

Thematic Exploration Of Morality In The Post-Apartheid South Africa Through Kani's Nothing But The Truth

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Abstract

Although the transition into the post-apartheid South African theatre reflects the influence of the legacy of colonisation in that some of the issues that the post-apartheid playwrights explore in their works are issues that evolve from the apartheid era, there is a dramatic thematic shift from protest theatre to morality plays. It is this emergence of a new form of thematic focus by playwrights in the post-apartheid South African drama that has prompted this study. Thus, this study strives to explore the theme of morality in the post-apartheid South Africa through Kani's Nothing But the Truth (2002). It, therefore, utilises Morality as its conceptual underpinning. Qualitative approach which is undergirded by exploratory research design was employed to guide the study. Kani's Nothing But the Truth was selected from other plays by the same playwright by means of purposive sampling. This was because of its relevance to the study. Thematic textual analysis was used as a data analysis technique in the study. For (South) Africa to prosper as a nation, Kani suggests that issues of adherence to principles of acceptable moral behaviour and conduct should be upheld by strengthening existing accountability structures and establishing them where they are non-existent.

Keywords: morality, protest theatre, post-apartheid, playwrights, prosper, accountability

Introduction

John Kani's Nothing but the Truth (2002) is set just after the attainment of democracy in South Africa, during the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) whose aim was to help in the healing of the wounds of families who suffered the injustices of the apartheid era. It primarily juxtaposes issues of morality, which is a value-laden concept, and reconciliation (Van der Walt, 2013). In other words, issues of what was done wrong and right during the apartheid struggle for emancipation against and for the people of South Africa (Heywood, 2004). The TRC encouraged people to disclose and confess the morally unjust things that they committed during the struggle in order for them to find closure and amnesty. Similarly, it motivated people to build on the right values, such as ubuntu (Mogoboya, 2019), which have sustained them until today, going forward. Building on these sublime moral values would help crystallise South Africa's peace and reconciliation project. Its rainbowness would be a reality. Thus, "the play revolves around the revelation of the hidden stories of a family deeply affected by political struggle that was responsible for Themba's exile" (Jamal, 2009:12), with the aim of moving away from protest to social justice and reconciliation through moral assessment (Edson, 2006).

Synopsis of the Play

Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* is dominated by traditional or cultural events. Van Heerden (2008:166) argues that events in the play "revolve around the return [to South Africa] of the younger brother's remains to be buried". The younger brother is Themba Makhaya who died in exile. Van Heerden (2008:167) adds:

Sipho [the older brother who remained at home in South Africa] plans a traditional burial amongst their ancestors to honour his brother, but what his Anglicised niece [Mandisa] brings back from London is not her father's body, but a small urn full of ashes.

Mandisa's arrival at home with Themba's ashes put in the urn reveals a clash of cultures which symbolises the intolerance that existed between the two brothers, Sipho and Themba. In other words, they [Themba and Sipho] did not have a good fraternal relationship from childhood, and this continued into adulthood. *Nothing but the Truth* is, furthermore, about mourning Themba's passing shortly after South Africa's independence. Sipho, his daughter Thando and his English-born niece, Mandisa, are mourning the death of Themba, Sipho's younger brother. Thando's father, Sipho, divulges the truth that Themba is Thando's biological father as he had been sleeping with Sipho's wife. Despite this shocking news, Themba still continues to appear as a hero in the eyes of many people. Sipho is obsessed with the idea that Themba took everything from him and keeps on repeating that the taking must stop. The issue of cultural dichotomy between Africa and Europe is evident through the eyes of Mandisa, Sipho's niece, who was raised in London, and struggles to adjust to some of the norms of the Makhaya family.

Jamal (2009:12) notes that Kani's drama "questions the historical orthodoxy of the struggle movement by challenging the overt celebration of exile partisan members, and members who, accused or convicted of treason or terrorism, populated apartheid's prisons". Sipho indicates that as a black man, he also suffered during the struggle. What angers him the most is the fact that credit is given to those who went to exile, like Themba, rather than those who remained in the country. Sipho defends his feelings by saying:

I too suffered as a black person. I went to the marches like everyone else. I might not have been detained. I might not have been on Robben Island. I did not leave the country, but I suffered too. The thousands that attended funerals on Saturdays, that was me. (2002:57).

The above excerpt indicates that Kani's play has some angry characters who seek the healing power of truth because of the effects of the unfair and violent struggle of apartheid for which the TRC was created as a catalyst. People were given an opportunity to vent their anger and confess their sins of the past for healing to take place, and development to emerge.

Conceptual Underpinning

This study is undergirded by Moralistic conceptual assumptions. As an ethical concept, morality is used in various disciplines. For this reason, the current researchers have contextualised it to this study in order to evaluate moral and immoral actions portrayed by characters in Kani's *Nothing But the Truth*. Jucan (n.d.) defines morality as a phenomenon which is concerned with the right and wrong, the good and evil, the ethical and the unethical; it is as a set of rules which govern society. Gert (2001:118) avers:

Individuals are continually judging their own conduct and that of their fellows. They approve of some acts and call them "right" or "good". They condemn other acts and call them "wrong" or "evil". Moral judgments always have to do with the actions of human beings and, in particular, with voluntary actions—those actions freely chosen. Involuntary actions—those over which people have no control—are rarely open to moral judgment, as a person usually is not held responsible for an action that she or he did not initiate

Gert (2001:118) suggests that morality is determined by a people in that that “moral judgements always have to do with the actions of human beings”. He, furthermore, describes morality in the form of “the moral situation”:

A moral situation involves moral agents— human beings who act, are empowered to make choices, and consciously make decisions. As moral agents, demands are made on us and place us under obligations: we have both duties and rights. We are faced with moral alternatives, and we can better weigh those alternatives when we have an understanding of the ingredients of the moral situation.

This suggests that what society approves as an obligation of conduct among its people, binds everybody living in that community or social environment to those laws. This study, therefore, contends that moral situations or conduct are determined by what people agree upon.

Nel (2008:33) contributes to the discussion on morality from an African perspective by defining it within the parameters of a complex global society. This relates to some cultural conflicts that can be found in Kani’s *Nothing but the Truth* when Thando brings an urn with the ashes of Themba’s body, whilst Themba’s family expected the body in a coffin. Nel (2008:33) uses the word “conventionalised” to describe this phenomenon. He further purports that:

African morality is not necessarily based on religion or faith, but on the beneficiary values of collective family and community well-being, without dissolving the individual’s character. In African thought, the “best” rational justification of the moral imperative is less of an issue than in current moral discourse (Nel, 2008:33).

In the above excerpt, Nel claims that African morality is measured or explored with reference to a collection of individuals leading into a family who agree about the same values. This, therefore, means that issues of morality are determined by a group of persons who share the same values and principles.

Morality in Kani’s *Nothing But the Truth*

There are underlying similarities shared by many African societies [regarding morality] which, when contrasted with other cultures, reveal a wide gap of difference (Idang, 2015:97).

Idang suggests that although there are similarities in many African cultures in terms of values, there are also major differences. This further implies that although societies may share similar values, each of these societies has codes of ethics which determine their morality. In this study, values are seen from a similar perspective as Idang’s (2015:101), who perceives values as a “point of view or conviction which we can live with, live by and can even die for”. This suggests that values are related to what an individual society actively believes in, and that a particular act defines what and who they are, their identity (Mogoboya, 2021). That particular society would normally do anything to defend its moral values. Thus, morality and socially acceptable values are intertwined. Idang (2007:4) further notes that:

As people differ in their conception of reality, then the values of one individual may be different from those of another. Life seems to force people to make choices, or to rate things as better or worse as well as formulate some scale or standard of values. Depending on the way we perceive things we can praise and blame, declare actions right or wrong or even declare the scene or objects before us as either beautiful or ugly. Each person, as we could see, has some sense of values and there is no society without some value system.

In light of aforementioned argument, one may suggest that traditional South African values and morality are complimentary. Thus, the perception of morals by a particular society may be determined by their set of values. Therefore, one cannot study morality in isolation without taking into account the concept of values.

Van der Walt (2003:51) states that South Africa and the African continent are experiencing a decline in morality. In Kani's *Nothing but the Truth*, the moral decline is seen when Siphos reveals Themba's womanising conduct by telling Mandisa how immoral her father (Themba) was. He states that "there was no single woman who had not slept with Comrade Themba. Wives, girlfriends, Themba made no distinction" (2002:53). African values prohibit fornication and adulterous behaviour but allows polygamy, which is marriage of multiple wives.

Van der Walt (2003:51) also identifies the decline in morality as a "moral vacuum". He compares issues of morality in Africa with what he terms "contemporary morality and traditional morality" and "provides an in-depth look at the reasons for the moral crisis". He posits that moral decline is caused by different external influences which encroach into a society. In *Nothing but the Truth*, Kani depicts Mandisa as a character who brings an external and foreign tradition which contemporary South African begins to embrace. Van de Walt (2003:51) also acknowledges that something important seems to have disappeared from the (South) Africa's moral fibre, and there is nothing good to replace it. The "something" in the latter sentence refers to morality; as a result, there is a moral vacuum on the African continent. If the moral gap is not closed, some opportunistic values will creep in to occupy the empty space.

Kinoti (1992:84) purports that "a shared morality was the cement of society" in the halcyon traditional African past. He outlines some of the values which determine morality as perceived in traditional Africa; they are "charity, honesty, hospitality, generosity, loyalty, truthfulness, solidarity, and respect for nature, elders and God" (1992:84).

Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* epitomises the moral vacuum as a result of the external foreign influence. Mandisa tells Thando that she does not understand why she (Thando) should ask for permission from her father, Siphos, in order for her (Thando) to accompany her (Mandisa) to a designer that she needed to see. Mandisa has studied fashion designing in London:

THANDO: My father ... I don't think he would agree.

MANDISA: To hell with your father! It's your life! ...It's not like you are going forever! Even if you were it would still be your decision. (2002:46)

One may argue for that Mandisa does not fully understand the South African value system since she was raised in London. However, the fact that Thando tried to explain to her how things work in the Makhaya residence suggests that she should show willingness to respect them. Mandisa is being immoral in this case because in many African families the orders of an elderly person must be followed. A child is expected to respect the elders at all times including seeking permission from them before leaving the household.

Contrary to Mandisa's situation, Luvuyo, Siphos's son, commits a much greater breach of morality when he calls his father a coward. Luvuyo, enthralled by his uncle's heroic antics, insists on attending a young girl's funeral despite his father's refusal. Siphos was afraid that there would be trouble which would lead to the matter ending badly:

He was a poet you see. He used to recite his poems at political rallies, funerals and special occasions... He looked at me and said that Uncle Themba was right, I was a coward' (2002:53).

Luvuyo was brought up in the values and the traditions of the Makhaya residence, and should have, therefore, known that to speak to his father in such a way was to behave in a manner that could be deemed immoral as he understood the ethical standards of his community.

Morality and Ubuntu

Ubuntu is the African moral value which is enshrined in the African philosophy of humaneness or humanism. It is a belief that “a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself” (Tutu, 2008). When do South Africans who fully understand the concept of ubuntu and what it entails deem one to have acted immorally? One is deemed to have acted immorally if they have violated their community’s shared values of humanism. This, therefore, means that what is right to one community may be wrong to another community. The issue of cremation, so vital to the events in Kani’s *Nothing but the Truth*, is a normative way of laying to rest the remains of a deceased person in most European communities whereas in most African countries, the corpse is buried in the grave since many Africans believe that the deceased has to be welcomed by his or her ancestors with their bodies intact. When Mandisa brings Themba’s remains home in an urn in, Siphon describes the cremation as burning, a practice which is foreign to (South) Africa. This further signifies a clash of cultures and further highlights the issue of a moral vacuum because with time, cremation may be adapted and adopted by many African families. For this reason, the tradition of burying corpses will lose its value.

Siphon fumes with rage after realising that Mandisa had brought the ashes of Themba’s body home. He is both furious and confused about what he is going to tell the elders of the family. He then proceeds to enquire from Reverend Haya who reminds him of the biblical reference that says “earth to earth, ashes to ashes and dust to dust” (2002:29). It is after his meeting with Reverend Haya that Siphon and the elders decide on the day of the funeral. When speaking to the girls about the day, Siphon states that although the funeral will continue, there will not be the “usual opportunity to see him [Themba] before the coffin is closed” and that his “uncles are confused”, as he is (2002:29). Although one may argue that there was nothing that Siphon would have changed about this stark contrast between the African and Western cultures regarding funerals, mourning and cremation, the moment he accepted this act as normal after talking to Reverend Haya, and the calm manner in which he explained the situation to the girls, indicates that he would accept this in future. Siphon uses the word “usual” opportunity to see the corpse before the coffin is closed; the word “usual” suggests a normal way of doing things though under the current circumstances of Themba’s cremation, they are unable to practice their tradition of seeing the corpse. Another cultural expectation was the presence of the widow, Themba’s wife, at his funeral but she was conspicuous by her absence. Even if she were present, African culture dictates that she cannot speak at her husband’s funeral. This means that the cremation of Themba’s body by his wife and daughter in London has compromised the practices of the Makhaya clan in South Africa. This has compelled Siphon to mention that although he and his uncles are confused, they will have to continue with the funeral plans anyway. Although a way forward to conduct the funeral is found, this compromises the normative ways of conducting funerals in the Makhaya clan. This study, therefore, argues that there are external influences which compromise some values of a people or society which result in the negligence of the ethical code of conduct of a particular society. This understanding corroborates Kinoti’s (1992) concept of a moral vacuum in South Africa because these influences are, by their very nature, likely to replace the traditional morality with the contemporary morality.

As indicated earlier, Jucan (n.d.2) views morality as a system in which behavioural codes are set by a particular society, and these codes serve as measurements to evaluate and legitimise behaviour “in terms of good or evil”. This means that when one has acted immorally, one becomes aware of the act, as is the case with Themba, Siphon’s brother. He (Themba) left for exile and never returned to South Africa when the country

became a democracy. Although his exile may seem political, since most exiles were political during the apartheid era, it is moral because he left immediately after Siphos had discovered that he had been having an affair with his wife. We may, as researchers, argue that he was ashamed of his immoral conduct. Siphos states that he never saw him and Thando's mother again after he caught them in the act of having sex in his bed (2002:56).

Morality and ubuntu are inextricably interwoven in their promotion of the good traits embedded in humanity (Jucan, n.d.2). Brown (2002:80) avers that ubuntu is a:

uniquely southern African concept which has do with the way in which we see and treat other human beings. It encourages us to see the humanity of others, and to treat all individuals with tolerance, sensitivity and respect.

In many communities, adultery is perceived as an evil deed which conflicts with the principles of ubuntu. The fact that Themba has been sleeping with his brother's wife is a sign of disrespect for his brother. Siphos wife is equally to blame. Shavell (2002:227) explains that morality is measured by one's behaviour as agreed upon by the community. This includes both law and moral standards. They both prove to lack all these qualities when they disregarded the shared communal values of their society by sleeping together.

Furthermore, what this suggests about the post-apartheid South Africa is that, figuratively, many South Africans are still dealing with the injustices and the betraying effects of the apartheid period. Through Siphos, one is able to observe the pent-up anger that he has against his brother, Themba, comparable to, and symbolic of, the anger of many black South Africans against the past apartheid system. Many South Africans feel that apartheid was an immoral phenomenon which has adulterously raped their country. Arguably, therefore, is that on the one hand, when Siphos sees Thando and Mandisa, he always remembers the heartache he suffered because of his wife and brother. On the other hand, many black South Africans are very sensitive to racial issues because of the past injustices.

Most African writers such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, among others, have written about the impact of colonialism on African culture. Their argument is that although colonialism has passed in many African countries, South Africa included, its results can still be seen and felt. The events occurring around Siphos and Themba's characters in Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* are, therefore, a symbolic reflection that the post-apartheid South African theatre is dealing with some of the legacies of the apartheid era.

Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* also explores the theme of mourning in two contrasting cultures, the African culture and the Western culture. Scene two of the play opens with Siphos and Mandisa arguing about the ashes that Mandisa brought along with her from London whilst Siphos and the Makhaya family expected Themba's body in a coffin. As argued earlier in the study that morality is a societal phenomenon, this means that good behaviour is determined by a particular society. In most African cultures, cremating a deceased is considered immoral, and is associated with the evil, whereas it is normal in most Western cultures. Additionally, a widow is expected to be present at the funeral of the deceased husband in Africa let alone speak there. In the case of Themba, his wife was absent from the funeral.

Kani explores some of the purposes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which were, in the main, conceived to heal the wounds of those who suffered the unfair treatment of the apartheid system. The intentions of the commission were to assist in finding a common ground among South Africans from all racial backgrounds in order to ensure that there is peace in the country based on agreed upon moral criteria. Jucan (n.d.:3) consents that morality is a set of rules which individuals agree upon. These rules may be cognitive rather than normative, which implies that a particular group of individuals may agree upon a set of rules which they think are suitable for them to achieve a particular goal. In the play, there are exceptional cases of

some characters who refuse to abide by the rules of forgiveness in that they pay for the blood of apartheid perpetrators. Mandisa finds it difficult to understand why some of the murderers interrogated by the TRC were granted amnesty despite the fact that they had committed murder:

MANDISA: Then why is Craig Williamson a free man? He committed murder.

THANDO: Because according to the rules and requirements for amnesty... (2002:32).

Similarly, Siphso declares that he wants his son's murderers to be brought to book:

SIPHISO: No, not yet. I haven't finished yet. They must give him a prison khaki shirt and a pair of prison khaki shorts. No shoes. One grey blanket and mat to sleep on. The following day he must wake up in his cell in prison, knowing that he is serving time for killing my son... (2002:59).

The above citations suggest that there was inadequate consultation in the conceptualisation and drafting of the TRC guidelines hence the disgruntlement from certain quarters of the victims. Siphso argues that he wants justice to be served for Luvuyo's death who was killed by a police officer at a funeral of a school girl. It is for these reasons that this study argues that issues of morality tend to conflict in cases where there is insufficient buy-in from a wider spectrum of the community. In this case, the TRC had its own rules while victims had theirs. Many of them wanted justice for themselves and their families as well.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to explore the theme of morality in the post-apartheid South Africa through Kani's *Nothing But the Truth*. The findings revealed that issues of morality in Kani's *Nothing but the Truth* are not literal in one has to critically analyse the events occurring in the play in order to unearth them. It was, furthermore, established that some South (African) moral issues in the play culturally overlap with Western ones as witnessed in the mourning rites. Through the play, Kani suggests that for (South) Africa to prosper as a nation, issues of adherence to principles of acceptable moral behaviour and conduct should be upheld by strengthening existing accountability structures and establishing them where they are non-existent.

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