

# Resilience and Resistance in Athol Fugard's play No Good Friday

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## Abstract

Athol Fugard, acclaimed as the greatest South African playwright in the English-speaking world, is best known for his political and penetrating plays opposing the system of apartheid. In his play *No-Good Friday* (1958) Fugard presents the burning zeal of an incipient black revolutionary against the exploitation faced by the blacks. At the surface level, the play appears to be a mere representation of the conditions of the blacks; but at deeper levels, it records the helplessness of the blacks in the face of exploitation by their own fellow men during the conditions of the apartheid. Fugard presents the oppressive politics working on the life of the people of Sophiatown in various forms by portraying the complex and evolving nature of submissiveness in the face of oppression and how the characters struggle to find a balance between survival and resistance. The play ultimately underscores the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of resistance in the face of oppressive systems.

**KEYWORDS:** Oppression, Intimidation, Submissiveness, Resilience, Resistance.

Athol Fugard, acclaimed as the greatest South African playwright in the English-speaking world, is best known for his political and penetrating plays opposing the system of apartheid and for the 2005 Oscar-winning film of his novel *Tsotsi*, directed by Gavin Hood. He has published more than thirty plays and was an adjunct Professor of play writing, acting and directing in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego. He is the recipient of many awards, honours and honorary degrees, including the 2005 Order of Ikhamanga in Silver "for his excellent contribution and achievements in the theatre" from the government of South Africa. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Fugard was honoured in Cape Town with the opening of the Fugard Theatre in District Six in 2010 and received a Tony Award for lifetime achievement in 2011.

Fugard's association with prominent local anti-apartheid figures had a profound impact on his plays which made him keenly aware of the injustices of apartheid and the political impetus brought him into conflict with the national government. Fugard publicly supported the Anti-Apartheid Movement (1959–94) in the international boycott of South African theatres that led him to have his plays published and produced outside South Africa. In 1958, the Fugards moved to Sophiatown, a 'freehold township', a place which combined magic and smut, respectability and crime, where the black and white could move freely, with certain social constraints. Yet Sophiatown was predominantly black and predominantly poor.

*No-Good Friday* represents the apartheid trauma of the South African Society. Fugard presents the burning zeal of an incipient black revolutionary against the exploitation faced by the blacks in this play. At the surface level, it appears to be a mere representation of the conditions of the blacks; but at

deeper levels, it records the helplessness of the blacks in the face of exploitation by their own fellow men during the conditions of the apartheid. The action of the play takes place between two Fridays and the play carries various emotions like humour, satire, shame, anger, frustration and tragedy, the representative feelings of an 'impoverished, fragmented and violent society. (Sheila Fugard: 1993:408).

Willie, the independent and stubborn protagonist, hopes for a brighter and better living. He represents the image of the desperately stubborn black young men of South Africa. Willie was admired by the people of Sophiatown for being educated. They held him in high esteem. Rebecca feels proud of him, “...*But it's made him...independent. A big word isn't it? But he says it is ideal and he's getting there. Willie could snap his fingers at anyone ....walk out any time. He just doesn't need anyone. Not you...not even me*” (2000:7). They believed that he was able to view certain issues from a different perspective. Willie realized that although he is educated, he will be unable to advance socially and economically because of the colour of his skin. His dreams and hopes fade away as he realizes that they mean nothing, it was a waste of time to dream in the first place. There is no social mobility and the blacks have no rights. But he refuses to adopt this mentality and to accept fate. Willie's fatal flaw was his desire to live a fair life without restrictions. He resented the fact that the whites were in control and wanted to be treated equally.

Willie, Guy, Rebecca and Pinky, initially exhibit compliance as a survival strategy. They conform to the oppressive rules and racial hierarchy imposed by the apartheid regime in order to avoid punishment, violence, or imprisonment. Compliance is often seen as a means of protecting oneself and loved ones. Guy instructs Tobias: “*Over here it is 'Bass'. do you understand? Just: yes bass, no bass, please bass, thank you bass... even when he kicks you on the backside.*” (2000:13) The theme of submissiveness is deeply intertwined with the broader themes of racial oppression and resistance during apartheid-era South Africa in this play. Submissiveness is depicted as both a survival strategy and a source of internal conflict for the characters. They are torn between the desire to conform to the system for the sake of safety and the internal longing for freedom and justice. This inner conflict highlights the psychological impact of submissiveness on individuals.

The play portrays all the problems in Sophiatown, - absence of care by the government, unemployment, frustration, poverty, insecurity, gangsterism, evils of pass-laws, broken bonds of love and the 'cheapness' of life, seen through the lives of the black as well as the white characters, like Father Higgins. Despite the hard work, they can hardly reach homes safely with their Friday pay-packets. The play also records the migration of the innocent youth like Tobias, to the townships to find employment. Willie, aware of the catastrophic situation that awaits black people in the township, he advises Tobias not to entertain big dreams. He does not make any promise to Tobias. The play projects a story of loss of relationships, loss of values and loss of security or protection in the white repressive world.

From the beginning of the play it is noticed that Willie does not accept the status that the dominant whites have given to him. While Guy explains to Tobias how he must behave and accept the humiliations silently, Willie gets upset and shouts “*Stop it, damn you!*” (2000:13). It is evident that Willie is angry and discontented with his current position. As a result he feels an overwhelming “*loneliness, melancholy, despair*” (2000:10) This rude awakening brings across a feeling of anger and hopelessness “*Bloody Ass! That's what I think of B.A.*” (2000:17) that made him realise the entire life he ever hoped and dreamed for, was impossible. He is sick of being intelligent because he knows it means nothing. But people around him believe that Willie can solve any issue and considered him as their saviour. Willie encourages Guy when he comes home disappointed after his futile attempts to become a

Saxophonist and convinces Guy to continue his search. He assures him that he will get him a job till he gets the breakthrough. When Pinky approaches him for a solution, he sternly instructs his job is more important than his vengeance.

When Guy asks Willie to explain their life in Sophiatown, he laments that the music of their life is a song of '*melancholy, loneliness and despair*' (2000:10) and this is reflected in every scene and every dialogue. Willie condemns the situation in Johannesburg. Life is not easy there and it has become unbearable, as observed by Father Higgins. The play portrays the hard realities of the life in Sophiatown, which is a '*fertile acre for troubles*' (2000:11) especially on Fridays. Father Higgins, though aware of the all-pervading nature of sorrow, expresses his helplessness when Willie demands he teaches the white men to treat them equally (2000:11). Despite these hard circumstances, Willie is optimistic and highly independent. Situations take a new turn when Father Higgins introduces Tobias Masala, a simple man from Eastern Transvaal to find employment, Willie regrets "why do they come here, like *that!*" (2000:11) Willie knows that life in Sophiatown will be miserable for an innocent man like Tobias as he wasn't made for the patch of muck '*to slosh through everyday filled with the tears and sympathy for their innocent black brothers*'. (2000:11) He refuses to promise Higgins to find him a job and says '*If he sinks, he sinks*' (2000:12) The dreams that Tobias had for himself and his family reminded Willie of the dreams that he had when he was a child. He hated Tobias because he was full of dreams that would never be fulfilled. When Tobias gets killed, Willie feels an overwhelming amount of guilt, shame and grief. After his funeral, it is almost as if Willie says farewell to his own hopes and dreams. He is unable to write to Tobias' family, incapable of fulfilling his only purpose as being educated in a township. He is made more aware that the apartheid system is inevitable and even more unwilling to accept the bitter truth.

Here Fugard incorporates his intellectual and individual stances of rebellion in Willie, the black protagonist. Through him, he voices out his feeling, which necessitate the reason for opposition against the dreadful forces like gangsterism which bear the impact of several cruel racist laws. Having understood the significance of life and the way it is being shattered in Sophiatown, and suffer from inter- and intra-racial oppression, the play records the raging gangsterism, a social evil, the oppression by the notoriously stronger ones, which has no opposition. It also shows how the underprivileged ones are victimised. The residents of the black township are frequently nagged by Shark, a black gangster who appears every Friday, the day of their weekly payment. The innocent residents ought to offer a share from their pay packets as 'protection fee' either to Shark or similar other gangsters in trains and on roads and those who protested were brutally killed. They cannot even make a complaint against them to the police, for they do not have the 'pass-books' to stay in that town. In a way, they buy their 'protection' from Shark, their fellow black South African. Unable to bear the insensitivity of the black people, Father Higgins instigates them to go to the police. But this grim situation of an unprotected life is summed up by Guy very well. Speaking about Shark, he says:

*Don't you understand? He's got shares in the police station. You can forget about the police. They protect a fellow like Shark. You see they are only interested in our passes. But a Kaffir laying a charge against a criminal-that would be a joke. We are all criminals. Look, Father, do not be hard on us. You know what I have just said better than any other white.* (2000:34)

Even the independent Willie makes a passive living allowing the share for Shark from his Friday's pay-packet. Tobias, unaware of these facts innocently argues about the protection fee and gets killed in the hands of Shark. It is only after the death of Tobias, Willie realises the gravity of the situation, the result

of their passive attitude and decides to oppose Shark in spite of the murderous consequences. He feels guilty and goes to the police to complain against Shark. He is aware that the idea of going to the police would just bring about danger and opposition, but he does it anyway. He lets go of his fear with the false hope of achieving a goal. When the police simply laugh at Willie he is even more angered and frustrated by the situation. The police are Shark's protectors and are only concerned with apartheid laws, not criminal laws. This is ironic in the sense that apartheid laws are criminal and inhumane.

Willie had a strong urge to do something about the situation. He is tired of seeing men with hopes and dreams carried out in coffins. He is tired of the oppression. Willie's stance does not fit into the social reality. His friends refuse to stand next to him against Shark. They watch what he is doing but they do not accept it. They let Shark kill him and do not try to stand against him. Willie mourns over the misery of their lives and the impossibility of living. He realizes that life is not a fairy tale with a happy ending. The absurdity of living forces him not only to be away from Rebecca but from his own life itself. To make his life more purposeful and less mundane, he wants to oppose Shark by informing the police. His dreams of 'living happily ever after' get shattered and he says:

*I gave up dreaming. Tobias reminded me of too much, Guy. He was going to make some money and live happily ever after. The cosy little dream like this, Willie and Rebecca lived happily ever after! That's how the fairy stories end and it's stupid because, out there is life and it is not ending happily" (2000:44)*

Willie feels that life is vain and useless without a protest against the problem and it needs a white man to remind them of their rights. He blames the individuals within his society including himself for allowing such problems. Willie feels guilty for being a silent spectator to the killing of the innocent Tobias. His conscience pricks him and dares to file a case against Shark risking his own life.

*Willie: I went for myself. For myself. Not to get shark. Before I even start reckoning with him I've got you think about, the part I played in Tobias' death. The emotion in me is shame, not anger, shame. You see Guy; I'm involved as surely as I stood there and watched him go down. (2000:43)*

Willie moves from a position of submissiveness to one of resistance. This transformation is triggered by the pivotal event i.e. Tobias' death and the growing awareness of the injustices he faces. Higgins laments why does it keep on happening. He regrets that there are going to be others like Tobias who walk in full of hope and be carried out in coffin. He condemns:

*Higgins: I know life is 'cheap' here; I've heard that sort of talk until I'm sick of it. But something inside me finds five shillings just a little too cheap. I was hoping you might have felt the same. Willie: Nobody over here thinks five shillings expensive. (2000:33)*

Willie begins to question the legitimacy of the system and find the courage to challenge it, even at great personal risk. This leads to the awakening of conscience and this inner conflict serves as a catalyst for resistance. His frustration can be clearly felt through his words:

*The world I live in is the way it is, not in spite of me but because of me. You think we're just poor suffering come-to-Jesus-at the end of it all black men and that the world's all wrong and against us so what the hell. Well I'm not so sure of that any more. I'm not so sure because I think we helped to make it, the way it is.(2000:50-51)*

Willie's act of defiance and opposition to Shark and the words of the cunning politician Watson, project Fugard's anger against such conditions. Willie realises that they are guilty as they accept a lot and do not react.

*Willie: Such as Tobias's death and a character called Shark. Our handiwork. We've been good customers. Every Friday night on the dot ...five shillings...for a time. So when a man like Tobias walks in he's out in the cold if he doesn't pay...And being a man he wouldn't want to pay. There is nothing that says we must surrender to what we don't like. There is no excuse like saying the world's a big place and I'm just a small little man. My world is as big as I am. Just big enough for me to do something about it. (2000:51)*

When life becomes dreadful and unprotected, it becomes meaningless. The death of Willie is not the end of the sequence, but it makes a bold beginning of opposition against gangsterism. It is also the frustration and struggle for a better life. The final speech of Willie is universal in its appeal, as it explains the reasons for the birth and growth of such evil forces within a society. The play is not restricted to South Africa alone; it appeals to the living conditions of all common people who live in poverty ridden slums and ghettos of all parts of the world. It is a statement against oppression, a feature that is found everywhere in the world.

Athol Fugard thus explores the intricate interplay between compliance and resistance by portraying the internal struggles of characters torn between survival and their yearning for justice. The play ultimately underscores the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of resistance in the face of oppressive systems.

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