

Postcolonial Trauma in Athol Fugard's the Train Driver

Zahraa Adnan Baqer¹, Arbaayah binti Ali Termizi², Hasyimah binti Mohd Amin³

Abstract

This paper examines postcolonial trauma in Athol Fugard's The Train Driver. The study designates the core conceptual nuances of trauma and how it intensified in the course of the play. It draws on Fugard's utilization of the dramatic incidents and the characters' dialogues as mere incarnations of post-colonialism in South Africa where psychic trauma maturely develops and reaches its highest point. Hence, the study follows a textual-contextual interpretation of the play's setting, characters, and dialogues which reflect the true essence of hegemonic post-colonialism in South Africa. These elements with the subject of the study's methodology which applies a close reading of postcolonial trauma via pursuing a textual analysis of Fugard's depiction of the South African native who suffered from severe apartheid. On that account, Dominick LaCapra's concept of trauma will be polarized in the analysis for the sake of delving deep into the lurking impetus of the characters' psychic trauma affected by social circumstances. Such circumstances will be analyzed as the regional setting in which the postcolonial encounter between the colonized and the colonizers takes place. In the long run, the play's dialogues will be explored as the authentic exemplification of postcolonial trauma since the characters reveal their psychic trauma by dint of their dialogues.

Keywords: *Apartheid, Fugard, LaCapra, Post-colonialism, Trauma.*

Introduction

Postcolonial trauma emanates from different psychic stimulations. They come out of abrupt or accumulated negative sequences of certain experience which leaves its apparent impact on traumatic individuals. Some of these stimulations relate to social factors, and they transform into detrimental inhibition sought by individuals in order to find appropriate outlets for their repressed emotions. In this respect, post-colonialism plays a crucial role in shaping the typical peculiarities of trauma through “integrating knowledge of trauma into practices and procedures” (Earl and Taylor, 2024, p.96). Traumatic individuals, in this case, inadvertently begin to show their repressed negative emotions through behavioral disorders. The social implications of postcolonial trauma are brought by the tragic and undesired events and incidents that occur inside traumatic individuals' social milieus. Postcolonial trauma begins to take its ultimate shape when oppressive colonialism disappears and is replaced with post-colonialism.

The vital formation of postcolonial trauma is not only appropriated by the social conditions of individuals but also by personal and subjective experiences undergone by these individuals at hard times. That is, they undergo a negative experience which is repressed in their psyches. However, the individuals have a strong predilection to remove such experiences but they fail as they are haunted by their remains of the past through recalling this experience. At this point, the individuals attempt to escape such experience by means of finding suitable psychic refuges in order to be safe of any oppressive mistreatment. Yet, the individuals are not entirely free of their past experiences. As a result, the residuals of the colonial past commence to accumulate; and it leads to drastic changes in the individuals' psyches which develop “trauma that impair not only feelings of safety, but self-esteem, personality, and social functioning” (Cardarelli, 2024, p.122). Culture and society, therefore, intersect with each other forming the laying premise of psychic trauma; and individuals find themselves at loggerheads with the postcolonial world to maintain their “complicated

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia, Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Babylon, Iraq, Email: gs59651@student.upm.edu.my, (Corresponding Author)

² Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia.

³ Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

performance of identity” (Ni and Wang 149). Accordingly, the current study tries to explore postcolonial trauma in Athol Fugard’s *The Train Driver*.

Literature Review

Athol Fugard, a renowned playwright and a prominent voice in South African literature, has consistently grappled with the complexities of his nation’s tumultuous history. One of his compelling works, *The Train Driver*, stands as a poignant exploration of post-apartheid South Africa, delving into the profound psychological and social repercussions of historical trauma. This literature review seeks to illuminate the nuanced dimensions of Fugard’s play, focusing on the multifaceted themes it presents, including racial discrimination, despair, and the enduring consequences of the apartheid era. By delving into the critical analyses and scholarly discussions surrounding *The Train Driver*, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Fugard navigates the intersection of personal and collective memory, offering a unique lens through which to examine the complexities of post-apartheid South African identity. Through an exploration of key literary insights and critical perspectives, this review endeavors to contribute to a richer comprehension of Fugard’s artistic vision and the broader implications of his work within the cultural and historical context of South Africa.

In “The plights of impoverished blacks of South Africa in Athol Fugard’s plays: *The Train Driver* and *The Island*”, Meera Siva analyzes Athol Fugard’s plays, particularly “*The Train Driver*” and “*The Island*.” Siva argues that these works serve as windows into the pervasive themes of racial discrimination, despair, and the enduring implications of apartheid on future generations. In addition, the author argues, “the play attempts to find reconciliation and harmony in a society torn by its violent and traumatic past through a blurry attempt of social absolution of the perpetrators or bystanders” (210). Thus, Siva maintains that “*The Train Driver*” poignantly explores the post-apartheid landscape, delving into the despair and oppression faced by black victims and grappling with the guilt carried by white oppressors. Through the lens of this play, we aim to unravel the intricate layers of post-apartheid South Africa, examining the emotional and social consequences of historical injustices.

In “Remembering Trauma: Fugard’s *The Train Driver*”, Sennis Walder argues that Fugard’s *The Train Driver* intricately navigates the complex landscape of South Africa’s engagement with its past, centering the narrative on the recollection of a ‘track suicide’ by a white train driver, whose tragic tale is recounted by a black gravedigger. Walder maintains, “The dramatic rhythms and balance of the play as an embodied performance are crucial in creating a sense of remembering a past that if it cannot be compensated for” (34). In addition, the author argues that this piece not only delves into the psychological intricacies of the driver’s macabre response, a consequence of his identification with the deceased individual whose final resting place he seeks but also orchestrates a delicate balance through the gravedigger’s portrayal, characterized by empathy and acceptance.

Therefore, the evocative choice of a squatter camp cemetery as the backdrop underscores the liminality of urban spaces, emphasizing the enduring continuity of historical injustices. Thus, Walder maintains that the play’s setting serves as a poignant reminder of the persistent legacy of past wrongs, highlighting the interconnectedness of the present with a troubled history. Moreover, Fugard skillfully explores the concept of selective memory within the nation’s elite, revealing a narrative distortion that conceals the everyday realities of poverty and violence. This deliberate act of remembrance by the privileged class not only masks the lived experiences of the marginalized but also perpetuates a sanitized version of the nation’s history.

“*The Train Driver*” thus emerges as a thought-provoking contribution to the post-apartheid literary landscape, challenging conventional narratives and engaging with the psychological complexities of memory, guilt, and reconciliation. Fugard’s ability to interweave the personal and the societal within the confines of a squatter camp cemetery offers a unique lens through which to examine the nuanced layers of South Africa’s post-apartheid identity. This play, with its careful negotiation of perspectives and its exploration of the persistent impact of historical trauma, becomes a compelling subject for scholarly investigation within the broader discourse on contemporary South African literature

In “Moral values revealed from Roelf’s character and the symbols in *The Train Driver* by Athol Fugard,” Novita Lestari examines the play titled “*The Train Driver*,” centering on the character Roelf, a train driver, who ventures into a squatter camp to locate the grave of an unknown woman. The study is guided by three main objectives. Firstly, it aims to unveil the depiction of Roelf’s characteristics through the primary events experienced by him. Secondly, it seeks to identify symbols within “*Train Driver*” and elucidate how they contribute to the narrative. Lastly, the study endeavors to uncover the moral values embedded in Roelf’s characteristics, as revealed through key events and symbols in the play.

Employing a moral-philosophical approach, the author justifies this choice as the most appropriate for dissecting the moral values embedded in the narrative. The findings of the study illuminate three primary characteristics of Roelf: he is temperamental, reckless, and wise, with these traits being discerned through his dialogues, interactions with others, and demeanor. Additionally, the study identifies three symbols in *The Train Driver*: the nameless grave, cursing, and suicide. These symbols are integral to conveying moral values in the narrative.

Analysis and Discussion

At the surface level, Athol Fugard’s *The Train Driver* recounts the guilt that Roelf Visagie, the train driver feels after killing an unnamed black woman and her child. On a deeper analysis, the historical dilemma of occupation is unraveled. Using Dominick LaCapra’s concept of postcolonial trauma as a lens, we can analyze this excerpt from Athol Fugard’s “*The Train Driver*” in the context of the lingering effects of historical trauma and its impact on individual consciousness. In the following quotation, Roelf Visagie is talking to a psychology counselor after the incident,

Ja, I know, Miss. I know its not really my fault, everybody keeps telling me that, you, my wife, the other drivers – some of them have already had as many as twenty hits! – ja, that’s what they call it, a hit. ‘It’s because it’s your first one, Visagie,’ they say to me. ‘That’s why it’s so hard. But give it time. You’ll get over it.’ I get so the hell in when people tell me that, Miss. Ja. You as well. I know you are all just trying to help me so I don’t mean to be offensive but I mean what the hell, if it’s not my fault – and I don’t need anybody to tell me that any more! – then whose fault is it? Ja, why doesn’t somebody try telling me that for a change instead of all this ... (14).

In the dialogue, Visagie, the train driver, grapples with the emotional aftermath of a tragic incident where he inadvertently caused the death of a woman by his train. The term “hit” used colloquially among the drivers underscores the normalization and desensitization to such traumatic events, suggesting a pervasive culture of detachment and indifference born out of repeated experiences. Visagie’s internal struggle and frustration with the responses he receives from others (“It’s because it’s your first one, Visagie,” “You’ll get over it”) highlight the inadequacy of societal attempts to address the profound emotional and psychological wounds inflicted by such incidents. This sentiment resonates with LaCapra’s notion of postcolonial trauma, which emphasizes the enduring impact of historical events on individual and collective psyche, even when the immediate circumstances or perpetrators may have changed. In *Writing History, writing trauma*, LaCapra discusses this issue, “Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement” (41). Thus, through the lens of LaCapra’s concept of postcolonial trauma, this excerpt illuminates the intricate interplay between individual experiences and broader societal dynamics, underscoring the profound challenges of confronting and healing from the deep-seated wounds of historical trauma in post-apartheid South Africa.

Visagie’s poignant question, “then whose fault is it?”, encapsulates the profound existential and moral dilemma he faces. This question transcends the immediate context of the accident, resonating with broader themes of guilt, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a society scarred by historical injustices. It reflects the complexity of navigating personal responsibility within a broader socio-historical context marked by systemic inequalities and the lingering shadows of a traumatic past.

In the following quotation, Visagie directs attention to the stark contrast between his own living conditions and those of the people in the squatter camp, referred to as “pondoks.”

You take off some time one day, Miss, and go and look at those pondoks. My dog's kennel in our backyard is better than what those people is living in. And then of course there's the woman herself. Because don't think I've forgotten her. I wish I could. But even if I could my wife wouldn't let me because that's who she points the finger at (14).

The term “pondoks” typically denotes makeshift shelters, often found in impoverished areas, and Visagie's comparison of his dog's kennel to the living conditions of the residents underscores the extreme disparities in social and economic circumstances. This stark juxtaposition serves as a powerful representation of the enduring inequalities inherited from the apartheid era. Visagie's suggestion that the conditions of the pondoks are worse than his dog's kennel highlights not only the physical deprivation but also the dehumanizing aspects of systemic inequality. Through this comparison, Fugard draws attention to the persistent legacies of colonialism and apartheid, where certain communities continue to bear the brunt of historical injustices because “trauma encompasses a host of traumatic events such as domestic” (Jacques, 2024, p.1989).

In *Representing the Holocaust: History Theory Trauma*, LaCapra argues, “Victims of severely traumatizing events may never fully escape possession by, or recover from, a shattering past, and a response to trauma may well involve “acting-out” (or emotionally repeating a still-present past)” (13). The mention of “the woman herself” refers to the victim of the train incident. Visagie acknowledges that he cannot forget her, and his desire to do so is thwarted by societal expectations, particularly those imposed by his wife. This aspect aligns with LaCapra's concept, emphasizing how traumatic events become embedded in the collective memory of a society and influence individual perceptions, creating a complex web of guilt, responsibility, and societal expectations. Visagie's wife pointing the finger at the deceased woman indicates the dynamics of blame and accountability within the broader societal framework. The finger-pointing not only reflects personal relationships but also symbolizes a larger social tendency to assign blame and responsibility for historical injustices. Therefore, through LaCapra's lens, this excerpt underscores the intersection of personal trauma with broader socio-economic disparities and the ongoing consequences of historical injustices, portraying a nuanced picture of postcolonial trauma within the context of South Africa's complex history.

In the next quotation, Visagie, the white train driver, still quarrels with the dead black woman and blaming her for what has happened, “I'll tell her how she has fucked up my life ... the selfish black bitch ... that I am sitting here with my arse in the dirt because thanks to her I am losing everything ... my home, my family, my job ... my bloody mind!” (31). This excerpt provides insights into the profound emotional and psychological repercussions of historical and personal traumas within the context of South Africa's complex societal landscape. In this emotionally charged passage, Visagie expresses his intense feelings of anger, frustration, and despair towards the deceased woman, whom he derogatorily refers to as a “selfish black bitch.” This derogatory language not only reflects Visagie's deep-seated resentment but also underscores the racial tensions and divisions that persist in post-apartheid South Africa. In *History Literature Critical Theory*, LaCapra argues, “one may also relate traumatizing events to, or even questionably subsume them under, a transhistorical source of disruption or disorientation” (24). The use of such language serves as a stark reminder of the deep-rooted prejudices and the legacy of racial animosity that continue to permeate societal interactions.

Visagie's lament, “I am sitting here with my arse in the dirt,” vividly conveys his sense of degradation and hopelessness. This imagery of physical and emotional descent encapsulates the profound dislocation and alienation experienced by individuals grappling with the legacies of historical trauma and systemic inequality. Through this portrayal, Fugard highlights the corrosive effects of trauma on individual identity and the erosion of self-worth.

The enumeration of the losses Visagie faces — “my home, my family, my job ... my bloody mind!” — encapsulates the multifaceted impact of trauma on various aspects of human existence. Visagie's despair reflects a broader existential crisis precipitated by the collision of personal tragedy with the enduring scars of historical injustices. His struggle resonates with LaCapra's concept, emphasizing the intricate interplay between individual experiences and broader socio-historical dynamics.

Moreover, Visagie's intense emotions and the attribution of blame to the deceased woman illustrate the complexities of guilt, responsibility, and the quest for meaning within a fractured societal framework. In *Postcolonial Parabola: Literature Tacitly and the Ethics of Representing Trauma*, Jay Rajiva argues, "postcolonial experience itself is frequently traumatic, but also because the very word itself suggests a division that remains unresolved: what was once colonial is now "post," but so close to its "past" that moving forward seems fraught with difficulty, as is so often the case with trauma" (8). This aspect resonates with LaCapra's exploration of how traumatic events become entangled in the collective consciousness, shaping individual perceptions and exacerbating feelings of dislocation and despair due to "psychological interventions designed to mitigate post-traumatic stress" (Schlosser et al., 2024, p.73). This excerpt illuminates the profound psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by individuals navigating the treacherous terrain of postcolonial trauma, underscoring the intricate intersections of personal grief, societal divisions, and the enduring legacies of historical injustices in post-apartheid South Africa.

In the following quotation, Simon, the old black gravedigger, confronts Visagie, "Simon (after a long pause) Whiteman! You can't sit here. Just now it is getting dark and then this place is dangerous. If the amagintsa find you they will take out their knives. You don't belong here. You must go" (32). Examining this excerpt from Athol Fugard's "The Train Driver" through Dominick LaCapra's concept of postcolonial trauma, we witness the portrayal of societal divisions and the lingering impact of historical injustices on individual experiences. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Stef Craps maintains, "dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery need to be revised and expanded if they are to adequately address the hitherto disregarded or overlooked psychological pain suffered by many disenfranchised groups" (4). Simon's words, "Whiteman! You can't sit here," immediately reveals a racialized division, emphasizing the social and spatial boundaries that persist in post-apartheid South Africa. The term "Whiteman" serves as a reminder of the historically entrenched racial categories that continue to shape interactions, even in the aftermath of apartheid. Simon's assertion underscores the persistence of racial tensions and the challenges faced by individuals attempting to navigate shared spaces.

Simon's warning about the danger of the place as darkness falls highlights the vulnerability associated with certain areas, particularly for someone identified as a "Whiteman." This cautionary statement reflects the deep-seated fears and anxieties that persist in a society marked by historical traumas and racial divisions. In "Memory and photography: Rethinking postcolonial trauma studies", Katherine Isobel Baxter argues, "Thus they also record the moment of trauma itself and act, like memories, as persistent markers of a past that persists troublingly into the present. The image isolates the visual elements of the moment from those beyond the frame, detaching them, and reproducing them in new and potentially unrelated contexts" (10). It also suggests a heightened awareness of the potential for violence, underscoring the lingering tensions and resentments that endure post-apartheid. The mention of "amagintsa" and their potential use of knives adds a layer of complexity to the racial dynamics, hinting at the existence of social groups that may resort to violence. This introduces the notion that societal divisions and historical injustices have not only left emotional scars but also tangible threats to personal safety, reinforcing the idea that the legacy of apartheid extends beyond the realms of memory and into the lived experiences of individuals.

Simon's directive for the "Whiteman" to leave reinforces the notion of societal separateness and the persistence of racialized spaces. This underscores the challenges faced by individuals attempting to bridge the gaps created by historical trauma, reflecting LaCapra's emphasis on the difficulty of achieving genuine reconciliation and understanding in the aftermath of profound social upheaval. In conclusion, when viewed through the lens of Dominick LaCapra's concept of postcolonial trauma, this excerpt illuminates the ongoing societal divisions and the complex interplay between individual experiences and the enduring legacy of historical injustices in post-apartheid South Africa as "trauma can be caused by one-time events or ongoing, relentless stress" (Apgar, 2024, p.224). The racialized boundaries and the implicit threat of violence depicted in the dialogue contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges inherent in the process of healing and reconciliation in a society scarred by its traumatic past.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore postcolonial trauma in Athol Fugard's *The Train Driver*. The study tended to find out the inherent drives of psychic trauma and how it negatively influences the characters' social and cultural disposition. It followed a textual-contextual methodology to locate Fugard's dramatic dexterity in portraying the intricate socio-cultural matters in South Africa after the advent of post-colonialism. By scrutinizing the textual description of trauma, the study tried to unravel the tangible and genuine influence of trauma on the behavioral as well as the social attributes of individuals who suffered from colonial apartheid. In this sense, the study pinpointed apartheid as the latent drive of trauma which became the acme of the psychological designation of people who love realistic events during colonialism and its racial insights. As a rule of thumb, colonial events are severe; and they do leave negative and destructive influence upon the colonized people's psyches. They are toxic and precarious by nature. As such, they are repressed in the individuals' psyches; and later, they manifest in traumatic responses to their surroundings. Here, the study accentuated the interpretation of the selected play's setting, characters, and dialogues as tangible components of postcolonial trauma which yields in abnormal behavioral and emotional reactions.

The study, therefore, had three interrelated contributions. First, the exploration of postcolonial trauma as a result of racial apartheid. In other words, the characters are dramatic miniatures of real people who suffered from racial segregation and apartheid during colonialism; and they are still affected by its residuals even after the end of colonialism. It develops and gets more mature during post-colonialism that nurtures it. Apartheid, which is relatively associated with South African postcolonial society, was discovered as the ground of psychic trauma which deforms the characters behaviors and well-being. Second, the dramatic setting was tackled as the regional place for the postcolonial encounter between the South African natives and their oppressors. Third, the play's dialogue is the clue to identify the characters' agitated traumatic psyches since they express their traumatic feelings and emotions through speech.

References

- Apgar, D. (2024). *Social work licensing bachelors exam guide comprehensive ASWB LBSW exam review with full content review, 300+ total questions, and a practice exam (4th ed)*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Incorporated.
- Baxter, Katherine Isobel. "Memory and Photography: Rethinking Postcolonial Trauma Studies." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2011, pp. 18-29.
- Cardarelli, R. (2024). *Children and the climate migration crisis a casebook for global climate action in practice and policy*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Earl, C., and Taylor, P. (2024). *Research handbook on inequalities in later life*. Gloucestershire: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Fugard, Athol. *The Train Driver and Other Plays*. Theatre Communications Group, 2012.
- Jacques, J. F. (2024). *Trauma and embodied healing in dramatherapy, theatre and performance*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History, Literature, Critical Theory*. Cornell University Press, 2013.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Cornell University Press, 2016.
- Lestari, Novita. "Moral Values Revealed from Roelf's Character and the Symbols in *Train Driver* by Athol Fugard." Skripsi thesis, Sanata Dharma University, 2021.
- Ni, Pi-hua, and Mei-Chuen Wang. *Liminality of Justice in Trauma and Trauma Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023.
- Rajiva, Jay. *Postcolonial Parabola: Literature, Tactility and the Ethics of Representing Trauma*. Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
- Schlosser, M., Konstantinos P., and Katy K. (2024). Editorial: Community series: police trauma, loss, and resilience, volume II. *Lausanne: Frontiers in Psychology*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1348111>
- Siva, Meera. "The Plights of Impoverished Blacks of South Africa in Athol Fugard's Plays: *The Train Driver* and *The Island*." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 208-212.
- Walder, Dennis. "Remembering Trauma: Fugard's *The Train Driver*." *South African Theatre Journal*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2014, pp. 32-47.