

The road to Mecca - Athol Fugard



"Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand: /
Come see my shining palace built upon the sand!"
Edna St. Vincent Millay

In a dark hour of her life, when she thought the curtains were drawn on her life, when pretence was taken away....



Helen Martins found a new world, she became an apprentice, studying the celestial geometry of light and colour.



Through her art Helen is on a pilgrimage of the soul, until she reaches Mecca
(Mecca-symbolic of reaching your own spiritual peak).



You lit one (candle) for me before you left-

there was a lot of darkness in this room- and
after you have gone I sat here with it.

Such a sad little light, with its little tears of wax running down the side!.... I had surrendered myself to what was going to happen when it went out.....

..but then instead of doing the same,
allowing the darkness to defeat it

the small, uncertain little light seemed to

find it's courage again. It started to get
brighter and brighter.

Helen Martins

On
darkness:

•

‘That is all the little girl thought about, trying to make her prayers last as long as possible...’

She was **terrified** of the moment her mother would bend down and kiss her and **take the candle away**’ p37



- 'The same darkness that used to come pouring down the chimney and into my room when I was a little girl and frighten me'. p37

- 'Darkness Elsa, darkness! The darkness that nearly smothered my life in here fifteen years ago. P37
- (she refers to Stefanus's death.)

- But those were easy darkneses to deal with. The one I am talking about now is much worse, it is inside of me, Elsa... it's got inside me at last and I can't light candles in there'. P.37

(This darkness resurfaced when no inner pictures came to her, and she was not busy creating her Mecca, depicting artistic dry spells and the sense of not having a purpose when this happens.)

Helen Martins-

light

I had grown up and had all the candles I wanted..'



- Such **brave** little lights! And they taught the little girl how to be that. When she saw one burning in the middle of the night, she knew what **courage** was. All my life they've **helped me to find courage**... until now.

- Upon lighting her candles for Elsa the first time: 'Light is a miracle Miss Barlow, which even the most ordinary human being can make happen' p24,25

- I had surrendered myself to what was going to happen when it went out....but then instead of doing the same, allowing the darkness to defeat it the small, uncertain little light seemed to find it's courage again. It started to get brighter and brighter

- A City Marius! A city of light and colour more splendid than anything I have ever imagined.....’ and that is where the wise men of the East study the celestial geometry of light and colour. I became an apprentice that night.

- After her revelation Marius comments; ‘I have never seen you as happy as this! There is more light in you than all your candles put together.’

- p70Elsa comments; 'you are radiant'p71

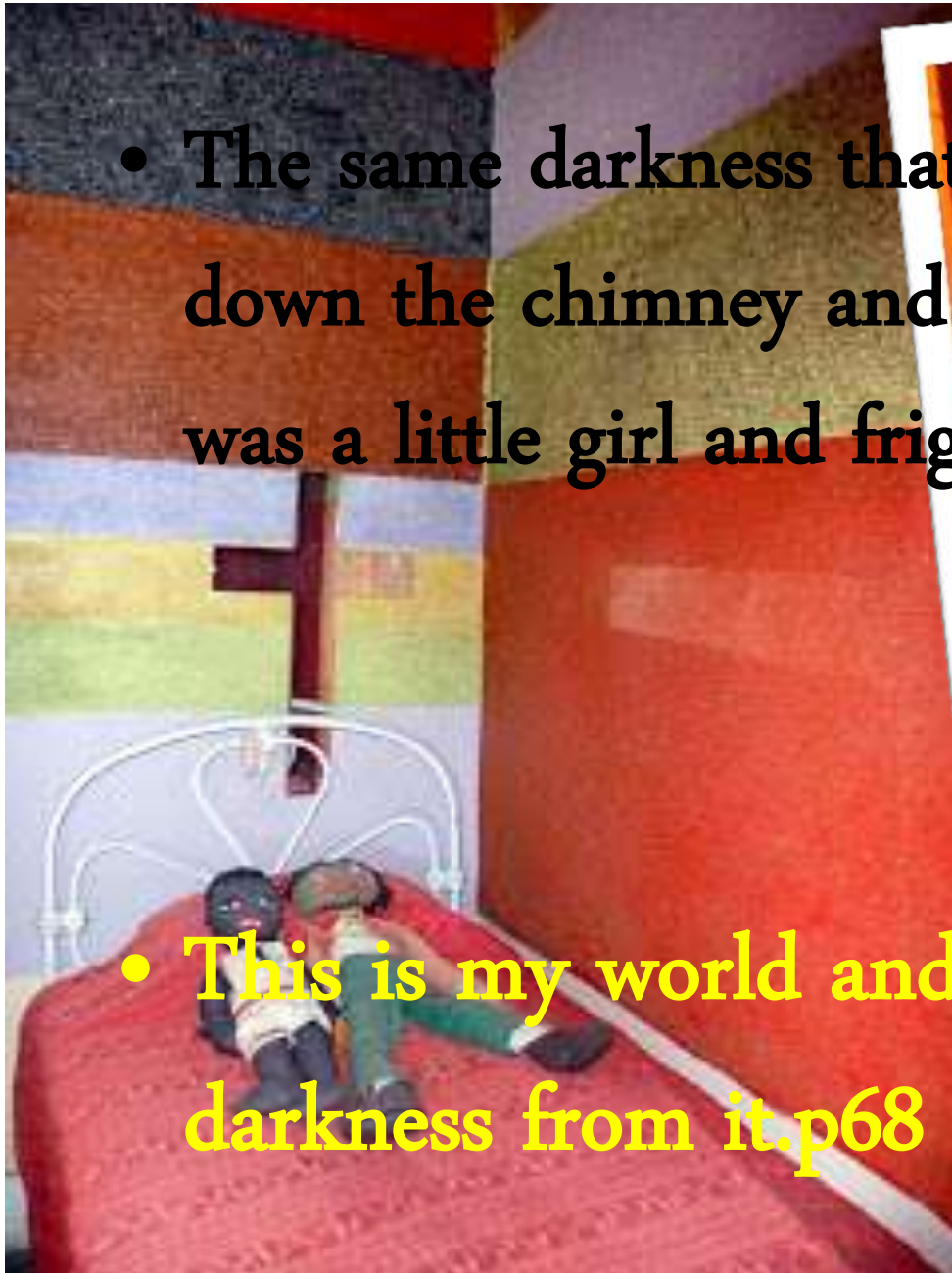
- –The light is now inside of her, the darkness that got inside of her gone. She has reached the end of her journey and can put the candles out one by one, the courage is now inside of her.

Even though she admits that she is still frightened, she is determined to put the candles out herself. (courage and bravery)

This is my world and I have banished
darkness from it. p.68

- The same darkness that used to come pouring down the chimney and into my room when I was a little girl and frighten me.

- This is my world and I have banished darkness from it.p68



Helen Reaching Mecca



- Note that Helen is not shy to show herself to Marius as she was with Elsa.
- She is ‘radiantly alive with her vision’p67, the book says she speaks with ‘authority’p67 .

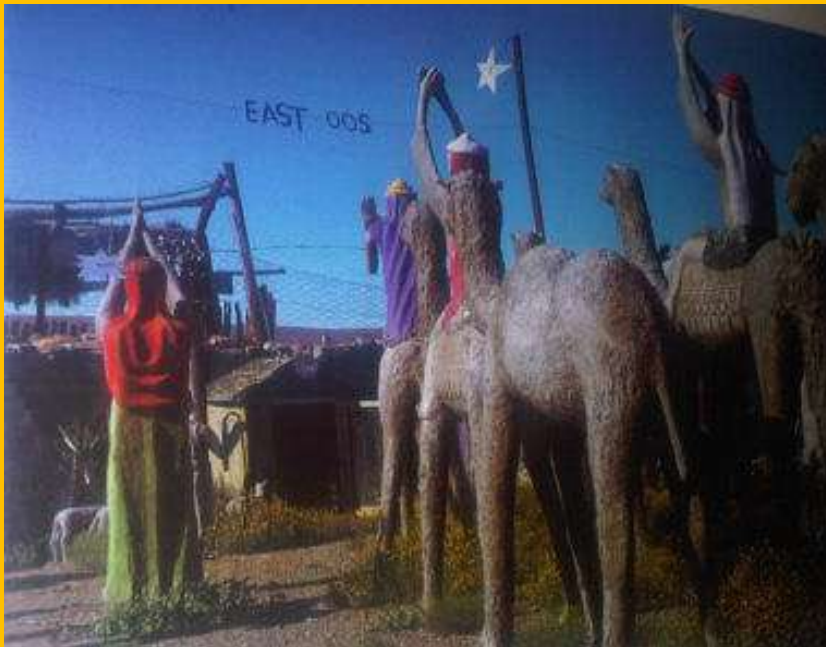
- This is the opposite of the timid birdlike Helen who has let herself be bullied by both Marius, Elsa and the townspeople.
- In showing Marius her 'real' self shows how she has grown in **courage**, and is being **brave**, opening herself up to his opinion.

- .

- Like her candles which symbolize **courage and bravery** to her, when reaching the end of her pilgrimage, Helen portrays the same qualities. **courage and bravery**



Road to Mecca the pilgrimage:



- This pilgrimage was not for others to judge, but for her to grow in braveness and courage, to conquer ‘the darkness’ of not having **her own** purpose.
- ‘ This is as far as I can go. My Mecca is finished and with it.... The only real purpose my life has ever had.’

- Three **wise men** also had a vision (star) they followed- they rode on camels- (mode of transport for pilgrimage), Helen's mode was art.



Camels have the ability to travel for long 'dry spells' before reaching an oasis (Mecca).

Helen's creative dry spells ended in darkness and despair knowing she has not reached Mecca yet..



- The Owl: Helen's totem animal,
- (spiritual guard)





- Owls where on all four corners of Helen's house, and guarding the gate.

Not afraid of the dark.



Wise and perceptive.

The owl over her entrance to the camel-
yard.



Look at the **defensive stance** of the owls
wings.

What Helen says her work represents:

Beauty
Divinity
Freedom
Purity



'My Mecca have a logic of its own, even I don't properly understand it.' p25

The women in Mecca;

- Study Artist as an outcast and a mother. On
- Myunisa, under additional study material.



- Age differences
- Elsie's need for a 'true free spirit' as a mentor.
- 'I am proud of you. I told you that you never needed me. And you did more than just say no to him. **You affirmed your right as a woman..p71**
- 17 year old Katrina staying with alcoholic wife-beater because she is married – community and their expectations of what woman ought to do.
- Patience having no rights to live on the farm with her baby after her husband died.
- Elsa thinking she can prove society wrong, that David will choose her over marriage and family. She describes herself as 'muddled, confused, full of self pity' p32 'the letters remind me of the mess I was in.'
- The woman's right to choose- abortion left deep, deep scars on Elsa
- Elsa is angry at the state of affairs for woman, 'for being old, for being black, for being born.... For being 28 years old and trusting enough to jump, for our stupid helplessness'. Helen 'You don't punish people for that Elsa.' Stop screaming Elsa and cry instead. Helen wishes she still could cry, for womankind's sake over all this things.





- **Relationships, love and trust**, it mattered more to Helen what Elsa thought of the real Helen, she says she was more nervous than on her wedding night. Trust was broken and restored between Helen and Elsa. Prickly pear syrup, ‘open your arms I am going to jump!’
- Helen has a strong sense to nurture- no children of her own- ‘anything would have been better than nothing; nothing meaning not receiving letters from Elsa. Elsa cries and Helen comforts her. From the beginning when Elsa enters Helen’s home she perceives Elsa is not the same, that something is wrong.
- **Helen states that her purpose** for life is over after finishing her Mecca, but shortly after discovers that in making Elsa laugh (feel better in her darkness) makes her as proud of herself as any of her statues she has made.... A new purpose, being a mentor of ‘becoming a true free spirit’ to Elsa. Helen has now reached wise man status and will lead Elsa to Elsa’s Mecca.

The unintended irony is not lost on Elsa. A little chuckle becomes a good laugh.

- **Helen:’ I don’t know how I did it, but that laugh makes me as proud of myself as any of those statues out there.’ p75**



Relationship triangle between Helen, Marius and Elsa:



Marius

Marius is the antagonist of the story and jealous of Elsa's close friendship with Helen.

His role is also to bring some view of the male's role in traditional society. Making decisions for Helen, not giving her much time to speak for herself... manipulating and goading her into making a decision. He is constantly using the 'us', 'we' argument of the towns opinion on her state, that they have a history together, and that Elsa does not know her as they do.... Yet they have ostracized her for not conforming to what their ideals of a widow her age should be.





Elsa and Helen

Elsa is a young woman of 28 with strong notions of human rights as well as 'woman affirming their rights' .

On a chance meeting, when Elsa was admiring Helen's artwork their 'little girls' met. Helen 'delighted' Elsa with her Mecca', later Helen explains that her Mecca is more her than her name or her face.

A special friendship developed with both woman growing each other on different spiritual levels. Helen finds affirmation of herself in Elsa.

Elsa sees a woman who followed her spirit despite all the consequences it entails to her communal life.

'Helen says: 'You revived my life'p25

Helen addresses Elsa in her letter: 'My **very own and dearest little Elsie**'

Elsa says to Marius: ' I met the first free spirit I have ever known.'p.61

"She challenges me into an awareness of myself and my life, of my responsibilities to both that I never had until I met her.p61

- Focus on **love and trust** between Helen and Elsa. (The crude businessman and son joke which Elsa describes as ‘ugly’, Helen asks Elsa if you can love and trust one without the other. Elsa: ‘I went on loving David long after I realized I couldn't trust him anymore.’p21 ‘One of the lamps started smoking badly, and there was a little accident on the stove while you were making prickly pear syrup for me! Oh boy! You certainly can do it Helen! Don't let us ever talk again about trust between the two of us.’
- Also the **lost and revival** of trust (hidden suicide attempt, Elsa tells Helen about the abortion.). Final line in drama, ‘Open your arms I'm going to jump.’p76 The leap of faith.
- Marius says ‘ A true friendship should be able to accommodate a difference of opinion.’ p44

- "Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand: / Come see my shining palace built upon the sand!"
- Edna St. Vincent Millay



‘ It’s not just the statues that frightened them. They were throwing stones at something much bigger than that – you. Your life your beautiful light-filled glittering life. And they can’t leave it alone Helen, because they are so, so jealous of it.p63,64



Look, Marius! Look! Light.....That is what I do in here.....Light just one candle here, let in the light of just one little star and the dancing starts



I've taught it how to skip around corners. Yes I have!



Similarly, the house itself, which today may feel, to some, lonely and rather spooky, was Miss Helen's jewel box: her placement of mirrors, for instance, was carefully planned and very specific (as can be seen if you peek behind them – she marked out the spaces for them on the walls before beginning her colour-and-glass impasto), in order to bounce light through the entire house. Her ritual of lighting her vast collection of lamps and candles after dark was experienced by only a lucky few, but it was a wondrous sight they would remember forever.

When I lie in bed, and look in that mirror, I can see that mirror, and in that one I can see the full moon when it rises over the Sneeuberg behind my back! This is my world...

Helen created her own world, she made her East, West end her West East. (See the moon rising behind her back.)



‘And then this..., **your little miracle of light and color.**’
(Miss Helen is smiling with suppressed pride and pleasure)















‘Tell that its sculptor well
those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped
on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked
them and the heart that
fed.’

-Ozymandias-Percy Bysshe
Shelley 1792-1822

-Helen was a visionary
artist, and could only
create the pictures that
came from inside.

Athol Fugard also only
wrote this play once he held
a photograph of Helen and
Elsa, and the vision of the
play came.

Helen about her vision of her Mecca
-and that is where the wise men of the East study the celestial
geometry of light and colour. I became an apprentice that
night.p67







Find YOUR Mecca

Quotations

are all from Athol Fugard's drama,

The Road to Mecca

unless otherwise stated.

All images

were downloaded from various sites related to Google images : 'Helen Martins, owl-house' date of access 10 November 2013

Music:

BEST Music to Help Study and Work to (from Study Music Project) on YouTube

These are only ideas of possible themes in the book.

Enjoy reading the book!!

Visit the Owl house in New Bethesda South Africa

