role was one of labourer, worker, and servant only. As Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of the Bantu Education Act (1953), conceived it:

There is no place for him [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. Within his own community, however, all doors are open.

For that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community while he cannot and will not be absorbed there.<sup>3</sup>

The final piece of the puzzle was the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923, better known as the Pass Laws; this meant that all Black South Africans had to carry a pass book

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<sup>2</sup> history.com, n.d. Apartheid [WWW Document]. history.com. URL <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/apartheid> (accessed 2.9.21).

<sup>3</sup> Verwoerd, H.F., 1966. Verwoerd speaks; speeches 1948-1966. APB Publishers, Johannesburg. Extract accessible at <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/hendrik-verwoerd-10-quotes-hendrik-verwoerd-politics-web-20-september-2016>

justifying why they were in any particular area. The Pass Book was the highest symbol of Black Slavery in South Africa.

This is the world my parents were born into. This was to be the defining struggle of their lives.

### **A Battle For the Minds of the Youth**

At a press conference held on Saturday 19th March 1960, PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) President Robert Sobukwe announced that the PAC was going to embark on an anti-pass campaign the following Monday. This was a refusal to follow the guidelines of the Native Urban Areas Act for which Sobukwe provided the following instructions:

African people have entrusted their whole future to us. And we have sworn that we are leading them, not to death, but to life abundant.

My instructions, therefore, are that our people must be taught NOW and CONTINUOUSLY THAT IN THIS CAMPAIGN we are going to observe ABSOLUTE NON-VIOLENCE.<sup>4</sup>

That Monday, standing in front of the Sharpeville police station, the people sang songs of liberation and stood protesting the Afrikaner government. There are varying accounts of how the shooting started, but what is clear, was that it was one sided. The police fired live rounds into the crowd, killing 69 and seriously wounding 180 others.

This was the conclusion of a decades long attempt to find peaceful solutions to the Apartheid government. Members of the African National Congress (ANC), the PAC and other political parties marched in the streets and addressed the United Nations, who advocated discussions with the government. But these peaceful methods had

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<sup>4</sup> Pogrand, B., 2012. Robert Sobukwe: How Can Man Die Better. Jonathan Ball Publishers. Extract can be accessed on [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Robert\\_Sobukwe/pMbnDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Robert+Sobukwe&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Robert_Sobukwe/pMbnDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Robert+Sobukwe&printsec=frontcover)

failed. It was clear the government was willing to do anything to maintain political control.

The struggle for freedom was present in every aspect of Black life, but nowhere was more acutely felt than when it was over the future of the next generation.

Despite poor education standards, the young people of the country grew politically aware and in 1969 the black South African Student Organization (SASO) was formed as a unified front to address the poor quality of education available to non-white students.

Bantu Education was designed to deprive Africans and isolate them from 'subversive' ideas. It was 'gutter' education with profound publicly declared racist intentions of Verwoerd:

Natives (blacks) must be taught from an early age that equality with Europeans (whites) is not for them.<sup>5</sup>

This conflict in the education system came into focus in 1975 when a directive from the Bantu Education Department demanded that Afrikaans be used on an equal basis with English as one of the languages of instruction in the department's primary and high schools. But the students refused.

On 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976, over 20,000 Soweto youth gathered to peacefully protest. The students, instead of heading to school, took to the streets, marching and singing the protest songs of their parents. Their goal was to gather all primary and high school students from Soweto, Johannesburg and march together to Orlando stadium.

The students started at their prospective schools and marched to "Uncle Tom's" Municipal hall where the entire 20,000 could officially march to Orlando stadium together. There, the police were waiting. Tensions quickly rose as it was clear the police were armed, not only with batons and riot gear, but with firepower and military vehicles. For the police, the number of gathered students was staggering.

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<sup>5</sup> Verwoerd speaking in the 1950s, quoted in Mwakikagile, G., 2008. South Africa in Contemporary Times. New Africa Press. Access at [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/South\\_Africa\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_Times/98Q\\_bLdWAWUC?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/South_Africa_in_Contemporary_Times/98Q_bLdWAWUC?hl=en&gbpv=0)

It was a standoff, with each side eyeing each other nervously. The students did not attack and the police eventually retreated. It seemed that the march would not be stopped. The students continued marching until the second and major encounter occurred at what is now known as Hector Pieterse Square. The march halted again and like all protests that turn violent, it is hard to know what caused the eruption:

Despite the tense atmosphere the students remained calm and well ordered.

Suddenly a white policeman lobbed a teargas canister into the front of the crowd. People ran out of the smoke dazed and coughing. The crowd retreated slightly but remained facing the police, waving placards and singing. A white policeman drew his revolver. Black journalists standing by the police heard a shot: "Look at him. He's going to shoot at the kids". A single shot ran out. There was a split seconds silence and pandemonium broke out. Children screamed. More shots were fired. At least four students fell and others ran screaming in all directions.<sup>6</sup>

On that day, over 500 youth were killed. No police officers were hurt. This was the turning point, as it was clear to the rest of the world that Apartheid was a fascist regime, bent on retaining power at all costs. It was all or nothing.

If you found yourself, as a student, in such a position, what would you do? For many of these young people, a continuation of their education seemed pointless. Instead they chose to join Umkhonto we Sizwe and fight.

### **An Army of the People**

Umkhonto We Sizwe ("Spear of the Nation") or 'MK' as it was more commonly known, was launched on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1961. It was the militant arm of the ANC (African National Congress) co-founded by Nelson Mandela. It is interesting to note that Mandela was a boxer and a lawyer when he was young. But he created the MK out of a frustration that peaked with the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. The

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<sup>6</sup> Brooks, A., Brickhill, J., 1980. Whirlwind before the storm: the origins and development of the uprising in Soweto and the rest of South Africa from June to December 1976. International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, London.

charismatic young leader encouraged others that freedom must be taken; it would never be given.

This approach held risks that were extremely high. To join in the struggle was to abandon your home, your family, to leave the country and go north to be trained. And there was the risk of informants who would reveal individuals who had ties to these 'terrorist' organizations. People disappeared all the time, with many never being found to this day. From 1960 until 1989 about 75,000 Black South Africans were detained without trial, 25% of them being children and young people.

The historical accounts presented here give us a sense of who the character of Buthelezi is in *I See You*. He was a young man, whose education in 1976 was cut short. He witnessed the brutal slaughter of his classmates at the hands of the government. He refused the peaceful option, understanding that freedom in his lifetime would come only by direct action. He joined Umkonto We Sizwe (MK) and left his country to train in guerrilla warfare. People he knew were 'disappeared' and when freedom finally came, most of his young adult life was over. He did not finish high school and had no training in any skills outside being a soldier.

Upon the country becoming democratic, Buthelezi was placed into the Police service, alongside many 'enemies'. It is difficult to imagine working with the men who tried to kill you in your youth.

### **Aftermath of Apartheid: A Rainbow Nation is born**

You see there are some people who have tried to be very facile and say let bygones be bygones: they want us to have a national amnesia. And you have to keep saying to those people that to pretend that nothing happened, to not acknowledge that something horrendous did happen to them, is to victimise the victims yet again. But even more important, experience worldwide shows that if you do not deal with a dark past such as ours, effectively look the beast in the eye, that beast is not going to lie down quietly; it is going, as sure as anything, to come back and haunt you horrendously.

Desmond Tutu<sup>7</sup>

When it became clear that peace was not possible, that South Africa would never enter the global economy as long as Apartheid continued, then president P.W. De Klerk sat down with Nelson Mandela and the ANC to discuss the peaceful surrender of the Afrikaner government.

Two non-negotiable requests were made by the government:

1. Peaceful settling of those guilty of gross violations of Human Rights
2. The protection of private property of the white people and businesses.

It had always been the intention of the ANC to bring about social reform, turning many of the country's resources towards the public good. For 300 years the people of South Africa had lived in dire conditions. All wealth from education to civil amenities were located in the beautiful white areas, whilst the rest of the country (the majority) lived in absolute squalor.

A civil war lasted for 56 years and many victims of the Apartheid system were not recorded. The blood on the hands of that government, the security forces and indeed the white culture living in staggering prosperity, had yet to be revealed. Yet one of their demands was for complete amnesty.

At the end of World War II, Germany and the Nazi regime were made to stand trial and account for their actions. Germany paid for its crimes and the families of the victims got to learn what happened to those they lost. The Apartheid Government refused to allow such an event to take place.

If there was to be an end to all hostilities, an end to Apartheid, the demand was complete forgiveness.

These requests and the fulfilment of them were unique in history and the consequences of these decisions have shaped the course of South Africa. Black South Africa was being asked to do what Europe and indeed any other culture in the

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<sup>7</sup> Tutu, D., 1996. Healing a nation. Index on Censorship 25, 38–44.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/030642209602500508>

world, had never been asked to do: forgive and forget 300 years of colonial slavery and 56 years of civil war.

If you were asked that, what would you do?

Through the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a man of grace, wit and refined truth saying, South Africa entered the Truth and Reconciliation commission. It was a time of discovery, an unveiling of a personal darkness inflicted by the few upon the many. Mothers came and asked where were their husbands, sons, even daughters? Locations of unmarked graves were revealed, methods of total human body annihilation explained, blatant lies finally exposed. This went on for years. And in the majority, all was forgiven.

### **The Price of Democratic Freedom is Economic Slavery**

Today South Africa, despite the faith of the people, is even worse off. It is one of the most unequal societies on the planet. Was forgiveness the cause of this? In truth, forgiveness is what has sustained this country. Evil exists in all of humanity, needing only a spark of righteous fury to ignite it. The act of forgiving white culture was an act of self-preservation. Looking across Africa over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you will find evidence of violent freedom fighters gaining power and continuing their destructive nature upon their own people. Physical violence was not allowed to enter democracy.

But the people suffer. And it is due to the second request of the Apartheid government. South Africa leads as the shining example of the neo-liberal capitalist structure made visible. Where else can one stand in a gorgeous Sandton high rise apartment overlooking Alexandra township with its tin and cardboard shacks?

Under apartheid the divide was racial. Under the new neo-liberal ANC, the divide is an economic one that continues to grow to astonishing new levels.



**Mongiwekhaya** was born in South Africa, raised in America before returning to SA to complete his BA Honours at Rhodes University.

Mongi's career is an autodidactic galaxy of skills that orbit around narrative and image. The focal point is writing, with directing as its natural companion, along with choreography, performance, and researching as necessary support skills. He recently worked with Idris Elba and Director Kwame Kwei-Armah at the Manchester International festival as Dramaturg for TREE, an interdisciplinary concert show.

A career highlight was premiering his play 'I See You' at the Royal Court in London, the Fugard Theatre in Capetown and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg South Africa.