



Historical Context

The background to the novel is apartheid South Africa, Sophiatown's imminent demolition, and the attempts by the government to suppress anti-apartheid activists by dispersing its inhabitants further from the city centre, into the South Western Township (Soweto).

From the 15th century onwards, Southern Africa became the interest of international powers due to its agricultural and mineral wealth. Although the British eventually replaced the Dutch as colonial masters, it was the Afrikaans-speaking descendants of the Dutch settlers who were the political majority in the white community. Through the creation of apartheid or 'separate development' races were segregated, and white superiority was established.

To keep the black population 'separate' from the white cities, makeshift settlements (townships) grew to house black workers outside the major cities. The people in these townships were denied access to basic amenities - one tap, no flushing toilets, no electricity. Slum demolition squads with bulldozers destroyed homes to ensure that there was a safe 'no-man's land' between the white suburbs and the townships. Parts of the townships were reduced to ruins. After slavery ended in 1833, blacks were required to carry passbooks to control the movement of black people. Passbook raids were a regular occurrence.

The Native Land Acts prohibited blacks from owning land in white areas of residence. Black Africans were also forced to live in 'homelands' where they could own land. Since this was the poorest agricultural land, many were forced to live in temporary buildings on the edge of the city where there might be work. Men frequently moved to cities for work, and women went into domestic service, leaving their children with extended families, in the 'Reserved Areas'. This disrupted family lives and had disastrous consequences for children.

Sophiatown, unlike other townships in South Africa, was a freehold township, where blacks were allowed to own land. As this land did not belong to the Johannesburg municipality, the houses were built according to people's finances, tastes, and cultural background. Eight or nine people lived in a single room and the houses hid backyards of shanties, since many Black property owners in Sophiatown were



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poor. Shebeens (informal and mostly illegal pubs), were one of the main forms of entertainment, but also a place to talk about daily worries, political ideas, fears and hopes.

The poverty, misery, violence and lawlessness of the city led to the growth of many gangs. Township youth were unable to find jobs easily. Employers were reluctant to employ teenagers as they did not have any work experience, and many of them were not able to read or write.

Sophiatown was a legendary, black, cultural hub that was destroyed under apartheid, rebuilt under the name of Triomf, and in 2006 officially returned to its original name. Despite the violence and poverty, it was the epicentre of politics, jazz and blues during the 1940s and 1950s. It produced some of South Africa's most famous writers, musicians, politicians and artists. The government began to dismantle Sophiatown under the guise of "slum clearance" but the real reason was to fulfil the apartheid government's plan to destroy mixed areas in order to enforce separate residential areas for people of different races.

Apartheid was a crime against humanity. Black South Africans fought these discriminatory practices and by the late 1940s, the African National Congress (ANC), increased its tactics to include strikes and acts of civil disobedience. One of the more violent protests took place in Sharpeville on March 21, 1960, against the passbook system. Police opened fire on protesters killing 69 and wounding many more. Another violent protest which took place in Soweto on June 16, 1976, was the students against the government's attempt to enforce the Afrikaans Language in Black South African schools. Estimates of deaths range from 176-700, with about 4000 injuries.

Apartheid ended in 1994, when South Africa held its first multi-racial elections.

Adapted from: <https://www.history.com/topics/africa/apartheid>

https://www.victoriaparkhigh.com/images/Lockdown/Grade11/Grade_11_Tsotsi_notes.pdf

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/gangsterism-sophiatown>

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/places/villages/gauteng/johannesburg/index.htm>