

APARTHEID, RACIAL OPPRESSION, AND RESISTANCE IN ANDRÉ BRINK'S A DRY WHITE SEASON

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Abstract

André Brink's A Dry White Season is a significant literary representation of apartheid, racial oppression, institutional violence, and moral resistance in South Africa. Published in 1979, the novel examines the transformation of Ben du Toit, an ordinary white Afrikaner schoolteacher whose confidence in the political and judicial institutions of his country is shattered after the detention and death of Gordon Ngubene, a black school cleaner. Through Ben's gradual awakening, Brink exposes apartheid not merely as racial prejudice but as an organised system sustained by police authority, discriminatory institutions, surveillance, intimidation, censorship, and the silence of privileged citizens. The experiences of Gordon Ngubene and his son Jonathan demonstrate the vulnerability of black South Africans under apartheid, while Stanley Makhaya represents a more politically conscious mode of resistance. Ben's investigation illustrates the moral dilemma confronting privileged individuals who recognise systemic injustice. The present paper examines the interrelationship among apartheid, racial oppression, state power, white privilege, resistance, and narrative testimony in A Dry White Season. It argues that Brink transforms the search for truth into a form of resistance and presents storytelling and documentation as instruments against political silence. The novel ultimately suggests that neutrality becomes morally impossible when injustice is consciously witnessed.

Keywords

André Brink, A Dry White Season, Apartheid, Racial Oppression, Resistance, South Africa, Ben Du Toit, State Violence, Racism, White Privilege, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Apartheid represents one of the most oppressive systems of institutionalised racial discrimination in modern history. Formally established in South Africa after the National Party came to power in 1948, apartheid developed earlier practices of racial segregation into a comprehensive political and legal structure. Race influenced residence, education, employment, political rights, mobility, marriage, land ownership, and access to social resources. The system was therefore more than an expression of personal racial prejudice; it constituted an institutional arrangement through which racial inequality was maintained by law and state authority.

Literature played an important role in exposing this system. South African writers represented the experiences that political discourse, censorship, and official institutions often



attempted to suppress. André Brink occupies a particularly important position among such writers. As an Afrikaner novelist associated with the literary generation known as the *Sestigers*, Brink increasingly challenged racial nationalism, censorship, and political repression. His fiction repeatedly asks how individuals should respond when their society normalises injustice.

A Dry White Season is among Brink's most powerful political novels. The narrative centres on Ben du Toit, a white schoolteacher who initially lives within the relative security provided to white citizens by apartheid society. His political consciousness changes when Gordon Ngubene, a black cleaner at the school where Ben teaches, seeks his assistance after Gordon's son Jonathan becomes a victim of state repression. Jonathan's fate and Gordon's subsequent detention and death compel Ben to question the official version of events.

Ben's search for truth gradually reveals that the injustice he encounters is not an isolated incident. It is connected to a much wider structure involving racial inequality, police violence, institutional protection, surveillance, intimidation, and public silence. The novel therefore develops from an individual investigation into a comprehensive critique of apartheid.

The present paper studies three interconnected concerns in *A Dry White Season*: apartheid, racial oppression, and resistance. It argues that Brink represents apartheid as a system whose power depends both upon institutional violence and upon the willingness of privileged citizens to remain silent. Resistance begins when silence is rejected and suppressed truth is recovered.

Objectives and Methodology:

The primary objective of the study is to examine Brink's literary representation of apartheid and racial oppression in *A Dry White Season*. It further analyses the representation of institutional power and police violence, examines Ben du Toit's development from political complacency to moral resistance, considers Gordon Ngubene and Stanley Makhaya as important figures in Brink's racial politics, and evaluates testimony, documentation, and storytelling as forms of resistance.

The study follows a qualitative literary methodology based principally on close textual analysis. Postcolonial perspectives are used where necessary to understand the relationship between race, institutional authority, and resistance. Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial racial division and Edward Said's discussions of imperial representation provide a useful theoretical context for understanding the unequal distribution of authority and voice in Brink's fictional society (Fanon; Said).

Apartheid as Institutionalised Racial Oppression:

One of the central achievements of *A Dry White Season* is Brink's demonstration that racism becomes especially destructive when prejudice acquires institutional authority. Apartheid divides people not simply according to social attitudes but according to legally and politically enforced racial identities.

Ben initially does not understand the full implications of this system because his whiteness protects him from its most violent consequences. His experience illustrates one of Brink's central ideas: privilege can prevent individuals from recognising injustice precisely because they do not personally experience it.

For Gordon Ngubene and his family, however, the political system is experienced very differently. Their encounters with the police demonstrate that black South Africans cannot assume that state institutions exist for their protection. Gordon's position in society is determined not merely by poverty or individual circumstances but by a racial structure that grants vastly unequal power to white and black citizens.

Brink consequently constructs two different experiences of the same South Africa. For Ben, the country initially appears ordered and relatively secure; for Gordon, Jonathan, and



Stanley, the same social order contains fear, surveillance, detention, and violence. The contrast reveals the ideological success of apartheid: privilege allows one section of society to perceive as “normal” conditions experienced by another as oppression.

Frantz Fanon’s discussion of colonial society is relevant here. Fanon describes colonial society as fundamentally divided, with material and political space distributed according to racial power (Fanon). Although Brink writes specifically about apartheid South Africa, his novel similarly depicts racial separation as an organisation of power rather than simply cultural difference.

Gordon Ngubene and the Reality of Racial Injustice:

Gordon Ngubene provides the immediate connection between Ben’s sheltered existence and the political reality of apartheid. His suffering becomes central to Ben’s transformation.

The treatment of Gordon and Jonathan demonstrates how racial inequality influences the credibility accorded to individuals. Official authorities possess the institutional power to define what happened during detention, whereas the victim and his family possess little comparable authority.

This conflict between official truth and lived truth becomes one of the novel’s most significant themes. The government possesses police reports, administrative procedures, courts, and institutional legitimacy. Gordon’s family possesses experience, memory, grief, and unanswered questions.

Ben initially assumes that the truth can be established by following ordinary institutional procedures. His belief gradually collapses as he discovers that the institutions from which he expects justice are themselves embedded within apartheid power.

Gordon’s death therefore acquires significance beyond individual tragedy. It exposes the vulnerability of black South Africans before institutions capable of controlling both bodies and explanations. His suffering makes visible the political violence that white citizens such as Ben have been able to overlook.

Brink thereby forces the reader to recognise that racial oppression is sustained not only through spectacular acts of violence but also through procedures that conceal responsibility.

Ben du Toit: From Privilege to Political Awakening:

Ben du Toit is particularly important because Brink does not introduce him as a revolutionary. He is an ordinary Afrikaner teacher, husband, father, and member of white society. He initially possesses considerable faith in the established order.

This characterization allows Brink to dramatise political awakening as a gradual ethical process.

At first, Ben believes that Gordon’s difficulties can be addressed through recognised channels. He assumes that if injustice has occurred, reasonable authorities will correct it. This confidence demonstrates how privilege influences his understanding of the state.

As contradictory evidence accumulates, however, Ben can no longer reconcile the official explanation with what he discovers. His questions become increasingly dangerous because authoritarian systems depend upon the acceptance of authorised narratives.

Ben’s transformation is consequently epistemological as well as political: to know becomes to assume responsibility.

Once he understands that Gordon’s experience is part of a larger system, returning to ignorance becomes impossible. Brink uses this transformation to examine the moral responsibility of privileged individuals. Ben did not create apartheid personally, but once he recognises its injustice, he must decide whether continued silence would make him complicit in it.



His decision costs him dearly. Relationships with family members and friends become strained. His social respectability deteriorates, and he increasingly becomes the object of suspicion and surveillance. Resistance removes the security previously associated with his racial position.

The tragedy of Ben's experience demonstrates that apartheid disciplines not only those it explicitly oppresses but also white citizens who refuse the political expectations attached to their privilege.

Stanley Makhaya and Black Resistance:

Stanley Makhaya provides an important contrast to Ben. While Ben gradually discovers apartheid, Stanley already knows its realities through experience.

This difference prevents *A Dry White Season* from becoming merely a story of a benevolent white man rescuing black victims. Ben's developing conscience is important, but he enters a struggle that has existed long before his awakening.

Stanley understands the limitations of institutional justice because he has not enjoyed Ben's privileged relationship with authority. His attitude is therefore more politically conscious and sceptical.

Through Stanley, Brink also reveals an important limitation of white liberalism. Ben may sympathise with oppressed people, but sympathy alone does not erase the structural difference between their experiences. Ben initially possesses the privilege of deciding whether to become politically involved. Black characters have no comparable option because apartheid has already involved them through racial classification.

Resistance therefore requires more than sympathy. It demands recognition of unequal power and a willingness to challenge the institutions that sustain it.

State Power, Surveillance, and Violence:

Apartheid in *A Dry White Season* functions through an extensive network of authority. Police officers are among its most visible representatives, but the system also depends upon legal procedures, administrative structures, social conformity, and the willingness of individuals to accept official explanations.

Surveillance becomes particularly important after Ben begins investigating Gordon's death. His private life becomes increasingly insecure. His movements, relationships, conversations, and documents acquire political significance.

Giuliana Iannàccaro points to the importance of spying, observation, censorship, and narrative perspective in *A Dry White Season*, demonstrating how surveillance influences both the characters and the novel's narrative structure (69-84).

Surveillance serves two purposes. First, it allows the authorities to obtain information about dissent. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it produces fear.

Fear encourages self-censorship. People may withdraw from Ben not because they necessarily believe the government is morally correct but because association with him could threaten their own security. The political system thereby extends its power beyond direct physical coercion.

White Privilege, Complicity, and Silence:

The novel is not concerned only with the cruelty of state officials. Brink also investigates the behaviour of ordinary white citizens.

Many characters surrounding Ben prefer stability to truth. His investigation becomes inconvenient because it challenges assumptions upon which their secure lives depend. Acknowledging Gordon's experience would require them to reconsider the legitimacy of the society from which they benefit.



Brink demonstrates that an oppressive system cannot survive through coercion alone. It also requires ordinary people to avoid difficult questions. Some may support apartheid ideologically, while others simply wish to preserve careers, family stability, social status, or personal safety.

Ben gradually refuses this comfortable neutrality.

His increasing isolation demonstrates the social cost of moral independence. He becomes disturbing to others because his questions threaten the psychological boundaries separating privileged white life from black suffering.

Brink consequently expands the meaning of resistance. Resistance does not necessarily begin with armed rebellion or organised political activism. It may begin with a refusal to accept a lie.

Truth, Documentation, and Narrative as Resistance:

One of the most sophisticated aspects of *A Dry White Season* is its treatment of narrative itself as political resistance. Ben attempts to gather evidence concerning Gordon's fate. Documents, testimonies, records, memories, and manuscripts become important because apartheid power depends partly upon controlling information.

The novel itself is constructed around the preservation and reconstruction of Ben's story. This narrative strategy raises a fundamental question: Who possesses the authority to tell the truth?

Official institutions produce one version of reality. Witnesses and victims produce another. Brink places these versions in conflict.

Edward Said's work on colonial representation demonstrates how political domination can be reinforced by the authority to describe and categorise others (Said). In Brink's novel, the apartheid state similarly attempts to control not only individuals but also explanations. Consequently, preserving evidence becomes resistance.

The political significance of Ben's investigation lies not simply in discovering what happened to Gordon but in preventing Gordon's suffering from disappearing into institutional silence. Testimony restores individuality to those whom oppressive systems attempt to reduce to administrative cases.

The Symbolism of *A Dry White Season*:

The title *A Dry White Season* itself carries considerable symbolic significance. "Dryness" suggests barrenness, exhaustion, absence of nourishment, and moral sterility. A "season" implies that a particular historical condition, however oppressive, is not necessarily permanent. The word "white" unmistakably introduces the racial dimension.

Taken together, the title can be interpreted as a metaphor for a morally exhausted system of white supremacy. Apartheid may appear powerful, but its ethical foundations have become barren. The metaphor of seasonality also permits an element of historical possibility. Seasons change. Political systems that present themselves as permanent may eventually disappear.

Brink therefore combines pessimism regarding immediate political circumstances with the possibility of transformation. Ben may not personally witness the destruction of apartheid, but his resistance contributes to the moral rejection upon which political transformation ultimately depends.

Major Findings:

The analysis produces several important findings. First, *A Dry White Season* presents apartheid as an institutional system rather than merely an expression of individual racial prejudice. Second, Gordon Ngubene's experience demonstrates that racial oppression involves control over both the physical individual and the official interpretation of his suffering. Third, Ben's transformation



reveals that privilege can create political blindness, while direct confrontation with injustice can generate moral awakening.

The study further finds that Stanley Makhaya provides an important corrective to a purely white-centred narrative of resistance because his political knowledge originates in lived experience. Surveillance and intimidation emerge as important instruments through which the apartheid state produces social silence. White complicity is represented as essential to the continuation of racial oppression, while Ben's refusal to remain silent transforms investigation into political resistance.

Most importantly, Brink represents testimony, documentation, memory, and storytelling as alternative sources of truth capable of challenging institutional authority.

Results and Discussion:

The textual analysis establishes a close relationship among race, power, and resistance in the novel. Apartheid converts racial identity into unequal political power. State institutions maintain this inequality through policing, surveillance, intimidation, and control over information.

Resistance begins when official definitions are questioned.

Ben's political development demonstrates that moral resistance requires a movement beyond passive sympathy. His transformation occurs when he accepts personal risk in pursuit of truth. Yet Brink avoids presenting his actions as sufficient to overcome apartheid. Ben is only one individual confronting a deeply institutionalised system.

The novel consequently recognises both the necessity and limitations of individual resistance.

Its most important political message lies in its treatment of witnessing. Once individuals possess knowledge of injustice, silence becomes an ethical choice rather than a neutral position. Ben's tragedy derives from his refusal to choose comfortable ignorance.

Conclusion:

André Brink's *A Dry White Season* remains a powerful literary examination of apartheid because it exposes racial oppression at institutional, social, psychological, and moral levels. Through Gordon Ngubene and his family, Brink represents the vulnerability of black South Africans within a political system structured around racial inequality. Through Stanley Makhaya, he introduces the consciousness of resistance shaped by direct experience of oppression. Through Ben du Toit, he examines the difficult awakening of a privileged white individual who discovers that the institutions he once trusted participate in injustice.

Ben's journey from complacency to resistance constitutes the ethical centre of the novel. His investigation demonstrates that apartheid survives not merely through police violence and discriminatory legislation but also through silence, fear, social conformity, and the unwillingness of privileged citizens to question authority.

At the same time, Brink gives special importance to testimony. Documents, memories, evidence, and stories become weapons against institutional forgetting. The struggle against apartheid therefore becomes partly a struggle over who possesses the authority to define reality. *A Dry White Season* ultimately suggests that resistance begins with the courage to see and to speak. Ben cannot destroy apartheid individually, but his refusal to accept official falsehood challenges the moral foundation upon which the system depends. The novel thus moves beyond its immediate South African historical setting to address a universal ethical question: what responsibility does an individual acquire after becoming aware of systematic injustice?

Brink's answer is unmistakable. Knowledge creates responsibility, and silence in the presence of recognised oppression can become a form of complicity. By transforming witnessing,



investigation, memory, and narration into forms of resistance, *A Dry White Season* establishes literature itself as a means of confronting racial power and preserving suppressed truth.

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