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Ismail Mahomed's *Cheaper than Roses* ❁



ثمن الحصول على "جواز السفر إلى المستقبل"
في مسرحية إسماعيل محمد "أرخص من الورود"

ماجد حميد نعمة

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البريد الإلكتروني Email: majidh.niema@uokufa.edu.iq

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Majid Hameed Niama

UNIVERSITY OF KUFA

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERATURE

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Abstract

The Indian Muslim playwright, director, and producer Ismail Mahomed (1959-) is considered one of the prominent Post-Apartheid playwrights in South Africa. His theatre, which he prefers to be labeled as 'issue theatre' is profound. Topics that Mahomed's theatre tackle vary to cover debatable issues both in South Africa and worldwide; they range to include, race, gender, identity, and most importantly, subjects that are closely related to women sufferings within their communities. In his solo play *Cheaper Than Roses*, Mahomed sheds light on abundant themes which are all a result of the reclassification period in South Africa that lasted for over four decades. The paper aims at investigating the moral and materialistic value systems that the brutal practices of

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Apartheid tried to destroy. Thus the paper is intended to thoroughly examine the consequences of the individual decisions, the past and new race layers, forgiveness and reconciliation, and the family integration and disintegration in order to bring up what have the South Africans, especially women, lost due to the most devastating segregation system in the twentieth century.

الخلاصة

يعتبر الكاتب المسرحي، والمخرج، والمنتج المسلم إسماعيل محمد (1959-) واحداً من أبرز الكتاب المسرحيين في مرحلة ما بعد الفصل العنصري في جنوب أفريقيا، إذ أن مسرحه والذي يفضله أن يوصف بـ "مسرح القضية" عميق المعنى. وقد تختلف المواضيع التي يعالجها مسرح محمد في التصدي لتغطية القضايا المثيرة للجدل في كل من جنوب أفريقيا وجميع أنحاء العالم؛ ويتضمن القضايا المتعلقة بالعرق والجنس والهوية، والأهم من ذلك، تلك الموضوعات التي ترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بمعاناة النساء داخل مجتمعاتهم. وفي مسرحيته المنفردة الأداء، موضوعة البحث، "أرخص من الورود" يسلط الكاتب الضوء على مواضيع عديدة والتي هي نتيجة فترة إعادة التصنيف العرقي في جنوب أفريقيا والذي استمر لأكثر من أربعة عقود. يهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على نظم القيم الأخلاقية والمادية التي دمرتها الممارسات الوحشية للفصل العنصري. ولذا فإن عواقب القرار الفردي، وأوجه التمييز العنصري في الماضي والحاضر وطلب الغفران والمصالحة، وتماسك وتفكك الأسرة كلها مواضيع ممكن تحليل عواقبها وتأثيرها، على وجه الخصوص، على النساء في جنوب أفريقيا. وهذا برمته يعود على نظام الفصل العنصري المدمر الذي شهده القرن العشرين.

• Ismail Mahomed and Theatre:

The Indian Muslim playwright, producer, arts administrator and director Ismail Mahomed is considered one of the prominent figures in the South African contemporary theatre. His contributions to the theatre of post-apartheid South Africa are thoughtful. Studies on postcolonial and feminism are openly and widely liable to Mahomed's plays. He is one of the few South African playwrights to receive distinguished accolades. As a playwright, Mahomed is internationally recognized, and his plays are performed in a wide range of venues. ¹ Kathy Perkins cites Mahomed's passion for theatre as he states "I lived in a community that still does not have a single theatre... .Arts takes second place to science and maths,"² In fact, Mahomed has found that teaching should move him a step forward and shift his real attention to the theatre Eventually he resigns to



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dedicate himself to the world of theatre.³ Art is not needed for art's sake, Mahomed believes, but also "have art that reaches out to the world."⁴

Back in the 1950s, Mahomed's family suffered from the implementation of the Group Areas Act. The apartheid legislation forces families to be relocated according to their races; eventually, his family moved to Lenasia, Johannesburg's biggest Indian community.⁵

One of the great impacts of the CAW on Mahomed's career as a playwright is that he finds himself very interested in performing one-actor play (solo performance) for reasons mainly related to costs and performing capabilities. Ismail defends the solo performance as he states "You could engage people—it was a cost-effective way of doing theatre and you could tour a production very easily."⁶ Besides, he comes across the fact that such performances reach the audience with no burdens or hindrance. Because of Ismail's belief and attempts, the solo theatre could be assigned as "a legitimate theatre genre."⁷ An observer would notice that such a belief goes in line with his "issue theatre".⁸

The volatile political and social issues are considered the main ingredients of his plays. Thus, he insists on labeling his theatre as "issue theatre". Moreover, he fully acknowledges the vital role of the theatre in South Africa as a means of addressing major conflicts in society. Accordingly, the diversity of the common themes, related to gender equality, race and sexuality, are thoroughly addressed in Mahomed's theatre. Along with some recognizable south African playwrights (men & women), it is worth noting, Mahomed's plays are distinguished as one-actor plays which render them to be performed at different stages both nationally and internationally. This could be well manifested as he endorses his vision of solo theatre.

David Graver, in his book *Drama for a New South Africa*, argues that South African playwrights like Ismail Mahomed, Mda, Ellenbogen Bailey and Slabolepszy introduce plays that "all offer distinct treatments of injustice after apartheid."⁹ In spite of his vital contribution to the theatre of post-apartheid South Africa and the wide-ranging implications of his work for postcolonial and feminist scholars, there has been little critical work on Ismail Mahomed. Graver offers important perspective on Mahomed's work in relation to the plays of other pioneering post-apartheid dramatists, including ZakesMda, Reza de Wet, and Brett Bailey.¹⁰ Mahomed's more recent plays, such as *Leather Boykies*(1994) and *Cheaper than Roses* (1995), tackle controversial social issues—the place of men in the Afrikaans hinterland or the dilemma of coloured



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people, especially women, who previously tried to pass for white and now face an uncertain future—through the means of comedy and satire instead of direct impeachment.¹¹

Women's opportunities in *Cheaper than Roses*

In her influential book *Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays*, Kathy Perkins includes a male playwright, Ismail Mahomed; this, one would argue, may contradict the title of the book. In fact, Perkins has a point in including a playwright like Mahomed as the latter clearly illustrates that he is quite capable of tackling, in his plays, women's stories and issues in the same way as women playwrights may do. Thus, Perkins seems to have understood Mahomed's statement that he can deal with such concerns. Mahomed argues, Perkins quotes, "I don't look at people with a gender bias. I'm interested in the stories which they tell me and that's what I put in my scripts. Women have supported my work."¹²

Ismail Mahomed comments on the inspirational incident that made him write *Cheaper Than Roses*. He states that he has been fascinated by listening to a story told by a woman on the train. The story reveals her anguish and remorse cornering the new South Africa. To him what the woman unveils is rich in the pain and bitterness that she undergoes. Moreover, what attracts his attention is the fact that the woman keeps "referring to herself as coloured but who could easily have passed off as a white. As she continued venting her anger, it slipped that she had actually been playing white in the old South Africa and she was now remorseful that things were going to change for her."¹³

One mysterious and debatable face of the Apartheid period results in what is known 'The reclassification period'.¹⁴In *Cheaper than Roses*, the Apartheid and democracy are thoroughly investigated and laid bare before the audience. On the other hand, the African society is regarded as a multifaceted one that has struggled for decades trying to establish an identity with which they would be able to fit. It is worth noting that, in this respect, *Cheaper than Roses* was written in 1996 just as the Apartheid era came to a halt in South Africa and, most importantly, after the first election that was considered, to a great extent, democratic: an election that brought Nelson Mandela to power. Thus having a black president for the first time marks "a remarkable achievement" writes Guy Arnold, "especially in the light of the country's grim racial history,





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and South Africans of all races have a right to be proud of such a relatively peaceful transition from minority racial based rule to majority all-embracing rule.”¹⁵

Cheaper Than Roses opens with the main and only character, Betty Fourie, at an empty railway station, whose appearance, the playwright indicates, “should look white but the nuances and accents in her speech should have traces of being Coloured.”¹⁶ The mixed and complex emotions that the play shows are intended to bring forth the real problem and make the audience aware of the sever suffering of the characters or, more generally, the generations she represents. Mahomed intends to make his audience thoroughly examine such debatable issues that leave them with a free space of options available. The questions thought is whether or not the tone of the play will remain the same or whether the play comes to an end that matches its opening scene. The heroine and the only one voice of the play, Betty Fourie, has herself suffered and paid the invaluable price due to her reclassification as white. A chief conflict that had led her to losing her identity or rather her real identity. As a result of the apartheid, Fourie changed her racial classification to white. As a coloured woman, she scarified her original identity, in other words, her family, her hometown, and her childhood memories, for the sake of the unknown future that is assumed to be good and prosperous. Decades later, she returns to her hometown to discover whether it was worth sacrificing.

“I went home and thought about this for a while. The position of the Coloured woman in our transitional society fascinated me because here we were dealing with a woman whose status continues to remain undefined. Here we were dealing with a woman who wasn't just presenting a gender problem, but also a race problem, and who continued to remain an unknown element in both cases.”¹⁷

Fourie has chosen to side with the minority in South Africa; the privilege she seeks, though, is that the black majority is enormously controlled by the apparatus of apartheid and thus the political and economic power are in the hands of the white minority.¹⁸

The individual decision *Cheaper than Roses* is of great value. The racial transition is not a matter of an unpretentious decision one can make and go on in his life. It is a profound issue that will have a great permanent impact. Fourie feels displaced and estranged in her hometown in her original birthplace. Obviously, her real identity rejects her since she already favored the reclassification assuming that such a decision will



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bring her to a better life. Time is not, as the play undoubtedly demonstrates, capable of eradicating the consequences of such transitions because they are deeply rooted and have permanent impact on the individual social, political and economic levels. The essence of truths, and what they actually represent or indicate, is individually investigated: “[T]ruth is like death, man. Nobody can run away from it.”¹⁹ Fourie strives to compromise her harsh choice by trying to keep her past and present on the same board.

Mahomed argues that “[T]he tragedy of apartheid is that it didn’t just physically separate us from each other but that it attempted to destroy our value system and our humanity.”²⁰ Fourie's identity is lost between her past and present, and, thus, establishing new identity is one of the difficult tasks. She is forced to live with her harsh reality and accept the consequences of her own decision.

Waiting at the train station for two to three hours gives Fourie a space and sufficient time to express her dissatisfaction with what she finds in her hometown as well as her family. During the course of the play she never stops blaming all things around her as if she has come from heaven. Thus, she hates waiting for the train for hours that seems to be, according to her, useless. She assimilates her waiting in Bedaarsdrop "like watching your whole life crawl past you. And dammit...nothing’s changed on this blerrie station."²¹ Nevertheless, what Fourie clearly notices that has changed in her hometown is "the number of graves in the blerrie cemetery."²² She clearly refers to the toll of deaths due to different reasons; apartheid, one would undoubtedly assume, is on the top of the causes. Moreover, she measures how many years have gone while she was inside and outside her hometown; yet all remain the same. No significant change has ever taken place "I gave this town eighteen years of my childhood and twelve years later...still nothing has blerrie changed. The same old house...Look out of the window and you see these blerrie rusting railway lines."²³

The deserted train station Fourie is waiting at may symbolize the theme that the past rejects receiving or welcoming the present; in other words, the present rejects welcoming Fourie. For her, the problem lies within the perspective that “nothing has changed”, whereas in fact it is she who could not fit the environment that she has already rejected and left. The anger, anxiety and bitterness are the main characteristics one can predict from the first appearance of Fourie's character which actually become very noticeable from the opening lines of the play. Mahomed has a sturdy credence in the power of theatre presenting the authentic face of brutality



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as he states, "I will always believe that theatre has a formidable role to play in the humanizing of our brutalized society."²⁴ The train that does not arrive on time is an excuse for Fourie to criticize her hometown condition. To be on time is a matter of order and law. Thus having such a persistent problem indicates that no significant progress has ever taken place. The only one thing that is on time is "the blerrie gravy train[s]."²⁵ She sarcastically refers to her father's death.

The railway station is considered the road that leads to the other side of Apartheid. Thus, Fourie clearly indicates that she has been, since her childhood, wondering where will the end of the railway lead?

"When we were children, Boeta Paul and I used to play on these same railway lines. We always wanted to know where the railway lines ended. We would walk along them trying to find out where they would lead to. We didn't know whether we should walk this way to the African locations or that way to the white dorpies. Well, that's what happened to our lives... I found my way to the white dorpies."²⁶

Mandela's poster at the train station allows Fourie to openly address her past, present and future conditions. All facts are laid bare to the audience; the poster, metaphorically speaking, becomes the second major character in the play. One more vital question needs to be addressed here. Is the existence of the poster brings forth a positive or negative motivations? Another important issue that is worth investigating is the extent Mandela's poster represents Fourie's father as far as the hope and love are concerned. A very important fact that in this context must be kept in mind Nelson Mandela coming to power in 1994, which marked a new democratic age and democratic transition, was not "peaceful nor magic". Thus William Finnegan writes:

"It was, in truth, a long, ragged, violent process, quite unabated by the supernatural. More than twenty thousand lives were lost to political violence in the last decade of white rule alone. And things would have been far worse if the two main contestants for power—the apartheid regime and the African National Congress, the liberation movement led by Mandela—had decided to fight it out rather than negotiate the transition to democracy."²⁷

Fourie addresses Nelson Mandela through a giant African National Congress election poster by stating: 'Yah, Mr Mandela, not all of us wanted to be saints and martyrs. . . We all dealt with apartheid in our own blerrie ways. If I looked white and if I got the opportunity to be reclassified . . . I took it!' ²⁸ Later she confides, 'Yah, Mr, Mandela, race



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reclassification, it's a moerse big word! If you made it, you got a passport to opportunity, but then of course you had to pay the price. I did and I'm still recovering from the debt.²⁹ Obviously, she indicates the long journey that she has suffered from as a result for taking up the brutal system. Thorn quotes Mandela's "the long walk" as an attempt to show that it is not quite easy to open a new chapter in life without considering how hard it is to forget or to put behind what the system had affected.³⁰ In his book *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, William Beinart argues that both the past and present, even with Mandela as the moral leader, have the same obstacles, sufferings and the pessimistic view of society. Indeed, all corrections that have been carried out by the new government still have no effective steps that would bring the radical change South Africans have been looking for and kept dreaming of. Accordingly, Beinart, discussing the puzzled condition of society, argues that "It was a society that seemed to Evince simultaneously an optimistic openness and frankness, but increasingly reflected pessimism in swift changes of public mood."³¹

The campaign poster has become an inspirational element for Fourie to address her main concerns overtly. In addition, whether or not she is addressing herself or the old campaign poster, all what she is trying to do is to show the audience certain aspects that they may be terrified to face or tackle overtly. The best way to face reality is to dig deep the issues and bring them to the surface so there would be no space for hiding the truth or, to be more specific, the ills in society. Thus, the scourges of 'poverty, disease, ignorance and backwardness' have been well addressed and paid much attention to by Mandela as he is fully aware that they chain the South Africans and prevent them from exercising their emancipation. Thus, he substitutes them with the themes of 'peace, stability, democracy, human rights, co-operation and development'.³²

Fourie does not only feel the presence of the poster but also thinks that it is "watching [her] like a blerrie eagle." That is why she asks the signboard to "take [its] blerrie eyes off [her]."³³ The magical and effective power of the signboard on Fourie comes from the fact that such power resembles the old South Africa power. A confrontation that would result, one would predict, the heroine loose.

It seems that Fourie has chosen to address the signboard as if it were a real character; this is the only means that confiscates what she has lost so far. A fact that can be supported by her query "I don't know why I'm telling you all this..."; she seems to have reasonable justifications in doing so. However she overtly explains, regardless whether or not we





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must believe such allegations, "I suppose it's good to get it off my blerrie chest."³⁴ Moreover, the magical power of the presence of the signboard leaves her with no way out resisting what needs to be exploded off her chest.

It must be noted that had not Mandela's poster at the train station, we would not have deeply investigated and comprehended Fourie's troubles. Mahomed, accordingly, gives his only character no other option available. She clearly indicates that "[he is] hunting [her]", and she knows him forever.³⁵ Consequently, she tries to establish a rather close relationship with the poster "[c]an I call you Nelson? All right Nelson."³⁶ The open dialogue with the poster allows Fourie to overtly express her opinion concerning the Apartheid issue. Her perspectives are worth to be taken into consideration because they do represent real and practical experiences that are all far away from slogans or mottos. Thus regardless whether they are realistic or logical, they still have certain layers that are not far from the truth. She, in fact, expresses her belief in the exchanges she has with the poster. However, this does not necessarily indicate that she is in a full agreement. She, with no doubt, argues, "[Y]ah, Mr. Mandela, and now you are trying to change it all but I suppose you don't know enough about the problems of making Coloured offspring."³⁷ Thus, she obliges the audience to hear her voice as she declares "You just never know what they're going to look like. Ask me... I know... when I went to Joburg."³⁸

Fourie's speeches, motivated by her family's rejection, are intended to bring forth a real conversation between the old and new identity; between past and present and between the presumed white and coloured. Her tirade about her new hometown brings the audience into realizing the effects of the new democracy. One of the vital questions that the play asks through Betty is how one would react when he/she is treated as an outsider in his/her real birthplace? Fourie just returns home to find out, according to her perspectives, that her family "is a bunch of blerrie hypocrites."³⁹ It is worth noting that her family that resembles the past that Fourie has already left behind is not different from the present. In addition, portraying her family as such is a clear attempt for not regretting her decision. One may think that her negative judgment is based on the fact that the family is "crying for the whole man that he's dead."⁴⁰ A thorough examination of her behavior indicates that Fourie has lost her moral values that she substituted for the new race. She is unable now to appreciate what her family mourns. That is why she despises her family action. Although Fourie tries hard to show that she is not interested in what her family has been doing, she cannot deny that she has longed to



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get in touch. Thus she comments on the invitation "They wanted to invite me but why they didn't is maar just another long story but anyway...life has to go on whether you are invited or not."⁴¹

Coming back to see her dying father and to pay him her last goodbye brings the heroine face to face with her estranged family members who made her realize that she doesn't belong to them because of what she left behind. This helps her to thoroughly examine and judge the consequences of her decision. Mahomed clearly states that, "Apartheid has not only brutalized [Fourie] but also her family and all of us who have to be witness to their pain."⁴²

Fourie's reactions in her father's deathbed scene explain that the character does really lament the big loss. Also the regret of her irresponsible decision of giving up her identity is well shown as her family orders her not to come back. *Cheaper than Roses* delivers some harsh truths that we must face and accept. As Fourie comes to realize the fact that it is not all about materialistic issues, human values are always on the top and one must not abandon "I can still remember him say (*mimicking her father*) "I don't care if we don't have bread in this house so long as I have a white carnation in the lapel of my brown corduroy jacket on Sundays."⁴³ Thus she can't forget her father's will that they mustn't forget to put white carnations in his coffin.⁴⁴ For this purpose, she puts in his hand the white carnation, which he drops as he takes his last breath. Again, there is an important emphasis on the humanistic values on both sides of the two generations.

"TantSennah says that before my father became ill, he too would sit here at the railway station with a basket full of white carnations and every time a young girl stepped off the train, he would walk up to her and give her a carnation. (Holds the wreath.) I don't understand... I really don't understand! If my father did that because he was longing for me then why did he lose his memory before I came home? And why didn't he recognize my voice when I was reading from the Bible? Or, why didn't he call out my name when he called out the names of all his offsprings?"⁴⁵

Forgivingness, or, as many references refer to, 'reconciliation', is one of the aspects that the play puts a great emphasis on. However, it is worth noting that there are no limits or borders which, in fact, control such





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process. Thus, Mandela has emphasized the role of forgiveness in South Africa. Nevertheless, it must be noted, to forgive is not the same as to forget. Accordingly, Mandela's public call "Let bygones be bygones" manufactures, Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley argue "a new myth: that the past no longer matters. But it does. It may be forgiven, but it can't be forgotten." ⁴⁶ Pieter Duvenage, adopting the same principle of forgiveness, sees that the new democratic phase in South Africa requires "issues of memory, forgetfulness and history to enter the public sphere."⁴⁷ Fourie still has a sense of hope concerning her family. Thus remembering her mother in the context of forgiveness is worth noting: "I suppose...that's why he even dropped the white carnation that I put in his hand before he died. I suppose it's only mammie from this family who still holds her hand out to me from heaven."⁴⁸ It seems full healing from the long years of apartheid requires a considerable time so that people would eradicate the negative and black images of that system. In his Book *South Africa Reborn*, Heather Deegan, quoting M. Ramphel's assertion, writes, "[S]outh Africa has many psychological and social wounds to heal after decades of apartheid."⁴⁹ Thus Fourie is trying to figure out how to locate herself with her false or masquerading identity in the post-apartheid South Africa. She tries to reconcile with her coloured past; however, her attempts end with less success. "The play deals with", Mahomed declares, "somebody who feels neither white nor black but is lost in between;"⁵⁰

Commitment to religion is another theme the death scene explores. Thus in his deathbed, Fourie's father is surrounded by all the family members who react emotionally and spiritually to the chapters the priest reads from the Bible. Her father likes the chapter that is being read "because he always said Coloured people were like Adam and Eve." ⁵¹ However, Fourie still thinks that her family members are hypocrites. Contradicting herself, she reads from her Bible but silently; an action that forces everyone around her, including the priest, to look at her with a strange guise. Moreover, the priest, accordingly, stops reading and leaves the room. Fourie sheds some light on a very important theme, which is a materialistic one. She knows that her family cries are not an everlasting one as they their cries today will result in "scratching into his wallet...like two dogs fighting over a blerrie bone." ⁵²

There are obviously many questions that Fourie cannot find an answer for, or she prefers not to address. Sometimes, certain questions are better to be left unanswered. Thus, she cannot tell why she has telegram about



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her father's serious condition folded in her Bible. She "suppose[s] some things in life is most best left unanswered" ⁵³ It seems that she tries to avoid confronting harsh truths from both her past and present, and she wants to give her back to all realities so that she has not to undergo an internal torture that increases her pain. This does not necessarily mean that she is satisfied with what she has done, but it seems that there is no way she could escape her reality. Mahomed, commenting on the effects of apartheid on men and women, argues that "I'm quite interested in what apartheid has done to men and women on an individual level as much as what it has done to them at a societal level."⁵⁴

In fact, the deathbed scene brings Fourie face to face with her real essence; in other words, the scene unveils the uncontaminated Fourie. Thus, in her new life as a white girl she has faced death scenes many times which has just become part of her everyday life routine. "I've seen many people die in my job so I don't get all emotional about it but somehow it was different when I came back here after all these blerrie years." ⁵⁵Confronting her father in his deathbed is different from what she has seen for years away from home. The playwright here is trying to put forth the human side that has been totally lost. Fourie, although how hard she tries, cannot hide her true feelings. However, she is having a tough moment confronting the strange look of the members of her family. They give her an "eye to eye" look; the same that Mandela's poster is giving her. ⁵⁶Thus, she feels unable to decide what to do, whether or not to stay longer. But it seems that the white side of her heart takes the decision to stay. It is worth mentioning in this respect what encourages her to stay is also attributed to, in Fourie's words, "my mother by correspondence" a reference to TantSennah. ⁵⁷ However, it must be noted that without her good morals such a good bond would have not hugely affected her decision to stay. Fourie tries to convince the audience that it's all due to Sennah's warm feelings as the latter gives her a hug and ask her to sit next to her "dying father's bedside." ⁵⁸

Fourie's genuine love for her father is one of the main reasons that encourages her to return back to her home town. Moreover, a thorough investigation reveals that it is all due to the morals that her father adopts. "I haven't come back for any of[family members]... I've come back to see my father before he dies." ⁵⁹ Consequently, she scorns how her family does not appreciate her visit for which she "took unpaid leave from [her] hospital job." ⁶⁰



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Mandela formed the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which aims at identifying and assigning women's rights as South African society is multilayered and many rights are lost due to such complicated diversity. The RDP co-coordinator, Mmatshilo Motsei, explains how difficult the task is as she writes " The one thing that we are facing as women is that we do not even know what our rights are. She adds, "We can have the best policies, the best gender structure in government, but as long as women are not organised they will get nowhere." ⁶¹ What makes things worse is the colour issue. White, coloured and black women are treated differently. Robert Harvey states that "[T]he blacks were to be treated as foreigners in their own country." ⁶² Thus, Fourie chooses to find a way to be treated in better conditions.

Approaching Mandela image to address it closely, Fourie sums up her lesson that she has learned from the experience of being away from home "[E]xperience is the best teacher so you'll understand what I mean when I say that twelve years is a long and painful time to be away from home and then to come back..."⁶³ The playwright intends to keep emphasizing the moral values that have not been lost. Fourie expresses her anguish and pain, as obviously the years are not quite enough to eradicate such morals. It is worth noting that, Finnegan argues, "The racial lines are drawn differently in South Africa than they are anywhere else in the world."⁶⁴ The radical transition that took place in South Africa is a milestone that history examines with a great respect. Going from apartheid system to a democracy has brought many changes to all aspects of life. Nevertheless, no serious and fruitful changes can be taken unless national reconciliation is well established and adhered. This has put a heavy burden on the government and people's shoulders all alike.

Fourie challenges Mandela that she has been already advocated the concept of 'Reconstruction and Development' even before this term came in Mandela's vocabulary. Accordingly, she decides to reconstruct and develop herself by reclassifying her race into white. She indicates that she had no other option. Therefore, she be either "poor Coloured or you could grow up to be a miserable Coloured." ⁶⁵ Thus, she decides to take the risk and packs her suitcase to go to the other side. The experience of taking up another identity was not an easy decision or, most importantly, an easy test to pass "it wasn't easy passing the test of changing from Betty Fourie, the Coloured girl from Bedaarsdorp to Betty Fourie the Coloured meisie from Joburg."⁶⁶ William Beinart, states "[C]lassification under the Population Registration Act caused enormous confusion and misery, with many uncertain cases and split families." ⁶⁷ Fourie disdainfully sheds light on the procedures that one must undergo to pass the reclassification



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test. The experience is humiliating, but she believes, it's worth it. She explains

The "government lady put a pencil through my hair...like this...the pencil fell right through and the government lady smiled. Then, with a ruler she measured my nostrils and my lips...she wrote down all the measurements. "⁶⁸ Robert Harvey comments on one of the tests as he states, "[T]he 'pencil in the hair' test was established as one rule of thumb. If the pencil stayed, the hair was fuzzy and the person classified as black or coloured. If it fell out, the person had straight hair, and was white. Families were split up as a result of these arbitrary classifications."⁶⁹ Moreover, Fourie has to take off her clothes for examination so that to make sure that her skin is "light enough for [her] to pass as a white."⁷⁰ She expresses her pain as she sees the test not is not easier than the school's test. Ironically, she does not complain about the test itself, rather she reveals her concern with the result of the test. With all that in mind, she refers to the "rows of people waiting to do the test."⁷¹

Fourie intends to radically change her past as the shoemaker's daughter; she wants to be away from decency, and not to remain like a stray dog waiting for somebody to throw the bone to. The future she is looking for is a bright one that would fulfill her dreams and bring her a nice life. With her dreams, she believes that she has been asking for what she deserves. It is worth noting that Fourie confesses that her dreams and potentials are all inspired by what she has got from her parents. There are many characteristics she has been endowed with which all came from them.

Passing the humiliating test for Fourie is "a dream come true"; luckily, she states that her skin colour gives her the passport to 'the white world'. Race classification means the "passport to opportunity" and it resembles a "big word".⁷² However Fourie was fully aware, right from the time the social worker brought the ID book to her house, that there would be serious prices that must be paid on the top of which is losing her family. That's why she refers to her family reaction, realizing that their daughter is getting a new classified ID:

"[T]hat's what she told my father. He didn't say a word and he couldn't get cross with the social worker because in any way the welfare was supporting us from the time mammie died. Shame! Oom Gamied looked at Tant Sennah and then Tant Sennah walked out of the room with tears in her eyes. Boeta Freddy was about eleven years old at the time. He didn't really seem to understand the fuss. Boeta Paul sat one side trying to force a pencil through his popcorn hair. Later that evening, Tant Sennah and I were having





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coffee in the kitchen. Boeta Freddy was in the bath when he shouted to me"⁷³

Fourie was not only aware of the consequences and the prices that she had to pay to be reclassified but also painfully confesses that "all these blerrie problems in my life just because of a blerrie ID book. Betty Fourie, armoedige meisie van Bedaarsdorp who went through all this ...to be reclassified white...."⁷⁴

Fourie clearly explains the negative consequences of reclassification. Having a new life with all dreams in mind is not sufficient. There are, according to Fourie's experience with Philip, permanent negative impacts. Thus her relationship with Philip that last over than six months does not end as it was expected to be. Although he was so sweet, had a good work as a clerk, and one that could be considered very romantic, all of these facts do not result in or contribute to a successful marriage. The only reason that prevents her from accepting him as a husband is because "Phillip was a blerriehalfnaartjie...just like me...a blerrie reclassified Coloured." ⁷⁵ Fourie could not face Phillip with the truth that she is just like him as a reclassified coloured. What she fears is that the kids that they would have may unveil her secret "[I]magine getting married...and then have a baby that's got Boeta Paul's popcorn hair and Boeta Freddy dark skin...and then your whole blerrie secret is out of the bag."⁷⁶

One of the great principles, with regard to the recognition of ethnicity that Mandela advocates and stresses, is the emphasis on minority 'Coloureds and Indians'. Thus he declares "I, as a coloured man, am represented.... And an Indian must also be able to say: 'There is Kathrada—I am represented.' And the whites must say: 'There is Gerrit Viljoen—I have got representation". ⁷⁷ Fourie gets very close to the Mandela's image holding on her ID book. She just wonders if it is still worth applying for a new ID, and sheds some light on the concept of diversity of the South Africans.

I did it once so why not again? (*Kisses the ID book and throws it on to the railway tracks*) Goodbye ID...tomorrow I can apply for a new one.... One that says I'm just a South African and not a Coloured, White, African or an Indian. En ek BETTY FOURIE kanvir myself decide what I want to be..." ⁷⁸

Mahomed , through Fourie, intends to inform his audience about a story that is not unique in its theme "Yah Mr. Mandela, look at me. I feel blerrie. kalgat in front of you telling you my whole blerrie life story."⁷⁹ Nevertheless, he wants his audience to hear a voice (of a woman) which has been calling for a change. Fourie is set is an example of a



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woman who has chosen to follow the troublesome path because, for her, it is the only way forward " I say to myself...Betty Fourie, life goes forward and not backwards."⁸⁰ She rejects her coloured condition of growing and selling carnations like her mother. Thus "Betty Fourie is going to be white!" was her final decision that she would take and proceed accordingly no matter what the future is awaiting for her.⁸¹The new South African government works on upgrading the role of women (white, coloured and black) as they "want their voices to be heard and regard equal rights between women and men and the equitable sharing of responsibilities to be vital to the well-being of humanity."⁸²

Fourie, or rather the playwright, concludes the play with many lessons, which are both humanistic, in the first position, and materialistic as well. Fourie has reached a final decision after her visit to her family; life must go on no matter what are the prices for that, especially when it is all about women's condition in society. Even by the end of the play Mandela's spiritual effects on Fourie is inescapable; moreover, she appears to be more than comfortable with that. Thus, she addresses the poster with her final call:

Life waits for nobody and especially not for Betty Fourie. So, I'm going to walk on
and you Mr. Mandela, maybe we'll meet again in the next town under better conditions.
(She walks a few steps and then turns to look at the wreath. She walks back, picks it up
and throws it on to the railway tracks.) Bye bye Bedaarsdorp...the flowers are for you...
I would have bought you roses but times are tough and money is scarce...so I suppose
you'll understand...carnations are cheaper than roses.

In addition, she is not going to pursue her future without being affected by Mandela's presence. She, accordingly, decides to take from her hometown Mandela's picture. Thus the play was opened with Mandela as the dominant character of the new South Africa who brought different promises to society, and by the end of the play Fourie decides to keep him with her in her new journey as she "(*rips off the Mandela picture from the signboard, puts it into her suitcase and walks off quietly.*)"⁸³

Conclusion

Women's severe conditions in South Africa have attracted many male and female native playwrights' attention. However, Ismail Mahomed's name





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remains an innovative one due to the fact that he brings to the stage issues that make his audience keep thinking of, most importantly after they leave the theatre, the playwright's intentions and implications.

The apparently personal theme of *Cheaper Than Roses* reflects the political nature of the play. There is no way that the play escapes the political implications. However, the playwright has successfully covered these implications with the personal experiences making his solo character able to discuss her past, present and future all within the course of apartheid and post-apartheid epochs. Audiences are left with an open space to interpret the play and examine its multiple themes against their principles that they believe in. The great and permanent impact (the price) of apartheid on the social and public level are hard to be fully eradicated within few year, regardless of the huge trust South Africans put in their inspirational new leader. There are, Mahomed clearly investigates in his play, themes that are deeply rooted, and they require things other than time so that to get them changed.

Opportunities require sacrifices; however, these sacrifices have to be examined in advance or else serious consequences have to be paid. *Cheaper Than Roses* shows the audience these prices or rather the consequences, on both personal level as it is represented by Fourie, and the social level which is represented by her family. Thus losing an identity means losing generations.

It is worth noting that Ismail Mahomed does not intend to show the dark side of apartheid only, but he also warns his audience of the wearisome future that they have to be very aware of. The present, with all of its bright and promising facades, would be no different unless all of the South Africans in all respects open a very new chapter in their life.

Endnotes:

¹ Ismail Mahomed's plays have been performed in Germany, Denmark, England...etc.

² Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P.97

³ See Graver, David *Drama for A New South African*. P.154

⁴ Makana.wikifoundry.com., (2015). *Ismail Mohammed - Makana Media*

Wiki <http://makana.wikifoundry.com/page/Ismail+Mohammed>

⁵ Apartheid refers to the racial segregation or discrimination that was introduced by Malan led National Party in South Africa in 1948. This racist system was theorized by Dr. Henderik Verwoerd, and thus gave the white regime the power with which white, Coloured and Black were treated extremely



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unequal. This distinctive era of aberrations in the history of the twentieth century came to a halt in the 1990's. See Deegan, H. (1999). *South Africa reborn*. London: UCL Press; Smith, D. (1992). *The Apartheid city and beyond*. London: Routledge; and Arnold, G. (2000). *The new South Africa*.

Basingstoke: Macmillan.

⁶ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 99

⁷ Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 99

⁸ One-actor play or show that Muahmed writes are *Koebaai Mary Jane* and *Purdah*,

⁹ Graver, David. *Drama for a New South Africa*. P 8

¹⁰ See Graver, David. *Drama for a New South Africa*.

¹¹ Kruger, Loren. *The Drama Of South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print. 229

¹² Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 99

¹³ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 100

¹⁴ Reclassification can be divided into three categories white, black and coloured.

¹⁵ Arnold, Guy. (2000). *The New South Africa*. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd. P. 3

¹⁶ All references of Ismail Mahomed 's *Cheaper Than Roses* are cited from Mahomed , I. (1998). *Cheaper Than Roses*. In K. Perkins *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. This reference is cited from P.102. Thus I will refer to the page No. only for the next references.

¹⁷ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 100

¹⁸ Arnold, Guy. (2000). *The New South Africa*. Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd. P. 1

¹⁹ P 107

²⁰ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 101

²¹ P.107

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 100

²⁵ P.109

²⁶ P.111

²⁷ Finnegan, William. *Crossing The Line*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. Print. ix

²⁸ P 109.

²⁹ P 110.

³⁰ Thörn, H. (2006). *Anti-apartheid and the emergence of a global civil society*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England]: Palgrave Macmillan. P. xiv

³¹ Beinart, William. *Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print. P.328

³² Cited in Deegan, H. (1999). *South Africa reborn*. London: UCL Press. P.149

³³ P.103





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³⁴P.104

³⁵ P.107

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ P.104

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge.

⁴³ P.103

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ P.107

⁴⁵ P.111

⁴⁶Adam, Heribert, and KogilaMoodley. *The Opening ofthe Apartheid Mind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Print. p43

⁴⁷ Cited in Deegan, H. (1999). *South Africa reborn*. London: UCL Press. P.78

⁴⁸ P.107

⁴⁸ P.111

⁴⁹ Deegan, H. (1999). *South Africa reborn*. London: UCL Press. P.86

⁵⁰ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 97

⁵¹ P.103

⁵² P.107

⁵³ P.103

⁵⁴ Cited in Perkins, K. (1998). *Black South African women*. London: Routledge. P. 97

⁵⁵P.103

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸Ibid

⁵⁹Ibid

⁶⁰Ibid

⁶¹ Deegan, H. (1999). *South Africa reborn*. London: UCL Press. P.86

⁶² Harvey, Robert. *The Fall Of Apartheid*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001. Print. P.49

⁶³P. 107

⁶⁴Finnegan, William. *Crossing The Line*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. Print. P.8

⁶⁵P. 108

⁶⁶Ibid

⁶⁷ Beinart, William. *Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print. 149

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⁶⁸ Cheaper than 110

⁶⁹Harvey, Robert. *The Fall Of Apartheid*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001. Print. P.44

⁷⁰P. 110

⁷¹Ibid

⁷²Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴P. 111

⁷⁵P. 109

⁷⁶Ibid

⁷⁷Adam, Heribert, and KogilaMoodley. *The Opening Of The Apartheid Mind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Print. P68

⁷⁸P. 112

⁷⁹P. 109

⁸⁰Ibid

⁸¹Ibid

⁸² Cited in Deegan, H. (1999). *South Africa reborn*. London: UCL Press. P.83

⁸³P. 112

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