

RACE RELATIONS: A READING OF ANDRE BRINK'S *BEFORE I FORGET*

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Abstract:

The term 'race relations' deals with the relationship between the individuals of various races. Race relations are mainly found in colonial societies and South Africa is the best example of such society. Andre Brink is one of South Africa's most popular, luxuriant and globally well-appreciated authors. His fundamental thematic concern is the probing of the interdependence of the Black and White races beyond the embedded racial prejudices. The present paper intends to emphasize on the different facets of race relations as articulated in Andre Brink's novel, *Before I Forget*. The protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel is a seventy-eight year old South African writer, Chris Minnaar. The story of his life represents a story of his lifelong love relations with a number of women including short affairs, prolonged romance, a marriage, extremely passionate sexual encounters and gentle affections also. Brink has profoundly presented inter-racial as well as intra-racial relations such as, man-woman, master-slave, rich-poor, father-son, mother-son, political activists-public relations as well as relations between a black nanny and her master's child etc. These relations are profoundly depicted on the backdrop of national as well as international political upheaval.

Key words: race, race relations, prejudice, Andre Brink, *Before I Forget*, apartheid etc.

Although skin color has performed a decisive task in human relations for hundreds of years and though it has continually ordained power relations, the notion of 'race' is comparatively new one. It is a primeval tendency of mankind to consider his own race or blood is of higher quality than that of the fellow men. But, to accredit this conceit to hereditary biological properties is a comparatively new concept. Michael Banton observes that,

Race is a concept rooted in a particular culture and a particular period of history which brings with it suggestions about how these differences are to be explained. It leads itself to use in a variety of contexts and gets elaborated into a whole style or idiom of interpretation. (*Theories* 66)

The term 'race relations' deals with the relationship between the individuals of various races. Cambridge Dictionary gives a simple definition of race relations as 'the relationship between the members of different races.' ("Race relations") While Collins Dictionary defines the term as 'Race relations are the ways in which people of different races living together in the same community behave towards one another' ("Race relations"). Race relations are profoundly found in colonial societies and South Africa is the best example of such society. It has a variety of racial cultures. And as literature is the representation of social reality, it allows an author to apply a memorable imprint on soul of a particular person as well as of the whole community too. The South African novelists, white, black as well as colored, remarked the discriminative exercises in their nation. In South Africa apartheid was existed for about four decades and was based on law until 1990. By this law, Black races were not allowed to mix up with white races. Sexual relations, marriages amongst different races were regarded as illicit. In fifties and sixties the radical

authors like Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson, J. M. Coetzee and Andre Brink depicted this dilemma provoked from realistic pictures of South Africa. Andre Brink is one of South Africa's most popular, luxuriant and globally well-appreciated authors. His fundamental thematic concern is the probing of interdependence of the Black and White races beyond the embedded racial prejudices.

The present paper intends to emphasize on the different facets of race relations as articulated in Andre Brink's novel, *Before I Forget*. Also it will assess how ongoing national political activities leave impact on the development as well as degradation of these race relations. The protagonist as well as the narrator of the novel is a seventy-eight year old South African writer, Chris Minnaar. He has fallen into that gloomy self-questioning state of recollection, where all his former subjugations and relations with women have overhauled for a long time. He has lost whatever gift he had for writing. He meets Rachel on New Year's Eve. She becomes the great love of his life. His mother is more than hundred years old. So, he believes that his prior function is to take care of her. But, he finds himself captivated by Rachel and hence unable to take proper care of his mother. He is drawn into a close friendship with Rachel's husband, George. Their friendship unavoidably threatens this uncertain triangular relationship. Through this story, the story of his life is woven. The story resembles of a lifetime love stories which include short affairs, extended affairs, a marriage, extremely passionate sexual encounters and gentle affections also. There are various kinds of women such as Daphne, the troubled dancer, Bonnie, his father's secretary etc. They are from nearly all races. These women define and inform his life. As it is clear that the present book is Chris' final writing act of creative life, one can understand that the recollection of these many loves is an attempt to bring order to an otherwise chaotic situation. As Godfrey Meintjes rightly points out,

The narrator, Chris Minnaar ... prompted by the death of his lover, addresses the deceased in a set of notes that take stock of his life and his loves; in the process, the private experiences recounted reflect broad tracts of South African history. (Meintjes 83)

Brink has mainly focused on intra-racial as well as inter-racial man-woman relations in the novel. These relations are demonstrated by depicting the protagonist's relations with various women. There are more than twenty women in his life. All these women play an important role in his development as a true human being. We will discuss here some of the representative of them such as his mother, nanny, wife, Rachel, Driekie, Daphne, Merlene, Bonneie, Venessa etc. Chris Minnaar is in relationship with many women throughout his life. In the very beginning of the novel, he admits: 'THERE ARE TWO moments in the relationship with every woman I have known in my life, which have brought me closer to understanding ... what it means to be alive.' (Brink 4) He is in relationship with not only white but also black and colored women too. He meets a young married woman, Rachel. With the increasing meetings, he secretly falls in love with her. After his wife's death, he is well accompanied by Rachel. But after Rachel's death, Chris suffers from loneliness. He can't stop himself from writing down memories of Rachel. While writing down these memories, he unavoidably remembers other women in his life before Rachel. He thinks that his writing about Rachel connects him with the memories of all those other persons especially women who have marked his life.

While depicting his relations with women, the novelist has made us aware of his relations with his mother, with his nanny, as well as with his wife also. He has healthy relations with three of them. His mother is of plus hundred years old and she is in an old age home. He always goes to visit her, to take care of her. From his childhood, he used to share his every experience with her. Even he asks for her advice and help about girls. He decides to get married with Helena as she offers him security, predictability and companionship. Before his marriage with Helena and after her death also he needed these things as he admits, 'later in life I came to miss, dearly, the sense of a "home" to come back to.' (Brink 167)

Brink depicts relation between a black nanny and her master's child by depicting relation between Chris and Aia. Due to his mother's long illness, Chris is brought up by a black Nannie. She is their old

housekeeper. She sings rhymes and stories for him in her mother tongue, Xhosa. Chris used to call her old Aia. It is because of her, he becomes aware of black culture. It may be considered that his relation with Nannie becomes the foundation for his unbiased view towards other races. As the novel proceeds, it unfolds Chris' humanistic view towards other races, his political understanding as well as his anti-apartheid mentality. But the novelist has made him only to think on the current political status of South Africa as well as that of the World also. The characters are not allowed to take active participation in politics. We can understand that this is the fact in South Africa during apartheid. Even whites who are against apartheid, they cannot utter a single word because of State's oppressive policies.

Christopher Hope notes that, 'The traditional way of doing things in South Africa has been for public drama to obliterate private feeling. South Africans ... have always been frightened of feeling, and ashamed of intimacy.' ("Review") This is applicable to the mentality of one of the characters, Daphne. She is a dancer. Though a dancer, she can talk about a stunning range of subjects like: 'the ice ages of Europe, bisons in America, colonial exploitation in Africa; and unfailingly she would return to the political situation in the country and her acute sense of implication in it.' (Brink 21) Though she loves Chris, she always tries to maintain safe distance between them. When Chris insists her, she cannot stop herself and throws her into his arms. But later she is ashamed of her intimacy and punishes herself by dancing rigorously and throwing her own body in the thorny bushes in her garden while dancing. Chris is unable to judge her behavior and logic behind her thought. She used to wear a coarse knotted rope around her waist so tightly that it leaves marks of many colors on her soft skin. She admits to Chris that she wears the rope to keep herself aware of reality. She is very much disappointed with the Sharpeville incident. According to her:

Even if I can't change anything, I can keep myself from forgetting. I want to make sure that with every move of my body, on stage or off, I won't ever allow myself to ignore what is happening beyond my own little world. (Brink 23)

Here, Brink has depicted the unrest in the minds of people who are against apartheid and its oppressive policies. He maintains that political activities decide the nature of race relations on group level as well as they can affect race relations at individual level also.

Another incident concerned with Sharpeville massacre decides Chris' fate as an author. But with the development as an established author he starts losing his relations with his father, Marlene etc. Chris has been writing since he is twelve or thirteen. But it is Sharpeville massacre that pushed him into real act of writing. He starts writing a novel on Sharpeville in an exercise book, which is discovered by his father. He becomes very angry and throws the book on the desk. He orders Chris not to write such nonsense again. But Chris keeps writing secretly and his mother hides everything he produced in her stoking drawer. But the explosion of Sharpeville stirs him so deeply that he could no longer remain silent. And he publishes *A Time to Weep*, a novel on Sharpeville. At that time he is under the influence of a young woman named Marlene. The novel causes an unexpected protest and decides his future as an author. He writes the novel in Afrikaans but there is no hope of getting it publishes in Afrikaans. With the help of Merlene he translates the novel in English and publishes in England. After publication of the novel, Merlene leaves him because she thinks that the book took him away from him. It is Sharpeville massacre that brings two individuals together but it is prejudice that departs them forever. It is a presentation of typical biased mentality of White races. Regarding this we can consider Ghorpade's observation. She states: 'Racial relations have almost invariably been conducted in terms of conflict.' (Ghorpade 24)

Relations between Chris and his father demonstrate tense relations between a father and his son, which focus on tensions in the familial relations. The increasing distance between family relations is a result of apartheid as well as disapproval of apartheid by younger generations. Bonnie Pieterse is the only colored person in Chris' father's office. She is the only person who held in a significant regard to have her surname acknowledged. She has been working there for at least five years. Initially she had been hired as a

'tea girl' (Brink 84). Because of her considerable skills as a typist and a stenographer, she is promoted rapidly. Even she gets her promotion as a secretary. The novelist gives two reasons for her promotion which are considerably true in the South African scenario. One reason is that it is cheaper to hire a colored woman than hiring a white woman and the other is her incredible beauty. Chris' father likes showing her off. He thinks that she reflects well on his generosity as a good Christian and an elite businessman. Even though she knows her place, she has a quiet, radiant self-assurance. On the day of Van Riebeeck Festival there is 'a series of historical presentations and tableaux' (Brink 85). Chris' father gives the day off to the whole office staff, including Bonnie. So that they could watch those presentations; as well as 'pick up some edifying lessons from history' (Brink 85). They all go to watch the presentations. Bonnie, Gerald and Solly are already present there in their 'Sunday best clothes' (Brink 85). The rest of 'their people' (Brink 85) were also present at the occasion. The presentation unfolds the history of the entry of a White man on the African Continent. These presentations

made of the blatant display of how the chosen people of God had, by divine providence, come to rule this land ... van Riebeeck's arrival at the Cape of Good Hope and the first encounter between his handful of colonizers in their resplendent finery straight from Rembrandt's Night Watch and the story band of cringing, beaming Hottentots, soon to be lured into abject submission by the fumes of arrack and tobacco (Brink 85).

Biased whites have always celebrated their whiteness, power and reign and consider other races barbaric and criminals. Chris finds this such humiliating that he gets up and walks away. His father gets angry with him and later asks him the reason of leaving the performance. Initially Chris makes excuses but when his father insists he could not stop himself from explaining him the real reason. He tells him that he can't imagine such a humiliating presentation before black and colored people. He asserts:

The point is, when van Riebeeck's landing was staged, I suddenly thought of how it must look to them to see their ancestors portrayed like that. Like many dogs crawling on their stomachs, begging for a crust of bread or a chicken bone. (Brink 87)

On the contrary his father sees no humiliation in it, rather he feels ashamed of his son who talks such nonsense. He thinks about the festival as 'a day of thanking God for having brought us through three hundred years of strife and turmoil to such a glorious conclusion' (Brink 87). Because of totally opposite views towards racial differences, the relation between a father and his son is distorted. On the contrary, Chris' relation with his mother and his beloved, Rachel, become strong because of their inclusive nature.

The novelist demonstrates the horror and tension in master-slave relations with reference to relations between Bella and Hottentots. Chris remembers one incident which occurred at his uncle Johnny's orchard. His cousin Driekie and her four sisters have gone for a walk to the farm dam. They removed their clothes before they enter the muddy water. But, when they step out of the water and go to lie on the bank to dry their bodies in the sun, Driekie hears a rustling in the nearby bushes. She discovers a young colored boy, David eying on them. He is the son of one of the laborers at their farm. Their mother, Bella, becomes very angry when she comes to know about the incident in the evening. She exclaims in rage, 'A *Hotnot!* Spying on *my* daughters! You could all have been raped.' (Brink 45) Aunt Bella considers nonwhite races as barbaric and offensive; while her daughters, the next generation, has humanistic views towards them. Her daughters have a quite different view about him. They try to calm down their mother. Driekie tells her that:

He ran away the moment I saw him, Ma. And we all know him. He's always fetching and carrying for us. And sometimes we even help him in the kitchen with his school work. He's actually quite clever. And very polite. (Brink 46)

But Aunt Bella is not in a mood to listen anything. She summons them to follow her and goes to the laborers' cottages. She shouts at David's parents to come out and angrily tells them in brief about the incident. She orders his father and another two men to bring David to the barn. They drag him inside the old

wine-barrel and torn his clothes. They tie his wrists and ankles with thongs hanging from a hook in the corner. 'Tears and snot were streaming from him.' (Brink 47) Then Bella orders them to flog him with a hose pipe and a halter. Through the words of Driekie, Brink describes the horror in the master-slave relations. Driekie tells:

It just went on and on, it didn't stop. In the beginning David screamed at every blow, but later he just whimpered, he had no voice any more. It wasn't like crying, it was like an animal. And still they went on and on and on. (Brink 47)

They only stop when Driekie cries out 'You're killing him!' (Brink 47) She burst into tears while telling the story to Chris. Brink demonstrates that while the older generations are not ready to change the rigid traditional relations amongst races, the new generations of both races have developed inter-racial relations from humanistic views.

The relations between political activists and people are depicted by describing George's experiences at work. George, Rachel's husband, is a photographer. He has to travel due to his career. He visits various places to capture pictures of different themes. Chris asks him that why he needs to go in search of dark and terrible places. George replies, 'Only because it is necessary for *someone* to report: ... The unrecorded life.' (Brink 38) He thinks that it is his responsibility to record events and it is people's responsibility to pay attention. Here, George represents Brink, who himself considers that it is his responsibility as a writer to record the events and present them before the nation in an unbiased way. Further, George describes the most dramatic incident of his career. He thinks that the toughest moment of all was in the late eighties. He recalls one moment when he is on the way back from a funeral in Soweto. In Orlando, he stops for a moment to reload his camera and suddenly his car is surrounded by a crowd of demonstrators on their way from a gathering. They had been attacked by police before merely a half an hour, where 'several youths had been killed.' (Brink 38) So they are in a bad mood. They surrounded George from all sides and start rocking his car. He is so frightened that he thinks, 'I'm not going to get out of this place alive.' (Brink 38) But he always puts a secret weapon in his breast pocket. It is 'a shot taken by a colleague, of Winnie Mandela and me [George]. Her arm round my shoulders. And She'd inscribed it. *To George Lombard, with fond wishes, Winnie*' (Brink 39). He rolls down window of his car and flashes the photo at the crowd. After watching the photo 'the rage turned into jubilation.' (Brink 39) And George rescues safely. He thankfully remembers: 'There was only one person in the world could save me that day, and that was mama Winnie. Her name was magic.' (Brink 39) Here, Brink maintains that some whites are equally active in the black liberation movement but because of their color, they are not trusted by nonwhites and their relations are determined by political activists like Mandela. Christopher Hope, in a review published in *The Guardian*, opines that 'Brink had a very good idea when he coupled Minnaar's sentimental life with seminal moments of South African history, from the Sharpeville massacre to the Soweto uprising, to the liberation of Mandela.' ("Review")

Brink makes a statement on distances between different races when he describes one incident at Rachel's studio. There are various sculptures made by Rachel in her studio. One of them is a small, unfinished sculpture that catches Chris' attention. It is extremely smooth and finely completed sculpture by her. But Chris finds something haunting in the incompleteness of it. He describes the beauty of it:

Two little figurines united in a sexual embrace, no more than fifteen centimeters tall ... though even its frankness there was an endearing gentleness about it, distancing, as if the sex were only incidental to what was really happening between the two ... Strange impression of distance between them: however closely they were joined together, the eloquent spaces that separated his body and hers, obtruded somehow, drawing attention to their separateness, injecting a feeling of ineffable poignancy into the whole relationship. (Brink 94)

Here, Sculpture represents human beings, especially man and woman from different races who are in love of each other but are not allowed to maintain relation because of racial differences, because of prejudices

and of apartheid system. Though they try to minimize this racial distance between them at individual level they are forced to depart by the social disparities. By depicting the beauty and sensuality in the sculpture, Brink has raised a banner of revolt against injustices of apartheid.

Chris enjoys some relations without bothering about racial differences but few of them are certainly affected by the racial disparities. For instance, his relations with Isolde and a colored woman, Venessa comes to an end because of politics. When the ANC enters into an alliance with the old National Party, Venessa is very much disappointed with these recent political activities. She expresses her rage when she asserts: 'We thought Mandela would give us back the dignity we once had. But we didn't realize that he wouldn't be allowed to have the final word. And now we're too white for the new fat cats, and we're still out in the wind.' (Brink 147) His intimacy with Venessa and other black and colored women suggests that even though he is a White writer, Chris is equally worried about the position of nonwhites. Brink has expressed the dilemma of nonwhites through Venessa's words.

In short, Chris, the protagonist of the novel is in relation with many women of many races of many colors. His intra-racial as well as inter-racial love affairs do resolve nothing, but it pressurizes him to ask himself some disconcerting questions. By depicting these relations between Chris and other women, Brink throws light on inter-racial as well as intra-racial relations such as, man-woman, master-slave, rich-poor, father-son, mother-son, political activists-public relations as well as relations between a black nanny and her master's child etc. These relations are profoundly depicted on the backdrop of national as well as international political upheaval. Brink demonstrates that how ongoing national political activities leave impact on the development as well as degradation of these race relations. He proposes the essentiality of collaborative transformations in the race relations from infelicitous to friendly and felicitous relations in South African scenario.

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