

Apartheid: The many colours of madness

I was born and raised in Cape Town by parents who were not overtly political. In 1948, my father, a very dark skinned, kinky haired man, classified as Malay was married by Moslem rights to my mother who was classified as white. The awareness of colour, race, racial differences and racism insidiously made their way early into my life as my parents negotiated their differences. My father proudly celebrated my mother's white skin and bright blue eyes and in later years would exploit her green identity card to purchase property in areas reserved for whites. My mother when angry with my father would be heard expressing her regret at not heeding her grandmother's advice of "marrying her own kind", which I understood to mean white rather than Christian.

I spent much of my childhood, like my father, enjoying the association with whiteness whilst being acutely aware that unlike my mother I did not have her blue eyes, her milky white skin, her shade or straightness of blond hair; that I was not white. I was also however acutely aware of the arbitrariness of race as my mother despite her racial classification had essentially been socialized as coloured soon after her white Afrikaner father left her mother. My maternal grandmother was classified of mixed race.

My mother's marriage and consequent conversion to Islam meant that her dress code included wearing longer dresses and headscarves, further removing constructs of whiteness. The most powerful reminder of my mother's whiteness was a large framed portrait of my maternal grandfather in his army uniform occupying pride of place in our living room. The man Dan Pienaar, whom I had never met, or who was seldom spoken of, lived in our home as our very close (by birth) white grandfather.

The absurdity of race was further emphasized by the forced removal of my family from Newlands, Cape Town two years after my birth. Newlands was declared for whites only, which ostensibly meant my mother could legally occupy our house but my father and the 6 children had to leave. My family eventually settled in upper Woodstock, an interesting area that appeared to slip off the radar of apartheid authorities as families classified as white lived either alongside or in the adjacent streets of those classified coloured. As children we wondered about the "mixed" neighbourhood and when District 6, a mere 3km away was bulldozed we quietly awaited our turn. It never happened. This meant that we lived within walking distance to a school and

public swimming pool that were reserved for our white neighbours. The experience of living in Woodstock emphasized the craziness of being assigned a race and its lived consequences. The one experience that raised much consternation during my first years at school was not being able to attend the school that was literally within a short walking distance from my home. I usually struggled to wake up for school and had to be rushed along to avoid being late, which at the time was a punishable offence. Having been caned more than once for late coming I was particularly indignant for not being allowed to attend the neighbourhood school. The irony was that my friends who regularly watched movies in our home and whose mother was much spoken about as she was considered a lady of ill repute attended the local school. She looked like a regular white stay-at-home mom, but during the night she worked as a prostitute. She always used one of my father's taxis at night and whilst we were taught not to judge her because of how she earned her keep, she on the other hand appeared not to judge us for not being white. Her kids who shared striking resemblance to being Japanese were our friends and regularly shared meals at our house. The awareness of their superiority however was sorely felt when they walked passed our house every morning to the school up the road whilst we had to travel further. On one particular morning I remember one of the children who had been particularly close to my younger sister crying and refusing to go to school unless my sister could be with him. I remember the silence that befell the adults as they struggled to explain to the little white boy why my sister could not attend.

Despite the awareness of the inequities and indignities suffered, my parents like many of my peers' parents remained resolutely opposed to politics and political discussions. In part they feared for the lives of their children, but it became painfully clear that they could not contemplate an alternative to being governed by anyone else other than white people. Besides, the elders would be heard saying, "the white government has been good to us, look how badly they've treated the blacks" intimating that coloured people should be thankful for the relatively marginal way they were being discriminated against.

On occasion my father challenged the status quo by for example agitating and eventually becoming the first person of colour to acquire a sedan taxi license that allowed him to own his own taxi business. He then defiantly employed white men as taxi drivers. His foray into the white property market had more to do with demonstrating his ability to outsmart the

government than the more lucrative option of investments. However despite his maverick behaviour in some areas, when confronted by a white person my father would be seen capitulating and embodying all the projections of being less than white. My father would insist on addressing white people as “sir” and “madam” and would make an effort to speak English or Afrikaans in a manner they would approve of.

My parents had been blissfully unaware of the many times myself and a few fairer skin friends had entered the white public swimming pool in our neighbourhood, only to laugh at the cashier who could not tell the difference between a coloured and a Portuguese child. Neither of us coloured children could swim, so we’d pay our entrance fee, walk around, proudly defiant and leave soon thereafter. On other occasions we would go to the “whites only” beaches in Sea Point and laugh at the police whom we believed couldn’t tell the difference between the Jewish beachgoers and ourselves. Again none of us went to the beach to swim, nor did we stay very long but would end our “acts of defiance” by destroying the mail in the mailboxes of the white people living in the flats along Sea Point beach road.

During the school uprisings in the late 70’s my parents did become aware of my involvement in politics and they were terribly upset. My father, who had at the time become a police reservist, could not believe that I would condone the violence and destruction to property that followed political rallies. Moreover, my father who did not have the opportunity to complete primary (junior) school was horrified at the thought that we were rejecting the education system on the basis of inequity. My father opined that we had to be grateful that we were getting an education at all. Soon thereafter my father arranged for me to further my schooling whilst living with my eldest sister in Natal.

Whilst Natal appeared an obvious choice for my father as the province appeared more peaceful relative to Cape Town, the experience in Natal did little to lessen my political awareness or sooth my burgeoning anger. My introduction to Tongaat a suburb north of Durban was mired in politics of a different kind. As a young teen I became painfully aware of the politics of difference and its manifestation beyond the binary categories of black and white that I had been exposed to till then.

Tongaat, I soon learnt was reserved for Indian people only. My sister settled into marriage with a man classified as Indian, however she appeared to have

been largely accepted which is not uncommon for those not of Indian descent but who practices Islam. The religion appears to minimize legislated racial differences. However compared to my sister, I differed in my dress code, was of fairer skin and my racial classification as Cape Malay offered a seemingly insurmountable challenge to the local school authorities who had to consider my application to the school. My application was denied. I was not Indian, a non-negotiable requirement according to the school principal. My late application was hurriedly sent to the nearest school for coloured children, which was at least a 30km train ride away. I spent the first 6months after my arrival in Natal traveling to and from school, again bypassing the school within walking distance from my sister's home.

My daily train journey ended when the principal at the local school retired and was replaced by a Moslem man. My brother in law, a prominent figure in the community at the time, had secured my place in the school, still reserved for Indians. I was however instructed to wear the Islamic school attire, that included a white pants beneath the school dress. The dress code did little to diffuse my difference as classmates asked about my background, wondered whether we cooked curry and expressed surprised at the softness of my frizzy hair when I agreed they could touch it. I soon stopped wearing the pants and established intimate friendships that dispelled racial differences. On occasion I was reminded of such differences when a friend spoke of the trouble at home where his Indian parents were concerned that he may be interested in more than a friendship with the only coloured girl at school. I left Natal before completing my studies. I completed my schooling in Cape Town at a school at the forefront of political activism amongst Cape schools.

The pain, complexities and madness of colour, race, racial differences and racism of course follows me as race has sadly become the prism through which I inadvertently continue to view myself and the world. You see whilst I intellectually comprehend that my difference to others has no basis in skin colour, I continue to struggle with the yoke of racism.