

Testaments of Resistance and Resilience: An Analysis of Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood*

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Abstract

*Where there is Oppression, there is going to be resistance. This is the story of almost every Independence struggle history has ever seen. Such was also the story of one the most shocking and horrendous tale of oppression the world has come to know, the apartheid system of South Africa. It was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that divided the whites and blacks living in South Africa, which gave the former full rights to enjoy all the privileges that the natives ought to enjoy rightfully, depriving the latter of every good thing the country had to offer. This paper will attempt to throw some light on the whole system by analyzing a work of art not written by an outsider but through the eyes of a person who was born into it and saw apartheid for what it was and what it did to the blacks living in South Africa. It is a memoir written by South African comedian Trevor Noah titled *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, an autobiographical work published in the year 2016 where Noah narrates instances from his childhood living in post-apartheid South Africa.*

The book is a kind of dedication to Noah's mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, a symbol of resistance. Patricia Noah broke almost every rule imposed by the White government, from having a good education and moving into a house in a white neighborhood to having a relationship with a white person resulting in giving birth to the child of mixed race, a crime for which the punishment was death. The paper will attempt to bring out the struggles and tales of the resilience of the black people under apartheid by analyzing the experiences of the Noah Family with special emphasis on Patricia Noah who can be seen as an embodiment of Resistance, resilience and above all sheer stubbornness to comply with the rules of the colonizers.

Key Words: Apartheid, Resistance, Colonization, Oppression.

The early man had to fight multiple elements to survive. Initially, it was nature and natural elements that he had to resist. He had to fight vicious animals that stood to threaten his life. The quest for survival led man to discover and invent various devices that would keep him and his tribe safe from danger and give comfort to his hard life to ensure a good living. He was in luck because his mind was progressive and had the edge over almost the elements of nature. But as he progressed, his dependence on nature for survival and protection started to change as he had already begun to live a reasonably comfortable life and had also begun to accumulate riches to satisfy his selfish desires and in the process, turned against his kind. He subjugated and oppressed the weak and also exploited and looted everything that is not rightfully his. Slowly his vanity and greed began to cloud his moral judgment. Over time he set out to conquer other lands that he envied for their riches and resources.

When the natives began to resist, he enslaved, oppressed, and even killed them to achieve his goals. But what happened to the enslaved? Did they remain slaves forever? No. Like the oppressors, even the oppressed were made of strong mettle. And so they began to resist. It cost them their lives, their future, and even their dignity. Nevertheless, they made steady progress, and one fine day, they overpowered their oppressors and became free.

The apartheid system of South Africa was one of the most horrendous tales of oppression the world has ever come to witness. It was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that divided the whites and blacks living in South Africa. This system allowed the whites to enjoy everything good that the country had to offer, depriving the blacks of even their basic rights. There were separate towns and villages for the blacks and whites, which were clearly distinguished in terms of facilities. The ruling white Government had forbidden them from having a good education and working white-collar jobs. There were only three jobs the blacks were mostly allowed to do, The Police force, teaching, and nursing. They also imposed so many rules, and some of them will even seem absurd for an outsider. One of the bizarre ones is forbidding blacks and whites from having sexual relations with each other. The black people living in this period had no assurance of safety or protection as their lives were constantly in danger. Crimes against women were at a peak during the period. There were communal riots among the people belonging to different tribes who also spoke different languages like Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, Venda, Ndebele, and so on. The colonizers instigated these riots in many ways as they wanted to keep the people divided for their advantage.

These were the living conditions in which Trevor Noah, the author of *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, was born and raised. Born in Johannesburg, Noah is a comedian, writer, producer, and television host. He is famous for his *The Daily Show*, an American Satirical news program on Comedy Central. In *Born, a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, Noah speaks about his early life and childhood in a Post-Apartheid South Africa. Noah talks about serious issues like Racism, poverty, and discrimination with

a tinge of humor that makes it more interesting. The book is also a kind of dedication to Noah's mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, a woman of grit and determination and a symbol of resistance. She broke almost every rule in the book imposed by the colonizers, right from getting a job as a typist to having sexual relations with a European and bearing a child of mixed race, which was a crime punishable by death.

Noah, in this memoir, says that growing up as a mixed child during apartheid was not very easy. Patricia Noah had to hide him from the authorities all the time. And once he was too big to hide, she had to break so many other rules and work as a maid in a white household to hide her son from the authorities. Adding to her trouble, Noah was a very mischievous child and had to be controlled all the time. Noah recounts that his mother was always a force to be reckoned with. She was so determined that the troubles that the society imposed on her didn't shake her a bit. Even when riots were going on in her neighborhood and everyone hid in their homes out of fear for their life, for the rioters were vandalizing and setting fire to anything in sight, there was no stopping her. She had places to go and work that that needed to be done. Noah's mother was also a deeply religious woman who attended three different churches on Sundays, and nothing could stop her, not the evils of the apartheid system, and not even her 'piece of junk' car that had the liberty to break down anywhere regardless of place and time.

One of the most important and bizarre rules that the apartheid system imposed on the people living in South Africa was that black people were not allowed to have sexual relations with white people and if they are found the white man was usually given a warning and the black man was lucky if he was not charged with rape.

The government went to insane lengths to try to enforce these laws. The penalty for breaking them was five years in prison. There were whole police squads whose only job was to go around peeking through windows—clearly an assignment for only the finest law enforcement officers. And if an interracial couple got caught, god help them. The police would kick down the door, drag the people out, beat them, and arrest

them. At least that's what they did to the black person. With the white person, it was more like, "Look, I'll just say you were drunk, but don't do it again, eh? Cheers. (Noah 25)

It came under the wing of another intention of the ruling white government to make Johannesburg a white place with a plan to uproot all the blacks to different places. This was rendered impossible because the white people still expected the blacks to work for them in their houses. This gave birth to the completely black neighborhood called Soweto, which was one of the places where the blacks were allowed to live. Patricia Noah and her whole family lived in Soweto until she decided to run away from the place and find her path. Being the rebel that she is, she studied a course on typewriting and became a typist, one of the earliest white-collar jobs the blacks were then allowed to have. She also started living in a white neighborhood with the danger of getting arrested anytime. She met a Swiss European gentleman and started a relationship with him that gave birth to Trevor Noah. One of the aspects that make Patricia Noah stand out from the rest of others was her unfazed bravery to stand up to the whites, which may even seem foolish to others. When others were cooped up in their houses for fear of their lives during the outburst of riots, Patricia Noah was undeterred as she went about her way, saying she had work to do and places to be and nothing is going to stop her. She broke almost every rule in the book without a second thought and also had the knack for survival that spared her from the consequences of her actions.

She imparted this knowledge to Trevor also as he was constantly in trouble being a mischievous kid and also because of his mixed race. Unlike in America, where even a single drop of black blood is considered black, in South Africa, a person with even a single drop of white blood was considered white. Growing up in Soweto with many of his black cousins, Trevor was never punished for his misbehavior as he was considered a white kid. In school, there were separate classes for white, black, and Indian kids, but there was no special class for a child of mixed race. Children who belonged to the mixed-race aroused suspicion among everyone and were also subjected to bullying. They were experiencing a severe identity

crisis, and many of them were denied a good living due to their circumstances. In her dissertation called *Through a Coloured lens: Post Apartheid Identity Formation amongst Coloured in KZN*, Fileve Tlaloc Palmer states that,

The effects of colonialism and racialism created groups that suffered displacement, (at times) parental and societal rejection because of being "mixed," substandard government provisions. As a result, many Coloured men and women turned to alternative means of success beyond institutionalized education and striving toward upward mobility. Many turned to alcohol and drugs, organized violence and sex. In attempting to break the stereotypes about Coloureds being drunkards or fierce fighters, I employ the theory of "voluntary" and "involuntary minority" to reason why some Coloured people do not succeed in ways that conform to the norms of general society. (Palmer 12, 13)

But Trevor Noah, like his mother, had a knack for survival and was popular among both the black and white kids. He could speak fluent English and also the various African tribal languages and won the favor of both the white and black kids. His flair for languages helped him not only in school but also on the streets when he found himself often in trouble in a Zulu or Ndebele neighborhood or with other white people. Language acted as a weapon to fight discrimination.

Standing up to a family member can often be more intimidating and humbling than taking on the whole world. This was so true in the life of Patricia Noah, as the trouble she faced with her husband was more daunting than the issues she had with the government. While she was just making enough money to support herself and her son, she married Abel, a mechanic who turned her life upside down. She invests all her money in Abel's sinking business and eventually loses everything. The family sinks into extreme poverty with nothing to eat, as Trevor recalls eating worms and other insects as food after days together going without food. At this point, Abel becomes abusive, and Patricia Noah is rendered helpless as she feels that she can't leave him struggling with two little children, Trevor and Andrew, her second child whom she had with Abel. Above everything, Patricia

Noah brings out her full abilities to be a strong and determined woman when Abel refuses to allow her to go to church. This ends up in Abel shooting her with a gun as she tries to drive away, and the car breaks down, and the bullet hits her on the behind, and she is rushed to the hospital. She survives the gunshot wound and leaves Abel and starts a new life.

The Apartheid system threw so many struggles on the people living in South Africa. Thousands of people lost their lives, and many were uprooted from their homes. In spite of all this, Patricia Noah stood resilient and determined and emerged as a beacon of hope. This was the story of just one person that came to light. But there is an uncountable number of these stories of people showing grit and determination

on the face of adversity, without which there won't be any history of freedom and independence in the countries that experienced this kind of struggles.

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