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Muselmann: Incarceration and the mobilised body in Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *The Island*

Chitra Jayathilake

University of Keele, UK & University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the status of incarceration, and prisoners' rights or the lack thereof, as represented in South African dramatist Athol Fugard's Anglophone play-text, *The Island* (1993) – co-authored by John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and premiered in 1973 – with a view to shedding light on incarceration and biopolitical violence. The play provides significant theatrical testimonies of political prisoners and incarceration by demonstrating corporeal and psychological dehumanisation processes in prisons during the apartheid era in South Africa. Despite the scholarly attention on the play, it is scarcely read through Foucault's and Agamben's biopolitical lenses, coupled with Nelson Mandela's prison testimonies, and this is where this reading departs from the existing scholarship. This article argues that South African black prisoners were in a prolonged period of oppression and offensive restrictions, and in a sphere outside the normal law, thus in a status of Muselmann. How the incarcerated body is mobilised as the focal point of struggle towards apartheid laws, and how it is linked to decolonisation is also examined. Prisoners attempt to regain their freedom and agency irrespective of their living circumstances – a figurative resistance to biopolitical violence. The article offers a contribution to the critical vocabulary of the play whilst interrogating the praxis of modern biopolitics.

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[W]e decided to explore the subject of Robben Island. To start off with, we put a blanket on the ground. We stood on it and began to move with Athol watching. We began to halve the blanket, halve the blanket, until there was just enough space for four feet to stand. We realised the restriction of space, and there it was – confinement. And there it was – prison. (John Kani)¹

The spectacle of corporeal punishment that continued to operate into the 18th century, as Michel Foucault (1995) explains in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, gave way in the 19th century to a dis-embodied practice in prisons; reformist approaches to crime and punishment, focused on the individual, became more pervasive. Giorgio Agamben, however, argues that political prisoners of the 20th century, in modern political contexts, are put in a status of camps, not just incarcerated in prisons; they are in a status of Muselmann and hold bare life (2002). Muselmann, a derogatory term used to refer to the

captives of the Nazi concentration camps of the Second World War, suffered from starvation and exhaustion, becoming resigned to their death, making them unresponsive to their environment. Agamben asserts that the Muselmann 'marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman' (2002: 55). Such prisoners are living-dead human beings – to use Achille Mbembe's (2003) diction – a status which cannot be comprehended as either dead or alive. The concept of Muselmann embodies absolute coercion over human beings through imprisonment. South African dramatist Athol Fugard's Anglo-phone play-text (1993),² *The Island* – co-authored by John Kani and Winston Ntshona, premiered in 1973 and set in a South African prison – provides significant theatrical testimonies of political prisoners and incarceration by demonstrating corporeal and psychological dehumanisation processes in prisons during the apartheid era in South Africa (see Walder 1993; Wertheim 2000). Inherent in the historical fact of apartheid regulations is the dimension of biopolitics – the employment of diverse stratagems in subjugating and regulating populations (Foucault 2003). This article examines, the status of incarceration, and prisoners' rights or the lack thereof, as represented in *The Island*, with a view to shedding light on incarceration and biopolitical violence.

Despite Foucault's explanation that explicit torture was avoided with the advent of prisons, he highlights that incarceration encompasses corporeal pain through 'forced labour ... and rationing of food, sexual exploitation, corporal punishment [and] solitary confinement' (1995: 15–6). Once prisoners are restricted in the consumption of food or their social company through solitary confinement, the rights of their physical body are affected. Foucault defines this as 'a trace of torture ... enveloped increasingly, by the non-corporeal nature of the penal system' (1995: 16). This 'enveloped' torture is the invisible corporal punishment in prisons. Foucault argues, however, that prisons should follow 'the gentle way in punishment' (1995: 104–27), and the 'ideal punishment would be transparent to the crime that it punishes' (1995: 104–5): in order to do justice to people who have been 'wronged' by the crime, the punishment must be considered as 'retribution' (1995: 109). Accordingly, the punishment should act as a way of retaliating, in a positive way. Foucault adds that the punishment and correction must 'effect a transformation of the individual as a whole – of his body and of his habit by the daily work that he is forced to perform, of his mind and his will by the spiritual attention that is paid to him' (1995: 125). Implicit is that imprisonment should create positive effects on individuals, transforming and enhancing them psychologically, spiritually and physically. Nonetheless, whether imprisonment is transparent to the crime and results in creating a society with individuals is unsupported by evidence in reality, especially in contemporary political contexts.

In this respect, Agamben argues that what is witnessed in the contemporary society is 'modern biopolitics: the politics of the great totalitarian' (1998: 119). This can be well-conceptualised through his concept of bare life, which is theorised primarily through the distinction between *zoé* and *bios* – a semantic divide of life identified by the Greeks: *zoé* – the simple element of living common to all living beings such as animals, men or God, and *bios* – the way of living proper to an individual or a group of people. Thus, bare life is 'a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion' (Agamben 1998: 105). When biological life and political power are inseparable, as Agamben contends, a corporeal space is created. In this regard, Agamben's suggestion is, for instance, that political

prisoners of the 20th century are placed outside the rule of penal and prison law, in camps, as opposed to just incarcerated in prisons. Agamben writes that the camp is: 'the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life' (1998: 171). He states that 'while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is... martial law and the state of siege' (1998: 20). Agamben further contends that in contemporary politics, a state of exception is employed extensively as a 'dominant paradigm' in maintaining political sovereignty (2005: 2). His contention is that the term 'full powers (*pleins pouvoirs*)' which alludes to the 'the expansion of the powers of the government', especially the power 'to issue decrees having the force of law', characterises the state of exception (2005: 5) – 'a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept' (2005: 4). The state of exception is closely related to 'civil war, insurrection, and resistance' (Agamben 2005: 2). Thus, Agamben adds that the state of exception 'constitutes rather a kenomatic state, an emptiness of law' (2005: 6); it is increasingly used 'as a technique of government rather than an exceptional measure, but it also lets its own nature as the constitutive paradigm of the juridical order come to light' (2005: 6–7). By referring to locations of detention camps, John Lechte and Saul Newman contend '[t]o further emphasise this exclusion and policy of the exception – as if the barbed wire, prison-like walls and surveillance cameras were not enough – some of these camps are located offshore' (2013: 15). This politics of exclusion and exception were systematically allied in apartheid South Africa as well. For instance, Robben Island prison was located on the island which is about seven kilometres west of Bloubergstrand, Cape Town. The praxis of exclusion of prisoners through the locality is salient in this case. Incarceration rendered black prisoners invisible in society, the location compounded their invisibility because even the prison buildings were inaccessible and distanced from largely populated areas.

To enquire how biopolitics finds its engagement with postcolonial concerns, as Russell West-Pavlov (2015) states, although biopolitics in postcolonial nations has gone unnoticed, with Mbembe as an exception, the way national governments' policing is exercised over the body has meant that power, incarceration, surveillance and control have been popular topics within postcolonial literature, with a focus on biopolitics. Thus there is much scope for employing biopolitics to make postcolonial understanding more relevant to politics (Samaddar 2013). Colonialism produces specific modes of biopolitics that sustain in settler states (Morgensen 2011) and the focus on biopolitics as a new kind of 'technology of power', different from disciplinary power, marks a theoretical departure in postcolonial studies' (Peters 2015: 95). Hence, while Foucault's concepts hold a deep resonance for biopolitical violence materialised in society, because they are core aspects in socio-political contexts including decolonisation processes, Agamben, is more interested in how contemporary biopolitics descends into tyranny and brutality – and the treatment of biological bodies as less than human entities, as objects. *The Island* with its backdrop in a prison which represents the prison on Robben Island in South Africa is a literary paradigm for both the creation of bare life exercised through surveillance and the state of exception, and prisoners' fortitude epitomised figuratively: the article proceeds to contend that the play is a literary testimony of biopolitical praxis.

Legal and penal system in South Africa during the apartheid era

The legal and penal system in South Africa, which was shaped by racism even before apartheid, was expanded since the early 1900s: the Prisons and Reformatories Act of 1911 was replaced in 1959 as the Prisons Act – the basis of South African prison law in the apartheid era (see Smith 1992; Buntman 2003). The Prisons Act reiterated and increased the policies of segregation mainly in three ways – pass laws, laws related to black liquor production and consumption, and laws of political opponents. From the 1960s, rates of incarceration became high (Human Rights Watch 1994: x). Media coverage and external monitoring of prisons were controlled,³ while corporal punishment and the secrecy about prisons became rigid. Since 1963, the police were permitted to detain anyone for questioning without charge. Until 1990 South Africa topped the world in judicial executions (Mihálik 1991). Despite revisions in 1959 and 1978, they were not adhered to in practice and prison conditions were decided by a security section affiliated to the security police of the country (Smith 1992; Buntman 2003).

Prisoners' evidence is imperative to explore prison brutality. Testimony, however, 'contains a lacuna', because the true witnesses are those who are dead, those who 'touched bottom ... the drowned' (Agamben 2002: 33–4). His explanation that testimonies come from the 'obscure' people – people who are 'invisible' and who greatly comprise the camp inhabitants (2002: 12–3) is logical – those who are not dead only bear witness to a part of the story. However, prisoners who undergo brutal violence similar to camp occupants' experiences also provide much evidence of visible or invisible punishment. Political prisoners and Serpent Players⁴ from apartheid history are apposite cases in point for prison violence. Black women were also subject to brutality and oppression: a testimony cited by Diana Russell states '[my] period stopped until July 1986. The doctor said that I had blockage in my fallopian tube because I had been kicked there repeatedly' (1989: 53). Winnie Mandela, exploring the unhygienic and pathetic prison conditions, reveals that '[b]oth the blankets and the mats tell many tales each time I fold them up. Perhaps the mat underneath has the worst story to tell for about a quarter of this mat is full of blood' (2013: 10).

One of the most dishonourable and tragic examples related to theatre was the death of Mthuli Shezi⁵ – author of the play *Shanti* – who 'was pushed in front of an oncoming train at the Germiston railway station during a scuffle with Germiston railway policemen'; the play was banned and its producers were arrested under the Terrorism Act (Orkin 1991: 1). Fugard (1983) also recounts the accounts of police violence: when staged in South Africa four years after the premiere, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (Fugard 1993a) was banned. John Kani and Winston Ntshona were 'imprisoned briefly before an international outcry secured their release' (Walder 1993: xxix). Having apprehended the actors of *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act* (1972), 'the policeman would reveal his intention to arrest them for a contravention of the Act'; they would be allowed to give statements yet anything written would be taken as evidences against them (Fugard 1983: 193). Welcome Duru, arrested upon the premiere of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* for acting Azdak's role, had to experience rigorous imprisonment for three years on Robben Island (Fugard 1983: 234). Robben Island is also significant because it was the 'laboratory of major political experiment' (Dingake 1987: 203), and a space of resistance towards prison violence (Fugard 1983; Mandela 1995).

The abysmal prison and the South African Muselmann in *The Island*

Set in a South African prison which represents the prison on Robben Island, *The Island* is centred on two political prisoners and cellmates – Winston and John (using the actors' own names). 'Armed and inspired by stories of actual experience, Fugard and his actors improvised the daily routine of prison life as they activated the strategies for withstanding the physical and psychological press of torturous confinement' (Prece 2008: 226). Moreover, the imprisonment in *The Island*, according to Mandela's description, represents the lowest category of prison conditions – D group.⁶ The play demonstrates how John and Winston spend their prison life during the day time, at futile physical labour, and in the night, stimulating their experiences. The focus of the time at night, however, is given to their rehearsal and performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which is to be presented at an imaginary concert in their prison cell.

Throughout *The Island*, only John and Winston appear on-stage, although there are references to the invisible prison guard, Hodoshe. John represents the organised resistance of educated blacks who looked for non-violent protests directed at the white economy, the constituted forms of indirect struggles against the apartheid system. Winston symbolises the majority who assumed that physical attacks and sabotage were the only ways to earn freedom. Paul Prece states that Hodoshe 'is as invisible as the undisplayed prison bars, by convention. The fourth and looming allegorical character in the drama is South Africa, dressed as apartheid' (2008: 228). It is the prisoners who (*mis*)name this invisible guard 'Hodoshe', a Xhosa word for a carrion fly that lays its eggs in dead bodies. The word 'Hodoshe' carries double negative connotations; this parasite is totally contingent upon others and is a 'dirty' parasite as it lives off from the dead bodies. By naming the dis-embodied guard Hodoshe, the prisoners demonstrate the vicious and harmful nature of the guard; it represents how the Afrikaner rulers nourish themselves on the human and non-human resources of South Africa through black populations' labour and property. In short, Hodoshe characterises both prison brutality and the callousness of apartheid South Africa.

It is interesting to note here that the initial title of *The Island* is, as Dennis Walder (1993: 194) and Wumi Raji (2005: 139) state, *Die Hodoshe Span*, and as Prece reminds us, *Hodoshe Span* (2008: 241). Both these titles focus on Hodoshe, but the imperative 'Die' indicates a strong rejection of his authority. However, the play is renamed as *The Island* (Prece 2008: 241) due to the Prisons Act of 1959, which considered public discussion of the prison system under penalty of imprisonment. Renaming helps to camouflage the direct references to Hodoshe and Robben Island, and the direct references to Sophocles' *Antigone* also obscure the play's criticism on the apartheid legal system.

Yet, the first set of stage directions of the play gives a clear, concise picture of the abysmal conditions of the prison and these prisoners' ruthless experiences – 'torturous confinement'. In the prison cell, 'Blankets and sleeping-mats – the prisoners sleep on the floor – are neatly folded. In one corner are a bucket of water and two tin mugs' (Fugard 1993: 195). As articulated figuratively in the epigraph, incarceration resembles here absolute confinement, marginalisation and restriction, giving only 'space for four feet to stand'. The display of the psychological and physical damage inflicted on the two prisoners, and the endless, brutal exploitation of prisoners' labour is also evident:

an image of back-breaking and grotesquely futile labour. Each in turn fills a wheelbarrow and then with great effort pushes it to where the other man is digging, and empties it. As a result, the piles of sand never diminish. Their labour is interminable. ... they are handcuffed together and shackled at the anklets. ... get beaten ... Winston receiving a bad blow to the eye and John spraining an ankle. ... After being searched, they lurch into their cell. (Fugard 1993: 195)

Tin mugs given to them as drinking vessels imply the derogatory living conditions offered to them while the deprivation of their hair symbolises the extermination of their identity: black people's distinctive hair is an important signifier of their identity, thus, shaven heads represent the erasure of identity – the abolition of their inherited black individuality. Winston and John in 'short trousers' provides theatrical evidence to Mandela's claim that '[a]partheid regulations extended even to clothing. ... Short trousers for Africans were meant to remind us that we were "boys"' (1995: 455). Short trousers also signify emasculation, rendering these prisoners less 'male' – the new menial identity imposed on them by white rulers. Thus, they were psychologically deprived of their manly strength and bravery traditionally ascribed to men. Besides, the exploitation of their labour is endless as the pile of sand is never reduced: the labour is non-productive and is a punitive end in itself, symbolised by the inexhaustible supply of sand and the continuity of their work. The dehumanisation process through interminable labour is further brutalised as they are made torsos – three-legged and handcuffed. Further, the two contrasting sounds heard are the prisoners' 'grunts' and the 'hum' and the 'whistle' of the prison guard, Hodoshe: grunts symbolise the prisoners' adversity and wretchedness, whereas hum and whistle signify the guard's power, privilege and pleasure. All these instances of the corporeal and mental torture show how these prisoners are treated inhumanely as machines and not as human beings. In short, their dignity is denied, and their labour is exploited by Hodoshe's inhumane actions, are positioned as bare life.

Both visible and invisible corporeal punishment, and psychological pain encountered by Winston and John recall Agamben's concepts of the Muselmann and modern biopolitics (2002). The Muselmann is 'a limit figure of a special kind, in which not only categories such as dignity and respect but even the very idea of an ethical limit lose their meaning' (Agamben 2002: 63). However, unlike the Muselmann who 'no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual' (Amery 1980: 9 cited Agamben 2002: 41), Winston and John remain sensitive to, and cognisant of, the dehumanisation processes.

What needs to be questioned further in this respect is the degree to which the body is implicated in this regime of prison punishment. This echoes Foucault's (1995) acknowledgement that modern incarceration includes corporal punishment and that imprisonment helps the social invisibility of the punishment. *The Island* makes the invisible corporeal punishment visible; for instance, through the injuries on the two prisoners, or the 'bad blow' to Winston's eye and John's sprain on his ankle. Winston and John are more susceptible to the enclosed torture – the invisible corporeal punishment as represented through their physical movement subject to the siren and the whistle. Although Foucault states that the embodied spectacle of punishment of the early modern period has given way to 'sobriety in punishment' (1995: 14–5), the seriousness of imprisonment is obvious from its representation throughout the play. The display of torture may have been removed from social consumption by the development of prisons, but *The Island*

presents a spectacle of prisoners' corporeal and psychological pain to its audience and readers.

Through the announcement about the reduction of John's ten years imprisonment and the extension of Winston's incarceration to life imprisonment, the play problematises the legal system, recalling Agamben's concepts of the state of exception. What merits observation here is the unequal nature of the sentences announced. Both are political prisoners in the same cell, and work in the same quarry: the play does not indicate that one prisoner is 'less criminal' than the other. Nevertheless, John's imprisonment is 'reduced from ten years to three' (Fugard 1993: 213) while Winston has to remain in prison with no hope of release, subject to Hodoshe's surveillance. The authorities have raised only John's status, according to Mandela's description of Robben Island prisoners, 'from D to C' (1995: 473), by considering the appeal he has made. How the judgement is made is not known except for the arbitrary decision: John repeats Prinsloo's words to Winston – 'you are very lucky. Your lawyers have been working on your case. The sentence has been reduced from ten years, to three' (Fugard 1993: 213). The judgement is made and pronounced by the authorities, leaving the convicted silenced; this symbolises how the segregation decisions were taken during the apartheid era.

Winston's devastation is caused because if John is not around, Winston will not be able to 'share his pains and test his humanity on a daily basis' (Raji 2005: 141). Moreover, Winston is distressed because of the unequal judgement: he realises that he is left alone, while John can count days to experience life. He is cognisant of this discrimination which heightens his bare life. That is why he prefers 'bloody Death' to 'Life' [life imprisonment] (Fugard 1993: 196). He articulates his resentment and contempt, and about his vulnerability:

JOHN: Why am I here? I'm jealous of your freedom, John. I also want to count. God also gave me ten fingers, but what do I count? My life? How do I count it, John? One ... one ... another day comes ... one ... Help me, John! ... Another day ... one ... one ... Help me brother! ... one ... (Fugard 1993: 221)

Winston's enquiry, 'My life', resonates both with his own life (prior to imprisonment) and his life imprisonment: his life has already been victimised by apartheid rulers as a martyr for black people's struggle. Despite their reputation and life at risk by proceeding with the action of freedom, it is only Winston who cannot count. In spite of his inherited right to count, as represented through his ten fingers, he is disabled by the circumstances. First, it suggests he is not accounted or worth in the apartheid system: both his inability to determine the date of his release, and the realisation that he is worthless simply because of his black skin, make him desperate. Second, counting emphasises humanity against animality, because the human hand symbolises the rationality of human beings: Winston's inability to count is symbolic of the dehumanisation process of incarceration. The suggestion that imprisonment should result in prisoners' positive transformation is turned upside down here because Winston's status as a human is symbolically transformed to that of an animal. Through Hodoshe's surveillance, commands and prison treatment, the prisoners' dignity is disparaged; identity is re-construed; labour is exploited and manhood is suppressed. This brutality is exercised through diverse means of corporeal and psychological disenfranchisement such as prison uniforms and laborious work in the quarry.

What also emerges from Winston's desolation is an understanding of the reality and a need to be optimistic. Raji writes that Winston 'has gathered himself together ... he has reconciled with his fate' (2005: 141). Yet, it is not a mere acceptance of his fate – or the establishment of a relationship with his destiny: it is his realisation of the truth which gives him a sense of positivity: '[o]thers will come in here, John, count, go, and I'll forget them. Still more will come ... then one day, it will all be over' (Fugard 1993: 221). Mandela explains that one of the first attempts of a political prisoner to be dignified is 'learning exactly what one must do to survive' (1995: 463). Survival is not the need to gain material conveniences, such as food or sanitary conveniences. He writes that their 'survival dependent on understanding what the authorities were attempting to do to us, and sharing that understanding with each other' (1995: 463). John's optimism for freedom resonates with Mandela's words – the challenge for every political prisoner is to 'emerge from prison undiminished' (1995: 463).

'Undiminished' prisoners

By using inborn physical and vocal power, the two prisoners attempt to regain their physical and mental strength, which function as a mode of resilience and resistance to prison violence. Upon the two prisoners' return to the prison cell in the night, their engagement in a dialogue about their involvements, their simulations of imaginary experiences, and enactment of dramas function as an autopsy of prison brutality and a means of consolation.

The pejorative status already imposed on black men by addressing them as boys is doubled in prisons as the prisoners are made to cry like babies. This is explicit through John's confession – even though he is a 'man', he would have broken down in tears as a 'baby' had Hodoshe forced them to work five minutes more with wheelbarrows (Fugard 1993: 197). His articulation – '[t]his morning when he said: "You two! The beach!" ... I thought, Okay, so it's my turn to empty the sea into a hole' (Fugard 1993: 197) – adds bitter humour to the play when he refers to the ridiculous absurdity in emptying the sea. As Raji (2005: 141) asserts, Hodoshe's harsh orders and regulations can be considered as a metonymy of the apartheid laws in South Africa. This questions whether these kinds of absurd processes in prison, as Foucault states, 'effect a transformation'.

Besides, taking turns each day, after returning to their cell, they recount stories such as going to a movie, making imaginary telephone calls and preparing for the prison concert. It is through these jovial but bitter imaginary encounters between cell mates that the prisoners find life amidst abysmal prison conditions. Gordon states that 'inherited kinaesthetic sense of African storytelling and tribal dance forms' are transformed into 'diction and a gestural poetry' in the play (2012: 382). For instance, their imaginary visit to a 'bioscope' – "'Fastest Gun in the West" with Glenn Ford' and 'whip[ping] out a six-shooter and guns down a few bad-men' (Fugard 1993: 204) – carries direct reference to the film, *Fastest Gun Alive* (1956) starring Glenn Ford. This indicates how they are in touch with the world outside, and how they make fun out of labour exploitation. It is also interesting to note their use of the word bioscope, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a term chiefly used in South Africa to refer to cinema. What is significant is the link

between South African language and western art, and the prisoners' knowledge and usage of it.

John's enactment of reading a parody of a news bulletin and weather forecast – a jovial experience to them – also entails two-fold significance:

Black Domination was chased by White Domination. Black Domination lost its shoes and collected a few bruises. Black Domination will run barefoot to the quarry tomorrow. Conditions locally remain unchanged – thunderstorms with the possibility of cold showers and rain. Elsewhere, fine and warm! (Fugard 1993: 196)

One of the defining features of human beings and their growth in life is their bipedal posture. The loss of shoes – a way to stand on their feet comfortably – and running 'barefoot' signify the deprivation of human rights to black people. 'Black Domination' signifying the prisoners, and 'White Domination' representing Hodoshe rightly reflect their prison conditions. This problematises Foucault's contention that an ideal punishment should be 'transparent to the crime that it punishes'. What these simulations epitomise is the horrible prison conditions and prisoners' attempts of recovery from the corporeal and non-corporeal pain experienced during the day.

A significant phase of their means of resilience and consolidation is their rehearsals of *Antigone* to culminate in the prison concert. After labouring under the sun, John and Winston's trials of the play in the prison cell – Winston rehearses the role of young Antigone who defies the laws of the state for the sake of her conscience and John, representing the educated black organisations, rehearses the role of Creon, the king who is desperate to hold onto power – test their friendship and demonstrate their resilience in their degraded living circumstances. Realising that prisoners should emerge from, to use Mandela's diction, prison 'undiminished', they perform, upon rehearsals, their play at the imaginary prison concert.

Nonetheless, initially, Winston has been reluctantly rehearsing the role of Antigone, because he has been under the impression that John 'wants a woman in the cell' (Fugard 1993: 211). Winston has also been arguing with John:

I am not doing your Antigone I would rather run the whole day for Hodoshe. At least I know where I stand with him. All he wants is to make me a 'boy' ... not a bloody woman (Fugard 1993: 208).

Despite Winston's disinclination to play a woman's role, what is interesting to note here is his alacrity to play the female role with a correct perception upon the announcement of the sentence – the reduction of John's imprisonment and the extension of Winston's sentence: the brutal prison conditions coupled with Winston's understanding of the injustice provide stimuli for him to perform Antigone's role enthusiastically. It is with the self-realisation and optimism emerging through his own desperation that Winston is encouraged to rehearse Antigone's role in *Antigone*.

'The trial and punishment of Antigone': Resistance to the 'state of siege'

Diverse political effects, irrespective of the locality and time, are drawn through *Antigone*, Greek tragedy from 5 BC. In the South African context, *Antigone* explicitly resonates with the apartheid political struggle Mandela and other inmates engaged with in reality. Being

incarcerated on Robben Island, Mandela recalls that he drew strength and courage from performance, even performing *Antigone*. This is evident through his reference to their amateur drama society in prison. Mandela writes:

I performed in only a few dramas, I had one memorable role: that of Creon, the king of Thebes, in Sophocles' *Antigone*. I had read some of the classic Greek plays in prison, and found them enormously elevating. What I took out of them was that character was measured by facing up to difficult situations and that a hero was a man who would not break down even under the most trying circumstances. (1995: 540)

The symbolic comparison drawn by Mandela between *Antigone* and the South African political struggle against the apartheid monopoly is significant here. During the apartheid era, the African National Congress (ANC) became proactive in showing resistance to apartheid regulations imposed by the National Party (NP):⁷ it was engaged in protest movements and non-violent activities, claiming freedom for black people. Mandela also states '[i]t was Antigone who symbolized our struggle; she was, in her own way, a freedom fighter, for she defied the law on the ground that it was unjust' (1995: 541). '[A]t the time of the play's premiere, [South African] history's Antigone was Nelson Mandela' (Gordon 2012: 389). Although Mandela's emphasis is on heroism and elevation in the prison performances of *Antigone*, what is highlighted is the role of Antigone as the representation of their protest for liberty in the 20th century in South Africa.

Fugard brings *Antigone* to the fore as a metadrama – the prisoners' performance of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the play-within-the play named 'The trial and punishment of Antigone'. The significance of metatheatre for *The Island* has been extensively explored. While drawing on elements from other cultures, the metatheatre 'foregrounds the relationship between the real and the fictive' (Weyenberg 2008: 127), and makes 'a location from which it is possible to escape the authoritative gaze of apartheid's representatives' (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996: 251). As Walder argues, Sophocles' play is used to show how political prisoners 'articulate a meaning for their suffering through another kind of dream' (1993: 15). The 'dream' here means Antigone's claims for the rights for an honourable burial of her brother. Yet, this dream is converted, as Gordon states, in line with 'modern liberationist tradition of interpretation' (2012: 390). Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins also argue that when canonical texts are rewritten, it helps to deconstruct the canon's authority and power represented in texts: rewriting those helps in 'interrogating the cultural legacy of imperialism' (1996: 16). Similarly, the play is also positioned as a narrative of 'writing-back' (Garuba 2001: 71) – the rewriting of canonical discourses as counter-discourses and as modes of resistance. In this respect, issues such as colonialism and political marginalisation are deconstructed and come to the fore. It is specifically useful in demonstrating apartheid prison injustice in camouflage, especially because, any public discussion of the prison system was prohibited by the Prison Act (see Hutchison 2004; Ross 2008). In Raji's words, *The Island* extends the original play's theme to 'accommodate the context of the South African struggle against racial segregation' (2005: 149). In this sense, as Walder asserts, it 'transcends itself, as it transcends the immediate circumstances of its making, and creates suggestive links with other times and places, other situations of tyranny' (1993: 57). By taking a canonical play based on Greek mythology as the base for *The Island*, as Garuba argues, the play is rewritten but it 'inscribes their own meanings within the text' (2001: 71). Metatheatrical techniques also help demonstrating

psychological and physical dehumanisation in prisons whilst critiquing the white domination on black people. Whilst acknowledging and extending these observations, this article proceeds to contend that *The Island* is rephrased and modified by incorporating apartheid law and political imprisonment of the 20th century to represent modern biopolitics and the state of exception in society. 'The trial and punishment of Antigone' stresses the figurative resistance against such lawlessness.

The metadrama is presented both to the imagined audience of warders and prisoners, and to the actual audience in the theatre. At the beginning of the metadrama, John addresses the audience in the theatre assuming them as the audience at the prison concert and announces:

[c]aptain Prinsloo, Hodoshe, Warders, ... and Gentlemen! Two brothers of the House of Labdacus found themselves on opposite sides in battle, the one defending the State, the other attacking it. They both died on the battlefield. King Creon, Head of the State, ... [Antigone] was caught and arrested. That is why tonight the Hodoshe span, Cell Forty-two, presents for your entertainment: 'The Trial and Punishment of Antigone'. (1993: 223)⁸

John's claim, still appearing as the prisoner – that Antigone attempted to secure a respectable burial for her brother Polynices, even though he was pronounced a traitor, and the law forbids even mourning for him, on pain of death – has obvious references to the Theban socio-political context of the tragedy, especially through the mention of names such as Labdacus and Creon. The context, with phrases such as 'Hodoshe Span', also resonates with the horrible life-style of the two political prisoners who lay their 'head[s] on the block for others' for the apartheid struggle. Thus, John's introduction reminds the audience in the theatre both of the Greek tragedy and of the current political conditions in the country; his appearance as the prisoner is a challenge to the white administrators and the audience.

What is highly significant, however, is John's (as Creon) definition of law, which suggests dual meanings echoing Falstaff's definition on honour;⁹ law is just a word which upholds nothing, but it is a tool of protection for people:

The law! Yes. The law. A three-lettered word, and how many times haven't you glibly used it, never bothering to ask yourselves, 'What, then is the law?' ... The law states or maintains nothing, good people. The law defends! The law is no more or less than a shield in your faithful servant's hand to protect YOU! But even as a shield would be useless in one hand, to defend, without a sword in the other, to strike ... so too the law has its edge. The penalty! ... The shield has defended. Now the sword must strike! Bring in the accused. (Fugard 1993: 224)

John's prominence given to the people, through 'YOU' is important. Although *The Island* was workshopped without a printed copy in 'clandestine performances to black audiences' (Dorney & Gray 2013: 86), and its 'origin [was] in acting exercises' (Wertheim 2000: 88), it is commonly recorded that *The Island* was first produced with the title *Die Hodoshe Span* in The Space, a fringe theatre located in Cape Town, South Africa in July 1973, and 'followed in December of the same year by another production, at the Royal Court Theatre, London' (Dorney & Gray 2013). However, when the play was performed frequently in South Africa in the apartheid era, after its premieres, the audience usually comprised white people because apartheid laws strictly restricted black people's creative participation, and segregation laws were applied even to the theatre audience (see Hutcherson 2004; Ross 2008). In such contexts, the referent 'YOU' signifies white, not black

people. What is implicit then is that the shield of law is to protect the white people, and it becomes powerful with its 'edge', when penalties are identified.

Agamben states:

if the essence of the law – of every law – is the trial, if all right (and morality that is contaminated by it) is only tribunal right, then execution and transgression, innocence and guilt, obedience and disobedience all become indistinct and lose their importance. (2002: 18–9)

If so, he adds '[j]udgement is in itself the end and this, it has been said, constitutes its mystery, the mystery of the trial' (Agamben 2002: 19). What is visible in the above court case in *The Island* is that law is practised in order to pass judgements without concerning about truth. Creon's interest is to pass the judgement, to materialise Antigone's 'execution', without noting the justice of 'transgression'. Evidently, after being imprisoned, they were also subjected to, to use Agamben's (2005) diction, a 'state of exception' in which law is mere judgement divorced from justice. Agamben asserts 'law is not directed toward the establishment of justice. Nor is it directed toward the verification of truth. Law is solely directed toward judgement, independent of truth and justice' (2002: 18).

Thus, Creon's trial scene demonstrates the 'mystery' of the trial, while Creon is shown as a puppet of this mystery trial; in Gordon's words, 'John's speech as Creon is a parodic version of the typical solecism used to justify the detention of people such as those found guilty at the infamous Rivonia Trial in 1964' (2012: 394).¹⁰ The comparison of Creon's trial scene with the Rivonia Trial drives home the argument. John's (as Creon) attempt is to provide a rationale for judicial decisions. As the metadrama resonates with South African apartheid politics, John's (as Creon) argument is to justify the apartheid political decision.

Nevertheless, Winston's (as Antigone) counter-argument is a verbal display of the power in manifesting rules and regulations for the state:

WINSTON: Who made the law forbidding the burial of my brother?

JOHN: The State

WINSTON: Who is the State?

JOHN: As King I am its manifest symbol.

WINSTON: So you made the law.

JOHN: Yes, for the State. (Fugard 1993: 225)

Metatheatrical symbolises 'John's attempt to assert the meaning of resistance' (Gordon 2012: 386). It is true that it is John's idea to perform *Antigone* at the imaginary prison concert, and it is John who teaches Winston the words of their metadrama. However, the 'meaning of resistance' is strongly articulated through Winston's (as Antigone) actions and voice. John's (as prisoner) attempt is materialised through Winston. Thus, the metadrama performs a symbolic resistance against the apartheid system and helps to restore to visibility and enshrine in process the justice needed for black individuals.

In that sense, the final dialogue of the metatheatrical is more significant in confronting the lawlessness, and is worth quoting in detail:

JOHN: [*again addressing the audience*]. You have heard all the relevant facts. Needless now to call the state witnesses who would testify beyond reasonable doubt that the accused is guilty. ... There was a law. The law was broken. The law stipulated its penalty. My hands are tied. Take her from where she stands, straight to the Island! There wall her up in a cell for life, with enough food to acquit ourselves of the taint of her blood.

WINSTON: [*to the audience*]. Brother and Sisters of the Land! I go now on my last journey. I must leave the light of day forever, for the Island, strange and cold, to be lost between life and death. So, to my grave, my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death.

[Tearing off his wig and confronting the audience as Winston, not Antigone.]

Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home!

Time waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honoured those things to which honour belongs. (Fugard 1993: 227)

A parallel is constructed here between the cavern where Antigone is imprisoned and then buried alive, and the Island where Winston (as Antigone) is cast aside to experience bare life or the status of the *Muselmann*. This extract is also pivotal as it draws another analogy: similar to Winston as Antigone, Winston as a prisoner (being sentenced to life imprisonment) is to lead a life between life and death. As Gordon claims there is no clue that Antigone may 'actually be wrong in her defiance of Creon; as played by Winston, she can only be viewed as a victim of state oppression, whilst in performance it is virtually impossible to respond sympathetically to John's portrayal of Creon' (2012: 390). *The Island* is a 'ritual enactment of political martyrdom' and 'a ceremony in honor' all South African political prisoners like Mandela who 'share the mythical fate of Antigone' (Gordon 2012: 393). Moreover, Winston's resistance, demonstrated through his argument on justice with John (as Creon), and his final claim – 'My Land! My Home!', and articulated by 'tearing off' his wig (used to appear as Antigone), surpasses the aim of honour. As Raji also stresses, the play is 'an act of open defiance, an assertion of human dignity, and an unequivocal affirmation of the inherent nobility of humanity' (2005: 140). The play extends its representation of political execution and ceremonial 'honor' to a position of insubordination.

Indirect contribution to decolonisation

Colonialism has construed referents for the colonised bodies such as barbarity, inadequacy and subordination (see for example Said 1995; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2002; Boehmer 2005; and McLeod 2010). In postcolonial theatre, the body of the colonised is recouped and the prejudiced stereotypical view of the colonised body is revolutionised (Innes 2007; Gordon 2012). In *The Island*, Hodoshe through his strict observation objectifies John and Winston in the quarry; they are interpellated by the ideology of the colonising power, both before their imprisonment and whilst being incarcerated. The prisoners are always under the command of 'hay boy', and subject to fixed identities such as 'stupid'. Yet, whilst performing the canonical play, the two prisoners recuperate their power and identity. As Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) show, when a black prisoner appears in a role of a classic tragedy, traditionally played by significant players, it helps deconstruct the binary opposition that white people are superior whilst black people are inferior: it becomes politicised resistance towards the white rulers. In this context, both John and Winston, who are beaten, exploited and considered to be disposable and *Muselmann* by the prison guard, represent political coercion as they perform two royal characters as Creon and Antigone. Thus the play helps construct an identity for black South Africans independent of the imposed colonial perspectives. This deconstruction contributes to the development of the play as a postcolonial drama, in displaying resistance against apartheid laws. This article proceeds to examine Fugard's interest in deconstructing the canonical play to address South African political concerns harmed by white colonisers,

and how it indirectly refers to the nation-building process of South Africa. How the play also sheds light on its postcolonial nature in general as it further shows resistance against supremacy.

John, being in his prison robe, not as a character, addresses the guard using the word, Hodoshe, in a pejorative manner. Stage directions also note:

[t]he two men convert their cell-area into a stage for the prison concert. Their blankets are hung to provide a makeshift backdrop behind which Winston disappears with their props. John comes forward and addresses the audience. He is not yet in his Creon costume. (Fugard 1993: 223)

It challenges the power of the guard, and it reverses the power balance. This indicates the symbolic resistance as the incarcerated bodies publicly criticise the powerful guard at the concert (by that time, the audience knows that two prisoners use this word to refer to the prison guard).

Winston, whose role gives a different rebellious identity to him, challenging the audience at the prison concert, is also prominent in this respect as he plays the role of a heroine who defies the law and challenges the rulers. The role Winston plays as Antigone – daughter of Oedipus – helps in recovering his identity. He enhances his power through his voice, through his argument with Creon:

[y]ou are only a man Creon. Even as there are laws made by men, so too there are others that come from God. He watches my soul for a transgression even as your spies hide in the bush at night to see who is transgressing your laws. (Fugard 1993: 226)

This extract explicitly challenges Creon and his laws as Antigone articulates her defiance stating that Creon's law is man-made, not imposed by the Supreme Being who has created and ruled the universe. Winston as Antigone also pronounces:

[y]our threat is nothing to me, Creon. But if I had let my mother's son, a Son of the Land, lie there as food for the carrion fly, Hodoshe, my soul would never have known peace. Do you understand anything of what I am saying Creon? (Fugard 1993: 226)

Although Antigone openly addresses Creon here, there are references to the invisible guard, challenging his coercion. Hence, the sovereignty of Creon's law is degraded; this is a challenge against Creon's mode of surveillance. Antigone stresses that while Creon's policing secretly watches for any break of the rules, God waits for a transgression of the man-made law. The gaze from both modes of watching is directed towards transgression. Antigone's argument is that western justice, represented through Creon, is under the scrutiny of human justice.

Moreover, Foucault affirms that the major effect of the Panopticon is 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even it is discontinuous in its action' (1995: 201). For the observer, visibility confirms the power to coerce, whereas for the observed, visibility is subjection as those observed are always under surveillance (Foucault 1995; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2007). Implicitly, when the observed are under invisible surveillance, they become more subject to the power of the observed. In this respect, the permanency of the surveillance in the prison of *The Island* is employed through the invisible guard, not through an automatic function mode. It is noticed in *The Island*, that despite Hodoshe's corporeal absence, he represents

the sole vantage point of observation while maintaining constant vigil over these two incarcerated bodies. Although the coercion is invisible and dis-embodied, often represented through whistles and humming, it is pervasive and punitive: the prisoners are physically and psychologically dehumanised.

Nonetheless, As Gilbert and Tompkins state, '[t]he play presents the prison panopticon which ostensibly defines the prisoners as those who are always watched' (1996: 251). It also enables the prisoners to challenge the gaze of the guard; the dominant gaze is here fractured by the prisoners as the guard has to simultaneously gaze upon the two players and two prisoners on-stage (Gilbert & Tompkins 1996). As Astrid Weyenberg also shows 'the viewers' authoritarian gaze, surveilling the stage in ways analogous to Hodoshe's gaze of the prison, is subverted, and the audience members are placed in the position of fellow prisoners' (2008: 127). They 'succeed in retrieving a sense of agency, transforming act into action' (Weyenberg 2008: 127), and the metadrama helps them create a displacement of authority and empower the status of the prisoners. Weyenberg adds that the audience, rather than observing an account of suffering, is 'involved in an experience of suffering' (2008: 127). Ruptured gaze symbolically damages the commanding gaze of the apartheid system in South Africa. John and Winston remain 'unrepentant', as they continue to struggle; 'Winston remains defiant' hoping that the apartheid system would 'crumble' (Raji 2005: 142). Although the resistance towards Hodoshe's gaze is figurative as it is expressed through their metadrama, it becomes literal to a certain extent as it makes the audience share the prisoners' pain. The political significance of *The Island* is related to the performance contexts of the play. Moreover, *The Island* was performed by Fugard, casting two black people, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, when apartheid politics since 1948 prohibited black and white people's collaborative work.¹¹ *The Island* transgressed this law, showing resistance through the play itself, contributing to the ANC sacrifice for decolonisation, through two Robben Island prisoners.

Although *Antigone* and *The Island* are logically opposite in terms of the time, the canon and the backdrop, the Greek tragedy resonates with *The Island* as both challenge the existing legal system. Furthermore, 'The trial and punishment of Antigone' provides the prisoners with an opportunity to show their superiority: it helps them to deconstruct their subjugation and Hodoshe's authority. However, Winston and John's performance at the concert is not for physical liberation, but for recapturing their freedom, irrespective of the dreadful living circumstances in the prison. The resistance is also figurative because John and Winston are well aware that in reality, after their concert, they will have to return to their cells and endure Hodoshe's brutal treatment: for Winston, it is life imprisonment on Robben Island whereas John has to wait until he is transferred to Victor Verster prison on the mainland, to experience another category of imprisonment. In this respect, what is highly significant is that whilst Sophocles' Antigone voices against the injustice for a respectable burial of her own brother, Antigone in *The Island* articulates *her* voice for all the Muselmann and against modern biopolitics exercised in the apartheid legal system.

Conclusion

Politically, socially or economically powerful people tend to intervene to regulate the biological lives of individuals – subalterns – who seem less powerful, either to fulfil these authoritative peoples' socio-political and economic purposes or to suppress such

subalterns' resistance. For instance, at the hands of national security, anything which threatens the state is removed: citizens are stripped of their rights (Glaser 2001; Abraham, Edward & Meredith 2010). To use Agamben's terms, these circumstances are the camps where individuals have to live between life and death experiencing bare life. As noted, Foucault and Agamben's concepts hold a deep resonance for such biopolitical violence.

The emergence of reaction against injustice, which is exercised through states' political stratagems, is submerged through governments' coercion which culminates in overt violence, surveillance, incarceration and killings. Regardless of the brutality of such actions by the states, in many instances the political rhetoric of security of populations, with deferrals of law, is used to justify them. When it is challenged by the victimised populations, they become subjected to further violence and discrimination. In brief, they encounter the dispossession of the right of their biological life. What needs critically interrogating, then, is the processes and the aftermath of such coercion – the regulation and economic exploitation of populations, human tragedies of both individuals and populations by internal or global socio-political powers, through surveillance, killings and incarceration. These are the postcolonial ramifications for once-colonised people, yet modern biopolitics.

What is represented through *The Island* is the role played through incarceration in this regard. Prece claims that *The Island* is not an allegory because it shows 'distinct and identifiable' reality (2008: 229); this is a valid claim, as the play exposes through incarceration the political truth of the country. Moreover, the closed prison is a microcosm of the open society where blacks are deprived of human qualities and bios, but offered bare life. In other words, *The Island* is a synecdoche of modern biopolitics represented through incarceration.

Notes

1. Interview (1991) cited in Robert Gordon (2012: 385). Kani is one of the two actors of *The Island*.
2. 'Kani and Ntshona were not given the opportunity by the publisher [Oxford University Press] to approve Fugard's introduction or to add their own version of events. ... Fugard acted as spokesman for his silent co-authors; he alone assumed the role as "the writer"' (Davis 2013: 10). Fugard's introduction was constructed according to the publisher's intervention although Kani and Ntshona had 'an eighty per cent contribution' (Vandenbroucke 1985: 126 cited Davis 2013: 10).
3. Publication of materials related to prisons or prisoners was restricted (section 44(1)(f) of the 1959 Prisons Act). Where whites and blacks were held in the same prison, 'white and non-white prisoners shall be detained in separate parts to prevent white and non-white prisoners from being within view of each other' (section 23(1) of the 1959 Prisons Act).
4. Fugard has been the manager of theatre groups such as the Serpent Players and the Space Theatre (see Walder 1993; Wertheim 2000).
5. Shezi was also the elected vice president of the Black Peoples Convention in 1972 (Orkin 1991).
6. Mandela writes '[i]n jail, all prisoners are classified by the authorities as ... A, B, C or D. A is the highest classification and confers the most privilege; D is the lowest and confers the least. ... It normally took years for a political prisoner to raise his status from D to C' (1995: 473).
7. Two political parties in South Africa.
8. According to Greek Mythology, Labdacus is a king of Thebes.
9. Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's key characters whose comic status enables reflectiveness on meanings. His definition of honour indicates the arbitrary nature of it and how it connotes

to nothingness – ‘What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air. A Trim reckoning!’ – *King Henry IV: Part 1*, Act 5 Scene 1.

10. Rivonia is a place in Johannesburg, and a farm located there was a ‘hideout’ for many ANC leaders, including Mandela during the apartheid era until they were arrested: the Rivonia Trial was well-known in South African history because it resulted in the imprisonment of many ANC leaders (see Glaser 2001; Foster, Haupt & De Beer 2005).
11. Since the establishment of the National Theatre Organisation (NTO), black participation in theatre was marginalised. This was further enhanced through apartheid policies gradually imposed. For instance, the Group Areas Act (1950) separated residential areas; the Bantu Building Performing Workers Act (1951) prohibited black people engaged in skilled work; and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) enacted segregation in all public areas (see Hammond-Tooke 1993; Glaser 2001; Hutcheson 2004).

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Note on Contributor

Chitra Jayathilake is a senior lecturer of the Department of English of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Colombo, Sri Lanka. She obtained her PhD in English from the University of Keele, United Kingdom. Her research interests lie at the intersection of Anglophone postcolonial dramas from the 1970s to the 21st century, performance contexts and cultural politics with a specific focus on South Africa, India and Sri Lanka. She is also interested in teaching English as a Second Language and Psycholinguistics.

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