

RACE RELATIONS IN ANDRE BRINK'S *AN INSTANT IN THE WIND*

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Abstract

*The term 'race relations' refers to the relationship between the members of different races. It refers to those forms of behaviour which arise from the contacts and resulting interaction of people with varied physical and cultural characteristics. Andre Brink has gained reputation as a South African novelist unafraid to tackle the controversial subjects of mixed-race love affairs and marriages, of the injustices of apartheid and racism in all its myriad forms. The present paper intends to present race relations as reflected in Andre Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*. It is a passionate story of an escaped slave and a white woman lost in the African wilderness. It deals with the unexpected development of love between them. The novelist has presented race relations regarding master-slave and man-woman relations in a highly sensitive multiracial society like South Africa. His characters succeed in establishing successful race relations, though at individual level. Brink proposes necessity of collective transformations in race relations from unhappy to happy and healthy relations to bring South Africa on the horizon of world for an utterly peace and humanity.*

Key Words: race, race relations, apartheid, Andre Brink.

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The term 'race relations' refers to the relationship between the members of different races. It refers to those forms of behaviour which arise from the contacts and resulting interaction of people with varied physical and cultural characteristics.

O. C. Cox defines race relations as, 'behaviour which develops among peoples who are aware of each other's actual or imputed physical differences.' (320) Race relations are dominantly present in societies which carry colonial characteristics. Perhaps, South Africa is the best example of colonial society having various racial cultures. The South African novels are bound to the topics peculiar to pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial South Africa, which are linked to its multiracial issues this or that way. Like the novels written by Nadine Gordimer, Eteinne Le Roux, J. M. Coetzee, those of Andre Brink form a tradition of protest literature – writing against apartheid. He has gained reputation as a South African novelist unafraid to tackle the controversial subjects of mixed-race love affairs and marriages, of the injustices of apartheid and racism in all its myriad forms. The present paper intends to present race relations regarding man-woman and master-slave relations as reflected in Brink's novel, *An Instant in the Wind*.

It is a passionate story of an escaped slave and a white woman lost in the African wilderness. It explores the unexpected development of love between them. Sue Kossew rightly observes about its setting and themes. She notes,

[The novel is] set in South Africa's colonial past, and ... touch on related issues of journeying, master/ mistress-slave relationships, the nature of his-story, notions of "civilization" and "savagery", and the theme of the betrayal of the colonized by the colonizer. (47-48)

Elisabeth Larsson, the female protagonist of the novel, marries a Swedish naturalist, traveler, adventurer named Erik Larsson. She accompanies him on an expedition to the South African interior. Their Hottentot bearers desert them on their journey inland. Their possessions get stolen and finally, Larsson disappears leaving Elisabeth bereft. She is found by Adam Mantoor, black, a runaway slave. He has been following the expedition for some time. His appearance saves her from certain death. Their proximity leads to an intimate relationship. It enforced the recognition of the other: 'This terrible space surrounding us creates the silence in which, so rarely, preciously, I dare to recognise you and be recognised by you.' (199) But, initially Elisabeth seems to assume that relationships that pertain in 'civilised' society might be maintained. She has a lot to learn. The path of safety ahead of them is long, unclear and dangerous. And they have no option but to support one another. Elisabeth is initially revolted by Adam. She is terrified of him. He is deeply suspicious, even afraid of her. But his knowledge is essential for their survival. He is fearful of what might happen to him if he returns to the Cape, for there is unfinished business around him. Together they struggle, survive and gradually learn to live alongside and then depend upon one another. Brink demonstrates how one's own actions can inspire others.

In the first section of the novel, Brink records history of both black and white characters. Adam, the black protagonist of the novel, fell foul of the law by disobeying the instructions of his master, Willem Rickert and by assaulting him with a piece of wood. For this crime he is sentenced, a fair trial, to flogging and branding, followed by banishment to Robben Island. In 1744, his escape is recorded without any further particulars and for seven years no more is seen of him in the colony. In the second section, Erik is disappeared and Elisabeth is found by Adam. It may be considered as a good start to the development of race relations in a black slave and a white woman. Their relationship has two angles: master-slave relations and man-woman relations. Though Elisabeth is afraid of Adam, she is so helpless that she has to seek help from him alone. Both of them try to command one another, to overpower each other. She claims herself a white master. Besides, Adam claims himself a free human being: 'I'm not a slave.' (14) He knows that Elisabeth is 'the ultimate *thou- shalt- not*, the most untouchable of all, you: white, woman.' (15) Initially, she considers his presence as 'a threat to her independence, her silence; a threat to her. Yet if he hadn't been there, like this, tonight, she would surely have died of fear.' (16) Slowly as days pass, they become dependent of each other though they don't admit it. Brink

allows his black protagonist, while away from the society, to overcome, at least for a small time, the barrier imposed between him and a white woman. As Hassall observes:

Brink's Europeans are confronted with very different coloured races. To begin with, they are not all indigenous people but a mixture of native Africans, slaves from the Dutch East Indies and elsewhere, and mixed blood descendants of earlier Europeans. Whatever their origins, however, the line that is drawn between them and the "whites" is a fiercely uncompromising one. And it is made more bitter by the fact that blacks and whites share the work, live together as children and indeed (though boxed apart) as adults and both claim the country as home (though both are immigrants) (181).

Adam and Elisabeth are prejudiced towards each other. He doesn't want to open up his history before a white woman. On the contrary, she doesn't want to believe a black man, a savage. As Ghorpade points out, 'This everyday awareness of different roles based upon the criterion of colour becomes the psychological shackle that cannot easily be shed.' (97) Both are unable to keep faith in each other because of their racial differences. He wants to help a white woman, though she is from another culture of different race. At first sight we think that it is his help from humanistic point of view, but Elisabeth is suspicious about his intention behind it. In the later part of the novel, when their healthy relation develops, he discloses his initial intention to help her that he considers her as a way to his forever freedom. He thinks that if he takes her home safely, she would tell the Governor to forgive him and to free him forever. Kossew notes that,

The historical distancing engaged by Brink could also be seen as 'opting out,' inasmuch as it might suggest that this idyllic black-white relationship is no longer possible, that Eden has been lost forever. (49)

On their way back to the Cape, Adam wants to speak with Elisabeth, to touch her, to penetrate her silence, to break into her. But, his historical background of slavery, he is not dared to ask her anything because she is a white woman, a mistress. He doesn't do anything to her

because he is aware of her pregnancy, even he doesn't want to harm her or her body. At this point, he thinks of his mother and her colour or her position in the society as a slave woman, 'Would anyone have spared my mother for the sake of the child in her womb' (50)? He remembers his white master. His heart aches due to clinching difference between master and slave, though both are human beings. He calls his master as, 'appointed by God: to him the world lay open and the law was silent. He had his wife; he had access to all that was white – but also to us, quite freely.' (50) He remembers their trips on the wine-wagon to the Cape. Though they have finished off-loading early in the afternoon, they have to hang around the taverns until sunset. After sunset, the white men quarters in the slave women lodge 'To improve the quality of the local slaves, they explained. A necessary service.' (50) His mother asks him not to ask so many questions. Slaves grow elder easily; they pass through early adulthood due to socio-cultural conditions around them. They live with fear of masters in their mind on one hand and with the hope of life of freedom on the other. Adam's mother tries to make his mind to accept the reality. She says: 'We are all under the same yoke, accept it.' (50, 51) And Adam makes his mind to fight the masters, to fight with their brutality. He admits to Elisabeth that, 'I was kept as a slave. I never *was* a slave.' (53) On the contrary, white masters also carry fear of blacks in their minds. They think that blacks can attack them any time, anyhow. This may be because of their awareness of their own brutal treatment to their slaves. They prefer safe distance from slaves and teach their children not to keep faith in blacks. Both blacks and whites roam in a shadow of fear of each other as well as of future. In this regard Richard Peck comments, 'South African blacks often experience the same anxiety and fear about the future that are so widespread among whites.' (119)

Elisabeth is born and brought up in a culture that values the closeness of the group throughout one's lifetime, hence, it is more difficult for her to leave family and community forever and give up her traditional cultural values, in order to make it in the outside world, in African wilderness. Whereas, Adam is grown up in a culture with the expectation that someday he may has to leave the nest and become slave of another master but not a free individual. So it becomes difficult for him also to leave his culture and survive in an African hinterland as a free human being. Though he is attracted towards her, he knows that 'You're white, and I am black of my own blackness. Do not let me think you're no more than a woman. Do not plunge us both into the abyss.' (54) Besides, Elisabeth is aware that Adam has saved her from death in the

wilderness. She is confused whether he is good or bad. She thinks, 'You dark man, death or life: who and what you are? --- Why do I fear you?' (66) And she admits that 'the only way to control you is to command you. To be the white Cape woman I loathe.' (66) Here, Brink demonstrates the mentality of white masters towards their slaves. On the contrary, he throws light on the thinking of slaves about their masters by making Adam memorizing his past. Adam has to struggle with the memory and the violence of the passion which stir him, when Elisabeth asks him that whether he is happy with his freedom. He answers that he doesn't consider his roaming into the wilderness as a freedom. He taunts her that she cannot understand his state of mind because,

You're white. I'm only a slave, aren't I? I'm two hands and two legs, I'm like an ox or a mule. You're the head, you're the one who is allowed to think. I'm just a body. I'd better stick to my place. It's presumptuous for me to think...it's all here, inside me. But what can I do with it (81)?

He remembers his Grandmother Seli, who tells him about liberty. She thinks that her Bass is not a Bass but a slave, when she asks, 'Whose Bass is he? Slave of his slaves, is what he is. What can he do without them?' (151) Brink suggests that master and slaves have developed their own views throughout the history to support their racial cultures, which makes their mindsets rigid. Hence, though masters are aware of their inhumane treatment of slaves, they don't treat them with humanity, because they want to enjoy social privileges without any interruptions. Besides, though slaves want to bear freedom, they don't revolt against their masters because of the fear for their future.

The third part of the novel explores the man-woman relationship especially when both are from different races. Until this part Elisabeth and Adam have retained both curiosity and fear of each other and at the end of the second part they start to merge into one another, physically and spiritually. We come to know about their involvement when Elisabeth thinks,

Sometimes I wonder whether I'm dreaming you. And even myself. It's all so impossible, so beautiful. Everything is so remote ...The intimate landscape of happiness. The ultimately inexplicable quality of it. Everything permissible; everything possible...See

how white I am; and you are black. You're black like a slave. But slaves steal past on the periphery of one's existence, like pets. And now no longer slave. Man. My man, my own... I love you. I have no other explanation to offer. I love you. (117-19)

Elisabeth tries to learn everything which Adam knows. And he teaches her everything he knows, with love. He owes his life to her. Though the outside world is civilized, though they have come from the civilised Cape, they live life of barbarians in the African hinterland. They dream of children and of a healthy family. In this connection, Isidore Diala points out,

It [the novel] chronicles the human journey from the wilderness to civilization, with the startling revelation that while the wilderness fosters and nurtures human communion, civilization, in moral terms presented as a state of nature, blights love and impoverishes life. (196)

Elisabeth is well aware of their racial differences and both of them are aware of rejection of their relation in the outside world, besides they try to maintain their relation in the inland and decide to fight with the bitter reality to accept their relation. She asks Adam, 'Do you really think we'll have children some day?' (138) Her intention behind this question is quite remarkable in the racially diverse country like South Africa in eighteenth century, where man- woman relations from different races, from different cultures are not allowed. Most of all, the relations between a white man and a black woman are accepted but those between a white woman and a black man are strictly banned because the white races think women as their property and they consider the possession of a white woman by a black man as a severe attack on their socio-cultural condition. By depicting sexual relation between a white woman and a black man, Brink has raised a banner of revolt against apartheid. As Hassall observes:

In Brink's South Africa blacks and whites are seen as natural equals separated only by the uncompromising racism of whites... Brink explores sexual relationships between blacks and whites, especially the taboo relationship between a black man and a white woman, and he portrays them as natural political and social partners if only the Afrikaaner establishment would allow it. (181-82)

Elisabeth is brought up by her parents to believe that she is from a good civilised racial culture and she is taught that she must follow its rules and regulations. After living in the African wilderness with Adam, she learns to respect the other cultures also. She learns to follow the culture of the land where she has to live forever. And this creates a hope of life in her live. The fourth part of the novel depicts the hope of life in their journey. They come across so many hindrances but they remain firm on their will to return home. At one point the difficulties overpower them and Elisabeth loses her hope of returning home. Adam convinces her every time and takes her nearer to the Cape. Brink stresses the necessity to act without knowing the consequences of one's actions.

Elisabeth regains her energy slowly and realizes the necessity to be survived and to return home. They reach near the Cape after a long journey of many months. She seems to be impatient to reach the Cape as early as possible. She seems to be unaware of brutal reality of the Cape. As Adam has already gone through its reality, he is very cautious about the reaction of the Cape people towards their relationship, towards the relation of an upper class white woman and a black slave. He reminds her that it is easier for a black woman with a white man, but it's very difficult for a white woman with a black man. He persists relentlessly:

They will never forgive you... If their white women start doing this sort of thing: it undermines everything in which they've got to believe if they want to remain the masters in the land. (257)

If fortunately he gets freedom, he is unable to enjoy it without his family and his race, which is unable to get freedom.

Finally, they reach their destination and Elisabeth goes in the city to seek freedom for Adam and he waits on the sea shore for her to come back but she never comes back. In the very first part of the novel Brink makes it clear that Elisabeth marries a white neighbor, much elder than her, for the sake of Adam's son to be free. She gives birth to their son soon after her marriage with the white man. And the novel ends with Adam's long lasting waiting for Elisabeth. He thinks: 'such a long journey for you and me. Not a question of imagination, but a faith.' (279) In this regard, Kossew comments,

Brink's narrative is rooted in the past, which is seen to contain seeds of hope that are not disseminated owing to the betrayal of the black man by the white society. (48)

His male protagonist, being a black slave and female protagonist, though white, being a woman go through traumatic experiences, long suffering and oppression. Brink brings them out of their traumatic experiences by making them assert themselves and by demanding equal rights, opportunities and freedom.

Thus, both the black and white protagonists of the novel develop positive race relations at individual level. They change their behaviour accordingly another culture but they are unable to change the whole society. The change, the acceptance of other's racial culture is limited to individuals. Brink's characters succeed in establishing successful race relations, though at individual level, by expressing themselves. There is an amazing shift from traditional master-slave relations to man-woman relations. Brink notes that though race relations in South Africa are unhappy in its own way, they should be given a new direction toward healthy coexistence. He proposes necessity of collective transformations in race relations from unhappy to happy and healthy relations to bring South Africa on the horizon of world for an utterly peace and humanity.

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