

Apartheid Laws and the Oppressed in South Africa: An Example of the Death of Sizwe Bansi by Athol Fugard

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Abstract:

From a historical and socio-political point of view, the possible situation in South Africa is that of the black majority living under an oppressive apartheid system engineered, manipulated and controlled by a white minority. Racism is the internal effect of the segregation policy of the white minority that has reduced blacks to the weak of the country. Racism here refers to a state of feeling alienated or separated from one's environment, whether culturally, socially, economically, politically or otherwise. Its impact on the social well-being of individuals cannot be overemphasized. South African playwright Athol Fugard's plays have a deep sympathy for the living conditions of black South Africans. The main literary themes of his plays include apartheid, oppression, extortion, and servitude. These and the inherent effects of apartheid laws on South Africa's oppressed are the main focus of Athol Fugard's plays. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is used as a case study in this submission.

Keywords: apartheid, subjugation, deprivation, racial segregation, black majority, white minority, oppression.

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Introduction

Athol Fugard is a South African playwright whose plays often concentrated on the theme of apartheid regime of which the resultant effect of the socio-political situation is racial discrimination. The black majority, who constitute the under privileged class, and who by virtue of their birth were the original owners of land, are discriminated against in their fatherland. The societal condition which Athol Fugard writes about is such that individuals are subjected to continual physical and psychological trauma which results in a state of discrimination. This paper intends to reveal the means and methods which

Fugard uses to expose racial discrimination in South Africa.

Racial discrimination means estrangement of blacks in their own land; a land of which by birth they are the rightful owners. Racial discrimination in South Africa can be said to be a relative term because it is caused by a number of factors such as racial segregation, oppression, frustration, deprivation, unemployment, subjugation and the problem of identity. All these factors come to play at one time or the other in Athol Fugard's plays in general and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* in particular. In this submission, racial

discrimination will be examined along the social, political, economic and cultural lines. The agents of alienation and the sufferers will be examined also. The play which the researcher will focus on, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* will be analyzed from his "Statement" plays. The play will be analyzed vis-a-vis the problems of racial discrimination.

The South African Society

Racial discrimination in South Africa cannot be fully understood without an insight into the background history of the South African society. This will reveal the socio-political development in the society which serves as the context for artistic writings in the country. According to Solomon Daves as quoted by Dennis Walder, "In no other country is there as direct an electrifying a relationship between an event on the stage and the social and political reality on the street" (5).

The oppression, dehumanization, debasement, frustration, and psychological depression of the black majority in South Africa dates back to the period of the struggle for supremacy among the different European nationalities, which came as a result of diverse historical circumstances to settle in the country. The Dutch's first appeared at the South African coast in 1652; the British and the French equally settled there as farmers, traders, and missionaries. The discovery of diamond in 1870 and 1886 respectively as well as the incursion of Germany, Sweden and Portugal only increased the number of white settlers, and this triggered off the struggle to gain control of the economy by dominating the mineral producing areas. The Dutch who were in minority accomplished their aim, usurped political power and declared a republic. The whites intermingled with the indigenous blacks and produced a new set of people, the coloureds or 'Mullatoes' who are neither pure whites nor pure blacks. As Akinwale Timi quoting Donald Denoon succinctly

puts it, "Their sense of having separate identity was quickly cultivated by the existence of a large and "alien" community among them" (15).

Socio-Political Situation in South Africa

The socio-political situation in South Africa is however a product of the European colonization and exploitation. The prevailing condition that existed was one in which the blacks lived as squatters and tenants on the land which they had previously owned; a land their fathers occupied originally, the land which formed the basis of their wealth, and the land the blacks have lived on freely. Repressive laws which restricted their movement were passed, reducing them to mere aliens in search of identity. The Native Land Act stipulated the areas for the blacks and the law on influx control bars their movement into the urban areas in search of jobs.

The white settlers on the other hand, came to see themselves over the years as having to enjoy a privilege position over the blacks, if not for anything else, for their "superior colour". Martin Lagassick asserts this in his statement on the crises in South Africa, "These whites find themselves in the unique and preposterous situation in which they are called upon to surrender their most coveted god-given rights, privileges and superiority for centuries now, they have been pampered and led to believe that the colour of their skin is indeed the deciding factor" (10).

Therefore, the changes which had taking place in South Africa then, had the first born of white racism fostered by the white settlers who had used their political and economic powers to reinforce notions of cultural superiority under their then newly acquired status. The whites who are less than thirty percent had made series of legislation to curtail the actions of the majority and keep them in perpetual servitude. They include laws on passes and permit to "white areas", poll tax receipt passes, lodgers permits, night special

passes for those night workers, monthly passes for Africans in employment, special passes for those in search of jobs, which lasts for six days, trek passes for the farm labourers, visitors passes and finally the identification passes, carried by all Africans with the exception of those who have been exempted from "Native" laws. Similarly, several laws and bills have been passed which stipulated certain laws on mixed marriages, emergency periods, separate amenities, crime, education and native laws. These laws were so numerous that one begins to wonder if the ordinary South African had a right to live at all. The legislation had redefined not only their social, political and economic position but also the worth of their lives. As Lawson Robert affirms, "... We no longer believe in the myth of the soul and dignity of man ...; men are fools, brawn and dust, machines are money brains and life (12).

The blacks are the backward race and have the inferior colour; they constitute the slave labour and live in black ghettos. Similarly, they are the slum dwellers packed together in workers' hostels where they could easily be reached by their overlords. A statement credited to the Native Commissioner in 1921, further highlights this fact:

... the town is a European area in which there is no place for the redundant Natives, who neither work nor serve his or her people but form a class, from which the professional agitators, the slum overlords, the liquor sellers, the prostitutes, and other undesirable class spring (25).

The coloureds whom to appropriate the title of one of Fugard's play had a "*Bloodknot*" with the whites received the same kind of treatment as that meted on the blacks. As Wale Ilori quoting Martin Orkin said, "... It has been estimated that by 1936, 38 percent of the people classified as white in the Cape Province were of mixed descent ... Laws were passed to introduce segregation on trains for "coloureds" to separate their living

areas from white and deprive them of the vote" (34).

Similarly, these economically exploited blacks deprived of their land as in Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* do not even possess free entry during the discharge of their duties, into white territories. This is the height of alienation of blacks in their own land. It is the passes which give them recognition as living beings. Once you lose your pass, you have lost your identity like in Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. Fugard condemns these repressive laws which among other things have been the bane of the common man's aspiration to live like another being on earth.

The concept of discrimination remains a recurrent phenomenon in the South Africa society. From the writers to the oppressed blacks, their experience is one of discrimination and exile. Book censorship whose priority should be to protect her citizens now poses a threat to these writers and individuals alike. James Olney puts the issue in a proper perspective when he asserts, "Looking back at South Africa from just over the horizon of exile in London or Accra or Lagos... all tell a story of their alienation from the land of their birth (15).

Racism could however be separated from exile since the alienated person needs not abandon his milieu in question. In fact, it can be said without mincing words that alienation is exile internalized. The fact that racism in South Africa takes its foothold from the concept of Apartheid in an Afrikaans word which means "a state of being apart", as applied to European and non Europeans. It is the volcano from which other problems erupt. *The American People's Encyclopedia* describes Apartheid as: the doctrine of complete racial discrimination:

The doctrine applies to native Africans (Negro), Asiatics (Indians) and coloured (persons of mixed European and Africa descent). It aims for complete social,

cultural and territorial segregation which are all sub-themes of alienation, the meaning of the concept of alienation as defined in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* becomes very appropriate: Racism is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work or self (362).

We can speak of estrangement as powerlessness. In other words, there is this feeling that one's destiny is determined by external forces: fate, luck or institutional arrangement and therefore not subject to his own control. The oppressed blacks can no longer make use of their own freewill, but live according to the dictates of the white minority. To such a person, life tends to be meaningless. Racism is further described as "normlessness". That is, one is no longer committed to share social prescription for behaviour. As a sign of protest against the whites, the oppressed South Africans deviate from societal norms and damn the consequences.

The communal way of life of the traditional African society has been broken; the South Africans are not ready to accept the "alien" culture (European culture) in their society. The family unit has been broken down and the future of the blacks labourers is no more than "a hewer of wood and stone"; this is cultural estrangement which is a sense of removal from the established values in the society. Moreover, urban individualism becomes the after effect of social isolation in South Africa because of their predicament. This is the height of social discrimination of individuals in their own land. In addition, racial discrimination has fostered a kind of psychological imprisonment of the oppressed in this society.

The ordinary South African during the apartheid regime was a shattered man; he was one whose thoughts could not be relied upon, not because he lacked intelligence but due to the prevailing circumstances which had affected his psyche. All he seemed to think about is the

situation in which he had found himself and how it had affected him and his family in the rural areas. There was no room for thoughts of development of the community but of the unending struggle for survival. He was shut out completely from his society. When he was occasionally given such privilege as education, it was for the benefit of the white masters. They were trained in segregated schools to remain in lower cadre to become clerks, messengers, cleaners and did all possible odd jobs. In general, the blacks were the unskilled labourers. They were equally discriminated against in their ways and are continuously affected psychologically; this brought discontentment which led to series of regular protests and strikes in South Africa.

Their state and position in the social stratification was equally highlighted. Fugard later shifted to the political plays where he defines the position of man in such a context. Despite the threats, arrests, violence, censorship of plays and exile which are conditioned by the socio-political circumstances in South Africa as highlighted earlier, Fugard has not relented in presenting the effects of apartheid on South Africans. He has succeeded in retracing the course of history in his plays; linking the past to the present and projecting a future for South Africans.

Notwithstanding the fact that the marginalization of the black majority by the white minority in South Africa is a thing of the past, the experience was traumatic. Though it is no longer what it used to be in South Africa, it is not out of place to talk about racial discrimination in South Africa and how it is exposed or presented in many contemporary plays especially plays by Athol Fugard.

Consequences or Effects of Apartheid Laws on South Africans

Apartheid was officially incorporated by the Afrikaner Nationalist Party in 1948. It was a system of legal discrimination,

effectively revoking the rights of about 25 million blacks for a period of over 30 years in favour of about 5 million whites who were at the helms of affairs. The laws established under apartheid combined earlier segregation laws and customs into a new comprehensive code of racial statues, and had as its main aim the establishment of legal separation and white supremacy rule. In total, 317 laws came into effect legally affecting all aspects of life for black people including land, ownership, freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and right to vote, constitutional rights and other general rights property. The group areas Act of 1950 established the distinct areas in which black and white people were allowed to live and work, favourably setting aside urban, industrial and agricultural areas for the whites only. It prohibited blacks from renting or occupying property in ‘whites-only’ zones.

The “Bantu Authorities Act of 1951” stripped blacks of their right to participate in national government. The Act created a basis for ethnic government in African reserves known as “homelands”. These “homelands” were established by national government to function as independent statues, effectively restricting every black Africans political right to his designated “homeland”, including his right to vote and ultimately forfeiting the citizenship of black South Africans. Homelands were created from 1916-1981, denationalizing about 9 million South Africans with laws so strict and severe that blacks had to obtain passports to enter their own country. Pass laws were brutally enforced by police and anyone caught in the streets after curfew was physically dealt with, and in most cases had their passes revoked.

These passes mainly applied to gardeners and house-maids only, which were expected to enter or live in white areas for work. Typically, this pass did not extend to the spouses of these workers. So the

effects of long period of separation from families were the norm. As a result, cases abounded of families consisting of a mother residing with a white family (typically getting leave over Christmas to see her family), a father who most probably worked on the mines or a farm throughout the year, and the children left in the location (raised by the eldest of the family). These factors obviously influenced various elements in immeasurable ways. The direct impact it must have had on the nations AIDS and education statistics alone is staggering.

Pass laws (The “Pass Laws” Act of 1952) required all black South Africans over 16 to carry a pass book called a "Dompas". Similar to a passport, it contained more detailed information on the individual, including fingerprint, photograph, details of employment, government authorization to be in a particular area of the country, qualification to work and a reference letter from one's employer elaborating on one's performance and general behavior. Should a worker displease his employer, and he in turn decline to endorse the “Dompas”, this would jeopardize the worker’s right to stay in that particular area, thus allowing whites total power over blacks in general: “... Forgetting to carry a Dompas, misplacing it, or have it stolen resulted in arrest and expulsion to a Bantustan (61).

Each year, over 125000 blacks were arrested for technicalities bothering on Dompas, effectively making it the most hated symbol of the Apartheid era. In term of constitutional right, blacks forfeited their civil rights under several laws passed by national government. The suppression of communism Act of 1950 forbade blacks to engage in political activity and exercise their democratic rights. It banned any type of opposition, communist or otherwise, and allowed the government to oppress any person or group they felt posed a threat to the system of Apartheid. The separate Representation, of Voter Act terminated the right of blacks to vote in

national elections. Any who rejected these restriction risked imprisonment or death.

Since 1963 the police killed over one hundred people in confinement, imprisoned tens of thousands; more died in political protests, gunned down by police or military. Regarding general laws, the Population Registration Act of 1950 required all South Africans citizens to be classified into categories according to race. The categories were: White, Black (African) and Coloured (People of mixed descent). The "Reservation of Separate Amenities Act" created separate public facilities to be used by black and white people in South Africa. Under the public safety and Criminal Law Amendment Acts, officials possessed the power to declare states of emergency and increase penalties for protesting against any or supporting the repeal of any government established law.

The most notable of these was the state of emergency declared in 1960, during a peaceful protest at Sharpeville. Large groups of blacks attempted to overthrow the pass laws by refusing to carry their Dompas. According to police "The protest became violent, resulting in the new infamous "Sharpeville shootings", where about 69 blacks were killed and about 187 seriously wounded.

Another historical turning point happened in June, 1976, when students protested being educated in Afrikaans as main language. More than 10000 engaged in the peaceful protest. Feeling threatened, police unjustifiably opened fire. In the end, over 100 blacks died as a result (Police line 10).

In the 1980's the fight for liberation rose to new height. As resistance to Apartheid continued to grow, a state of emergency was declared in some parts of the country in July of 1985, which lasted until 1990. In February, 1990, the Apartheid regime was forced to recognize the ANC and other affiliated organizations, indicating the government's willingness to solve and

overcome the country's political problems peacefully. In 1991, Nelson Mandela was elected president, thus bringing to an end the Apartheid regime.

Analysis of Sizwe Bansi is Dead

This play dramatizes life in response to specific apartheid laws, such as the pass laws and the immorality Act respectively. Taking all these laws into cognizance, one begins to understand what Lewis Nkosi says in his book, *Exile and Tradition*, "The total effects of the Apartheid laws in South Africa is to make it almost illegal to live. Before you are through reading about what the black is not allowed to do, you begin to wonder if there is anything he is permitted to do" (107).

Athol Fugard wrote his "Statement" plays at a time when the influx of blacks from their ghettos to the industrialized areas was on the increase in South Africa. The characters represent the new working class of blacks who emerged in the cities as a result of this development. Fugard gives us an insight into the living conditions of the workers in Port Elizabeth, the kind of work they do and the effects the plight has on them. These developments have, however, fostered a new kind of intimacy between the blacks and whites.

The importance of Port Elizabeth and her economic significance cannot be overemphasized. At the period when Fugard wrote, the number of industries especially Motor Assembly plants were on the increase in Port Elizabeth. Blacks, coloureds and whites alike moved there in search of jobs. As the population continued to increase, the government of South Africa under the oppressive regime promulgated certain laws to check the influx of people especially the underprivileged. Fugard in collaboration with John Kani and Winston Ntshona has carefully merged this setting with the character of Styles who acts as an overseer of all the events, in the development of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

The play opens in the photo studio, which belong to Styles, a brilliant photographer and a former worker in a Ford assembly plant. He is reading the headlines of a newspaper and thereby involves himself in a dramatic monologue. He takes us to his days at Ford motors; we follow him on a visit round the plant and the preparations made towards the visit of Ford. Styles gives us an insight into the working conditions of the unskilled labourers, where he belongs. Tired of serving the Whiteman, Styles leaves Ford after six years to set up his photo studio. He gets a decrepit shop next to a funeral parlour, engages in a war against cockroaches and sets up a studio: a strong room of dreams. It is not until preparations were made for the arrival of Henry Ford III, that the alienated workers know the danger points in the company. Special attention is given here in Styles' monologue to the deplorable conditions under which they worked. The capitalists in American in their relationship with the Afrikaners have helped to strengthen the power of certain apartheid laws, especially in the oppression and economic exploitation of South Africans. All they are interested in is the profit which they make and not the welfare of their unskilled labourers. The action of Mr. Ford during his visit throws more light on this issue:

...One ...two...three... out!
that's all, didn't talk to me, Mr.

Baas

Bradle, line supervisor or anybody.

He

didn't even look at the plant (8).

Reports of the low wages of workers are often noted in newspaper pages, yet no good seems to come out of it. This justifies why the man "without a name" still has a choice of whether to work in the mine or not. It is fear, frustration and insecurity that make such a person to say, "there is no money there, you can die there" (26).

Styles' studio, a home of dreams where realities are forgotten with "a smile", is a

miniature of the entire South African society. We see all those South Africans who have come to take "snapshots" either to re-establish their legitimacy or as a keepsake in remembrance of their family members whom they have been away from. Sizwe's visits for a snapshot gives us an insight into the subtle effects of apartheid pass laws on the individual. The problem of accommodation which the black aliens face is further shown in the trouble Styles goes through to get a store in a very bad state as his photographic studio. It is this same permit that Sizwe needs to secure a partial house in New Brighton.

In addition to this, the influx control (for the control of movement of blacks into major towns), deprives Sizwe of a job. His attempt to secure self employment, in his bid to sell potatoes, proved futile because he does not have access to the Hawker's permit. Racism has certified the Blackman an alien in his own fatherland. Being born in South Africa does not give you easy access to all necessities as a citizen. Sequel to this, Buntu says:

If I tell you the trouble I had before I could get the right stamp in my book, even though I was born in this area! The trouble I had before I could get a decent job ... born in this area! The trouble I had to get this two-roomed house...born in this area (27).

The lack of freedom makes Sizwe a dejected man. Buntu is apprehensive of the dilemma of the oppressed blacks; they till the soil, mine the gold and minerals deposits, do all the menial jobs and can only be happy when they are dead. When his passbook reads King Williams town, not only did he not get a job, his passbook declares it illegal for him to remain there. His lodger's permit only lasts for three days. Sizwe is bent on staying because there is no job in his town, so he stays with Buntu, who explains further the implication of his act. After one of their escapades at a local beer parlour, in the

drunken state they see a dead man who has a passbook containing all vital information, like name, address identification number and the workers permit. Against all odds, Sizwe acquires the passbook and changes the passbook photograph. He becomes transformed into the dead man. Robert Zwelinzima, gets a job and takes a "snapshot" to send to his wife, Nowetu, in King Williams town.

The oppressed people need passbooks, a sign of acceptance and submission to the colonizers; it also serves as an autobiography of the black man. Apart from the passes such as reference books, residential permits, hawker's permit, lodger's permit, the worker's permit and so on, they equally need the Native identification number which is more important than the real name of the oppressed in South African. The concentration of houses for the unskilled workers in the slum and in hostels breached the protection of citizens which the residential permit stipulates. All citizens are supposed to be housed in conducive environments and not in ghettos.

The dead ones do not even have a thing left to his name, except of course pictures left in a box like Style's father's which is full of memories. It could be likened to the "rubbish" in Fugard's *Hello and Goodbye*. The journey towards fulfillment gets to its peak at "Sky's place", the beer parlour where Sizwe's baptism started. Like Buntu and Styles who are already aware and all out to confront the black problem, Sizwe accepts the fact that he is a "man". He is optimistic about the need for a change in a world which according to Buntu, "...allows us nothing ... there is nothing we can leave behind except the memories of ourselves" (38).

Sizwe's world of illusion has changed to reality and he accepts the identity of the dead man to survive because there is no difference between a ghost and the

oppressed in South Africa then. Buntu declares that when he says:

Wasn't Sizwe Bansi a ghost? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N. 1 number? Isn't that a ghost? When the Whiteman sees you walk down the Street and calls out 'Hei' John! Come here ...To You, Sizwe... Isn't that a ghost? Or when His little child calls you 'Boy'... You a man circumcised with wife and children... Isn't that a ghost? Stop fooling ourselves ...is a real ghost... That is... what they have turned us into. Spook them into hell, man! (38).

Buntu, Sizwe and Styles envisage a radical change. They believe it is time the Blackman stopped the Whiteman from calling him all kinds of names which are not his, free themselves from the bond of passbooks and don't run to him, Whiteman, I'm a man! (43). It will be ideal at this point to say that the situation of the black "aliens" in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is metaphorical. It can be likened to the alienated South Africans who leave their ghettos, everyday for the industrialized areas in search of jobs. They are faced with all forms of dehumanization, racial segregation, oppression, unemployment and injustice. While in these areas, they must carry their passes to the church, streets and working places to prevent arrest and police brutality, like Sizwe's arrest at Zola's place.

The man who visits Styles to get a snapshot would welcome his position as a chief messenger with a smile; this he would attain after a correspondence examination. This is exactly the kind of education that will keep them in the position of the unskilled labourers. The image of the dead man reveals many facts about the society where there are no fundamental rights. Every man lives in frustration and loneliness. They isolate their fellowmen because they care less about another man. This is implied in the abandoning of the dead man by Sizwe and Buntu. Urban individualism is inevitable

in this kind of situation. The loneliness which man suffers is as a result of the weakness in his fighting spirit; in essence that questioning spirit in South Africans is dead. Athol Fugard highlights in his play the need for awareness and rebellion against the oppressors. The South Africans should “smile” at their plight and face themselves from servitude like Styles. Awareness should be able to help and convince their fellow oppressed on the need for a change.

Conclusion

The play is an anti-apartheid struggle; it is effective in portraying the traumas of racial tensions in the lives of both whites and blacks in South Africa. It presents bleakness and frustration of life especially for those on the fringes of society. Racial discrimination in South Africa then made the owners of the land which are the blacks an alien on their own land. Being born there did not give them easy access to all the necessities as citizens. The lack of freedom makes Sizwe a dejected man. Buntu is apprehensive of the dilemma of the oppressed blacks; they till the soil,

mine the gold and mineral resources, do all menial jobs and find their only moment of bliss at death. The dead ones do not even have a thing left to his name, except of course pictures left in a box like Style's father's which is full of memories.

Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* shows the effects of apartheid and theme of racism in South Africa. The quest for freedom is a phenomenon which runs through the play and in most of Fugard's plays. The play neutralizes the reality of the present and projects a future for the South Africans. He also tries to put this kind of consciousness into the lives of the oppressed people in South Africa.

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