



Apartheid and Identity in Miriam Tlali's *Soweto Stories*

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Abstract

Born in 1933, Miriam Tlali was a celebrated writer of South Africa who also happened to be the first black woman writer of significance in Africa. The "Soweto Stories" by Miriam Tlali serve as a literary monument to the horrifying reality of apartheid and prejudice in South Africa, especially inside the boundaries of the township of Soweto, which is close to Johannesburg. The goal of this research paper is to dissect the many layers of oppression, resiliency, and human spirit that are portrayed in Tlali's narratives by delving deeply into the subjects explored in her work. Through an analysis of Tlali's characters, their relationships, and the social context in which they operate, this essay aims to shed light on the complex aspects of apartheid and prejudice as they are depicted in "Soweto Stories." This research attempts to provide light on the long-lasting effects of apartheid on individual lives, community dynamics, and the larger socio-political landscape of South Africa through a thorough examination of important theme components and narrative techniques. In light of this, this study seeks to further knowledge of the intricate interactions of discrimination, apartheid, and human resilience within the framework of South African literature and history by closely examining Tlali's ground-breaking work.

Keywords: Resiliency, Apartheid, Discrimination.

"Death lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?"

Zakes Mda

Introduction

South Africa's most prominent writer Miriam Tlali (1933-2017) was well-known for portraying in her books, essays, and short tales the hardships faced by native Black Africans. Among the first voices in South African literature, her writings mostly addressed the struggles of black women under the Apartheid. The majority of Tlali's writings were initially banned by the South African government because they frequently dealt with Apartheid, social injustice, and the experiences of black South Africans. Tlali was also the first black woman

in South Africa to depict the experiences of black women under the oppressive regime. Her works questioned the current quo and added to the larger conversation about social justice and transformation.

Thus literary endeavour in Africa, unlike most other places, was not born out of aesthetic appreciation of nature or philosophic contemplation of human nature or metaphysics. It was the result of the agony and crisis in the soul of the African who became an unfortunate scapegoat in the hands of the ambitious colonials (Jha, 3)

In addition to having complex characters, Tlali's writings typically examined the psychological and emotional effects of discrimination and persecution. She challenged readers' preconceptions and asked them to think about the biased structures that exist in society. Her work had a significant impact not only in South Africa but globally as well. Miriam Tlali has received praise for her critical portrayal of apartheid life in her landmark book *Soweto Stories*.

Tlali's collection of stories, which is set in the Soweto Township outside Johannesburg, tells a powerful account of the tribulations, resiliency, and dreams of black South Africans at one of the worst times in the country's history. *Soweto Stories* focuses on the goals, challenges, and daily lives of black South Africans who reside in the township of Soweto, which is close to Johannesburg. Apartheid, racial prejudice, poverty, fortitude, and the pursuit of freedom and dignity are just a few of the topics that Tlali touches on. She illuminates via her stories the brutal reality of apartheid for black South Africans and the tenacity and fortitude of people and communities in the face of injustice.

Tlali's art adds to a deeper comprehension of South Africa's history and social dynamics by offering a window into the everyday lives of those who reside in Soweto. She talks about how the blacks had to struggle with daily commutes and the whites were not even concerned with the pathetic condition of the natives, rather they enjoyed watching them struggle through daily chores in their own country.

You come rushing into platforms 1 and 2, and you see the train you want unashamedly rattle right over on to the other side into platform "voetsek" and you have to jump over rails and break your legs or lose your life, just like that. They don't care! You just have to be alert and read the train numbers yourself! (Tlali, 34)

Tlali through her characters explains how they had to struggle with boarding trains as the announcement they made over the speakers were never clear and was intentionally made to create chaos, while the blacks had to jump over the railing just to board the trains. As there were only limited trains for the blacks, and if they missed their scheduled trains they would have to wait for some hours to board another one.

Tlali's depiction of 'trains' act as an awakening for many who were flowing in the waves of apartheid, without acknowledging the atrocities Boers had over the natives. She points out how the trains had separate coaches for whites, in which the blacks were not allowed to travel. She also displays the contrasting image of those coaches, where the blacks would fix into their designated coaches like cattle and buffalo while the whites would travel with empty seats next to them. But these apartheid laws would never allow the blacks to share the same room with the white minority.

What is annoying about this congestion is that you never see it happening in their trains- those "whites only" coaches. They make sure that the white passenger sit comfortably. You very rarely find them standing even at the very busy hours like early in the morning when most people board trains, and at this time of night when everybody wants to go home. (Tlali, 36)

In *Soweto Stories*, Tlali depicts the many sorts of discrimination that her characters encounter in a realistic manner. Tlali emphasises the ubiquitous occurrence of prejudice in both public and private domains through complex characterizations and striking storytelling. She reflects upon how the Boers were so inconsiderate towards the natives and they would create an environment of fear amongst the blacks.

Miriam Tlali has focussed upon the importance of “Pass” in her debut work *Muriel at Metropolitan* also, she has reflected upon how the natives were forced to carry a pass that would validate their identity while they travelled in their own country. She talks about the police raids that were held out-of-blue just to torture the natives. The white police men which she referred to as the ‘white dog’ would insult and yell at the natives and order them to show up irrespective of what position they are in. *A loud bang of a steel bar against the toilet door meant that Boitumelo had to finish whatever he was doing and walk out with his arms held high above his head.* (Tlali, 46)

The discriminatory treatment towards the blacks was quite alarming and Tlali has reflected upon the issue as she mentions about the scenarios where the whites would be more concerned about their pets and even materialistic thing over the basic rights of the blacks. In her collection she mentions about an incident when a black worker was sent to jail for a crime he did not commit whereas his master was more concerned about the bicycle that he was taking care of rather than the black man. *Tell baas-boy milk boy’s woman I’ll send someone to fetch the bicycle tomorrow quick. Do you hear that Jim?* (Tlali, 55)

In essence, whilst the African traditional societies practised their own customs and values over the course of colonialism, the European decree brought a wave of modernity that added new voices that propagated the western culture, religion and medicine in the African traditional societies. (Montle, 3)

Characters experience prejudice in the workplace, in the educational system, in the healthcare system, and in day-to-day interactions—systemic impediments that are a legacy of apartheid. The author expressed upon the shallowness of White who would not even respect the customs of the blacks and would rather mock them. *What disgusts me is that they no longer even respect our customs..... They thought the whole funeral procession was a big lie. What do they care about our customs, about our dead? As long as they sit on us and they eat and drink, they don’t care* (Tlali, 101)

Tlali examines the devastating effects of apartheid on both individual and community identity in "Soweto Stories." People in Soweto felt alienated and dispersed as a result of the apartheid-era's forced relocations and geographic segregation, which broke social ties and divided communities. She illustrated upon how the blacks were interrogated in their own country while they travelled from one place to another.

Why do you want to go Johannesburg?

To what address?

How long are you going to be there?

Who is the person you are visiting there?

How much money have you got in your purse- will you be able to pay for return ticket? (Tlali, 106)

In a culture that aims to silence and marginalise them, Tlali's protagonists are able to reclaim their voices and proclaim their dignity via the power of storytelling as a form of resistance. In the face of structural injustice, they express their humanity and agency via acts of disobedience, solidarity, and cultural affirmation. *Somebody has got to sacrifice so that others may be free. The real thing, those that really matter, are never acquired the easy way.... Our freedom will never be handed over to us on a silver platter* (Tlali, 130)

Tlali uses her narrative technique and protagonist to highlight the condition of blacks in their own homeland. From the coaches of the train to the preference of bicycle over blacks, she dwells onto the theme of humanity which the Boers lacked. She has displayed upon the treatment, where the dogs were given more attention and care than the black natives. *Soweto Stories* was published by Tlali to awaken the consciousness of citizen who were residing in the nation and had accepted their fate of being dominated by the Whites for the whole life. *Soweto Stories* provides a moving examination of the severe effects of apartheid on both personal and societal identity. Apartheid's geographic segregation, forcible relocations, and dehumanising practices tore apart

communities and undermined social relationships, creating a legacy of pain and disruption that still permeates South African culture.

Conclusion

Miriam Tlali's "Soweto Stories" is a literary gem that also serves as a powerful reminder of the lasting effects of apartheid and prejudice in South Africa. Tlali depicts the harsh realities of apartheid-era black South Africa, especially in the Soweto neighbourhood, through vivid characterizations and intricately nuanced storylines. Tlali highlights the pernicious nature of discrimination in all of its manifestations, from institutionalised racism to random acts of prejudice, by exploring the lives, tribulations, and ambitions of her characters. But in the middle of all the misery and suffering, Tlali also honours the fortitude and defiance of her characters, who, rather than allowing their circumstances to define them, claim their humanity and agency in the face of injustice. *Soweto Stories* advances knowledge of South Africa's complicated past and apartheid's lasting effects on modern society. Tlali also illuminates the historical injustices and arouses hope for a more fair and just society via her moving tale. *Soweto Stories* serves as both a monument to the human spirit's unwavering resilience in the face of injustice and a ray of hope for a better future.

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