

**RE-WRITING SOCIETY THROUGH THE DRAMATIC EXPLORATION OF
ATHOL FUGARD IN *SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD***

BY

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ABSTRACT

Plays are created from and exist within the society. Therefore, a playwright does not operate in a vacuum, thus reflecting on the needs of the society in his dramatic writings. A playwright in this milieu is ganged by how he sees the society and points the way forward for possible change. This study is anchored on Marxist Sociological Theory and adopted Political Theatre approach as framework to connect with representation in society. To this regard, this article evaluates the dramatic exploration of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* in the citizens' quest for better living condition in a society bedeviled with economic recession, discriminating legislation, social injustice and political instability. The study employed qualitative methodology to explore resourceful materials. Therefore, the method of this research is based on content analysis and library research as well as critical analysis of texts for insightful purpose. This work recommends more encouragement to scholar-artists, most especially the playwrights, to mirror, depict and replicate the ailing state of the society in order to stimulate actions in an effort to chart a course for the restoration of economic balance, political suffrage, human's dignity, equal rights and justice. However, the reason for the selection of this play is because its contents reflect the present global human struggles for survival in a failing and ailing economy. This work also recommends the use of plays by playwrights as an instrument of addressing political and socio-economic issues in the society.

INTRODUCTION

The notion behind the phrase "Re-writing" as used in this work connotes re-engineering, galvanizing, chatting courses and prescriptive mirroring of the society. It also depicts the state of the society, the way it is, and the way it should be. It is from this perspective that we are going to consider Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and the scenario as played out in the defunct apartheid South African society.

It is a fact that playwrights reflect the overall state of societal developments in their creative dramatic writings. The idea is to give clear and detailed information about the state of

the people, their plight and condition. The ultimate aim is to expose the evil, wickedness, corruption, intrigue, propaganda, economic degradation and other social vices inherent in such a society. Suffice it to say that a playwright uses his dramatic writings to foster the course of effecting societal transformation positively.

It is noteworthy to observe that in quest for survival in the then apartheid South Africa, Athol Fugard, in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, embarks on re-writing the society in an effort to restore socio-political equity, economic balance, human dignity, equal rights and justice. The idea of quest for survival as applicable in this work is to appeal for a positive change - an effort aimed at putting a new structure in the society.

THE PLAYWRIGHT AND SOCIETY

There is an inter-link between the playwright and his society. The connecting factor is that they both affect each other- the playwright does not exist in, or write from a vacuum; and the society cannot function properly without a watchdog that observes, criticizes and ridicules its environment in an attempt to make a change for the better.

In any society, the playwright uses plays as a medium of communicating and proffering checks and balances. The playwright, as stated earlier, is the watchdog of the society. He does this critically, probing into the goings-on in the society. In the process, he exposes human failures and lapses. According to Olaniyan: "He is the questioner and the implacable critic of the mores and attitudes and myths of his society, but he is also the aspiration of his people" (166). It is pertinent to say that plays are the products of what is happening in the society. From the ancient Greek society through the Elizabethan and the Renaissance to contemporary society, playwrights have always used dramatic writings to explore relevant societal issues. The following are examples: in ancient Greece there was Aristophanes in *Lysistrata*; Medieval society's attempt to instill morality in *Everyman*; intrigues and secret love affairs in Restoration comedies as can be seen in *The Way of the World* by William Congreve; the problem of identity in the Victorian society as depicted by Oscar Wilde in *The Importance Of Being Earnest* and political dictatorship in contemporary Africa as captured by Wole Soyinka in *Kongi's Harvest*, *The Play of Giants*, to mention but a few. In lieu of criticizing and eliminating social vices through drama, "the playwright's subject, then are human beings..." (Wilson 150).

In re-writing the society, the playwright uses his plays to x-ray the economic situation, political development, social status, moral decadence as well as other prevalent conditions in the society and seeks to rehabilitate the lives of the people for meaningful existence. The playwright frequently confronts the evil that is prevalent in his society through his artistic and dramatic writing, employing the tool language. In mirroring the society, the playwright's mission is to sensitize the people into their responsibilities of righting the wrongs and challenge the ills in the social system for a free and liberated society.

From the above perspective, the playwright becomes a visioner, a missionary, teacher and a catalyst to the society, stirring the consciousness of the people in the society towards a positive change. The playwright is a part of the society. He comes face to face with displeasurable developments like economic recession, political instability, ethnicity, tribalism, corruption, dictatorship and of course, apartheid - in the case of Athol Fugard's South Africa. The playwright writes about his detest action and dissatisfaction in the form of a play, in order to create awareness on the need for positive change. Sometimes, playwrights are accused of being anti-social. They are also seen as invaders, outsiders, subversive elements and anti-government. It is quite correct to submit that the playwright is thus motivated by the society and the society is affected by the playwright.

A BRIEF BIO-DATA OF ATHOL FUGARD

Athol Fugard was born on June 11, 1932 in Middleburgh, a small village in Keroo district in South Africa to an English-speaking father and Afrikaner mother. At the age of three, the family moved to Port Elizabeth, an industrial city on the Indian is an Ocean where he spent most of his life and where he was to set most of his plays.

He began his higher education studying motor mechanics at the technical college, and later at Cape Town University to study philosophy and social anthropology. After three years, he quit school and became a merchant seaman in North Africa and spent two years sailing around the Far East. In 1956, he returned to Port Elizabeth and got a job writing news bulletins for the South African Broadcasting Corporation. That year, he married Sheila Meiring, an actress. Together, they started an experimental theatre group for which Fugard wrote plays. While in Johannesburg, he had many Black people as his friends and became fully aware of the racial problems in the country. Drawing from these experiences, he wrote his first full-length play, *No-Good Friday and Nongogo (A Woman for Twenty-Five Cents)* (1959). After the production of the latter play, he was appointed to the position of Stage Manager in the National Theatre Organization. His popular plays are *The Blood Knot* (1961), *Hello and Goodbye* (1969), *Boseman and Lena* (1969), *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* (1974). Fugard's works also include *A Lesson from Aloes* (1978), and *The Road To Mecca* (1984). He also published a novel, more recent plays are: *A Place With A Pigs* (1987), *My Children! My Africa!* (1989), *Playland* (1999) and the *Captain's Tiger* (1998), as well as other novels. Athol Fugard, an actor, novelist, and activist is a poetic playwright, but his works are valued more as a testimony against apartheid than as interplay of emotions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this essay is anchored on the revolutionary Marxist Sociological Theory and approach advocating that a playwright should take position implicitly in the social issues bothering his society in terms of situation, choice, commitment, responsibility and

freedom (Bamidele 15). Based on the aforementioned theory, this study hinges on the concept of "Political Theatre". As the name implies, political theatre or political plays reject dominion through conventions. So, it usually embraces alternative strategies. It derives its style from the pursuit for empowerment of the oppressed. According to Jenkeri O. Okwori, political theatre: "describes the kind of theatre practice that seeks to contradict and undermine an ineffective, biased and oppressive social system" (Okwori 95). From the foregoing, it could be seen that the theatre as an art as always measured the heart-beats of the socio-political system, reflecting it, perpetuating it, changing it and in the process re-writing the society.

Political Theatre is message-oriented to readers and audience through realistic plays as replicated by Athol Fugard in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. "Yet the messages of contemporary political theatre tend to be fused into the process of theatre, so that the politics of the play come into being, not in the prepared script of the play but in our experience as an audience" (Worthen 545). To corroborate his assertion, Worthen submits that "political theatre since Brecht, has worked to make the audience's performance in the theatre a recognizably political one" (544).

Political theatre tends to argue on the place of political power and economic strength being in the hands of the people. It energizes them and moves them into taking decisions which can change their lives positively. Political theatre addresses itself to political and economic policies as they affect the economic lives of the people. This was the case in South Africa during the apartheid years. In a way, political theatre is subversive, and this is what determines its production style as seen in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. "Political Theatre" as earlier stated, derives its production style from the empowerment of the oppressed. Drewal (Agomuo 34) argues that in style: "...techniques... should be understood as resources for negotiation; that knowledgeable agents deploy critically in specific performance either for complicity or resistance".

Political Theatre afforded Athol Fugard the advantage of using the stage for a more immediate and direct relationship with his audience. Through this method, he discovered that he could say a lot to the people. His theme hovers around part of the wider society in terms of political and economic policies that negatively affect the economic lives of the people and the inhuman restrictions on man by the society. The aim of "political theatre" in placing power in the hands of the people to crave for positive change is related to "Marxist's approach". The Marxist's approach to sociology of literature is that a "poem, play or novel should be used as a weapon for change" (Bamidele 16).

Fugard, in using political theatre as his theoretical framework, rejected all the conventional, "pre-fabricated" text usually offered to actors from the beginning of rehearsals and began his work without the usual constraint of plot and sequential dramatic logic. He merely gives the actors what he calls a "mandate" which is not a plotted, structural text, but a cluster of images on which they work to express the anguish of the hopeless, as seen in *Sizwe*

Bansi Is Dead. Athol Fugard, puts it this way: "...instead of putting words on paper in order to arrive eventually at the stage and live performance, I was able to write into its space and silence via the actor" (Preface). Commenting on Fugard and the concept of political theatre, Julian Mitchol in *Athol Fugard In London*, said: "... The best politics, like the best theatre, is about people..." (Jones 131).

In *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, Athol Fugard indicts the authoritarian and inhuman regime of the racist using compassionate and humorous examination of everyday lives of apartheid South Africa, and in the process, advocates for *change*.

SYNOPSIS: SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD

The play's central character is Sizwe Bansi, who wants to work and live Port Elizabeth, but because of the apartheid law that forbids the blacks and whites living together in particular towns, he could not succeed. Sizwe is despondent. On returning from a binge at a local bar one night, his friend, Buntu, discovers a passport on a dead man across the road. Buntu persuades Sizwe to pick the passport, because it could help him secure a permit to Port Elizabeth. Sizwe hesitates, but later sums up courage to pick the passport. He thus assumes the dead man's identity, Robert Zwellingzima, in order to live and work in Port Elizabeth.

CRITICAL APPRAISAL

In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Athol Fugard presents Sizwe as a man whose economic condition reflects, in totality, the agony of South Africans under the apartheid pass-laws. The decision by Buntu to give Sizwe a treat in the local bar shows the extent of their frustration. However, the stumbling on a dead man and "stealing" of the passport seem absurd to a man that was fighting inhumanity – an action owed to economic frustration and an option to survive it. Although it could be assumed that what happened was as a result of alcoholic effect, Sizwe's decision to make use of the passport to secure his permit without any respect to the dead pricks morality and conscience.

Man: ... No, Buntu

Buntu: It's a chance

Man: Haai, haai, haai...

Buntu: It's your only chance

Man: No, Buntu! What's it means? That me, Sizwe Bansi ...

Buntu: Is dead

Man: I'm Not dead, friend

Buntu: We burn this book... (Sizwe's original) ... and Sizwe Bansi
disappears off the face of the earth.

In the play, Fugard characterizes Buntu in an attempt to teach the audience that the best strategy to survival in economic recession is self-interest, even in the face of inhuman and ruthless world. In the dialogue between Sizwe and Buntu, there is an indictment of the "pass" system. The play fully reflects the problem of inferiority which the black man in South Africa experiences. The African man, no matter his status, is nothing to a white-kid as every black man is reduced to a "pass-book" and a "boy". Buntu laments:

...It's like my father's hat. Special hat, man! Carefully wrapped in plastic on top of the wardrobe in his room. God help the child who so much as touches it. Sunday it goes on his head, and a man, full of dignity, a man I respect walks down the street Whiteman stops him: come here. Kaffir! What does he do? (... whips off the hat and crumples it in his hands as he adopts a frowning servile pose in front of the white man. What is it Baas? Fugard, (a: 38).

Besides highlighting the economic impoverishment of the blacks in South Africa, Fugard attacks the Ciskeian independence which does not in anyway, improve the living condition of the blacks. Sizwe asks: "put a man in pandock and call that independence?" (31) In the play, Fugard portrays the Blacks as a courageous and relentless people who do not fold their arms to watch recession, oppression and degradation. Buntu advises his fellow Blacks:

...next time you hear a Whiteman say "John" to you, don't say "Ja Baas!" and next time the bloody Whiteman says to you, a man "Boy come here", don't run to him and lick his arse like we all do. Face him and tell him, Whiteman, I'm a man! (43).

Fugard cleverly avoided mentioning the theory of apartheid in raw term but creatively explains what it is like to have a black skin and live in apartheid South Africa.

Finally, in the play, Robert (Sizwe) is asked to smile before the camera while the audience is left with the feeling of uneasiness about the outcome of the false identity game that Buntu persuades him to play. Style's final message to "Robert" carries a literal meaning; for him, *smiles* in the context of the play, involves the adoption of a false identity. It also means an acceptance of a personality torn between a public image and economic suppressed private reality, which are at odds. Athol Fugard has exercised caution in the focus he gave to the situations and characters he has chosen to sketch the play. The *laughter* is a little too light, the

smiles too thin, but both are not enough responses to a painful reality of racism in South Africa, (Jeyifo 537).

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN *SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD*

There is a deliberate effort on the part of many playwrights in re-writing the society and also accessing the pattern of survival of the people mostly under severe economic hardship, so as to awaken the socio-political consciousness of the people through their dramatic writings. Athol Fugard, to this regard, is a paradigmatic of this. He, in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* dwells on the government failure to make means of livelihood affordable to the citizen the struggle for survival, economic exploitation and the illegal methods adapted by the citizens in an attempt to sustain living.

Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is an artistic medium of expression, committed to the furtherance of a socio-political revolution. This is in the sense that the play serves as a pointer to the socio-political problem of some government in providing necessary and vital needs for its citizens, like when Buntu says...

...That poor bastard, I passed out there in the dark... Look, if someone was to offer me the things I wanted most in my life, the things that would make me, my wife and my child happy, in exchange for the name Buntu... You think I wouldn't swop? (Fugard 42).

In this play Athol Fugard sets out to challenge the socio-political situation in a country that the economy has failed woefully, promoting the citizens to legalize illegalities in an attempt to survive and he further in an attempt to survive and he further the theme of survival in a country through the dramatic characterization styles and his strategies to live as a result of the deteriorating – economic condition.

For instance, Buntu protests:

Who is going to lend money to somebody endorsed to hell and gone out in the bush? And how you going (sic) to buy your potatoes at the market without Hawker's licence? Same story, Sizwe... If you need work, so bad, go knock on the door of the Mines Recruiting Office (Fugard 26).

In the case of Outa Jacob, one of the characters in the play, his story is within the main plot of the play and stands out as the absolute image to enforce the concept of socio-political consciousness. His youth and energy have been expended working timelessly for the white man but little or nothing to show for it. In the play, he is kicked out of employment by an employer's son who simply did not like him. Finally, Outa Jacob is forced to take to the road with his entire family. With his load on his back, he walked the roads of the level. At last he died homeless, penniless and forgotten.

In his notion of socio-political consciousness, Athol Fugard relates the Blacks and their plight in South African experience while by extension criticizes and addresses a number of other socio-political problems in the African continent that have devastating impact on the governed in the land of abundance. Athol Fugard uses this play for effective conscientization of the Africans as well as the oppressed people towards promoting socio-political awareness. The most effective elements in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard are his choice of subject and the thematic pre-occupation of exposing the ills and suffering in the society thereby calling for a change. The message in the play is all about socio-political consciousness or awareness creation in a failing society or country in order to ensure socio-economic survival for the citizens.

THE VISION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC INFLUENCE IN *SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD* BY ATHOL FUGARD

For better understanding of vision and socio-economic influence in this play, it is pertinent to have in mind that Athol Fugard carefully sets the play to replicate the hardship in the apartheid South Africa, the economic situation and the social condition witnessed by the citizens. He makes sure that the principal characters in the play are almost entirely a reflection of the real personages.

In this context however, the word 'vision' refers to the ability to see and plan the future intellectually while dramatizing the situation on ground as it affects the citizenry. The playwright's vision, therefore, is the natural, self-discovered opinion regarding the socio-economic plight of the people which every writer or author employs in his/her creative pieces.

However, part of what any playwright has to say, comes while he is actually writing and thus vision is creatively considered, built and shaped by the playwright's perception of the life itself. The playwright envisions a society in jeopardy, mostly when the economic lives of the people are involved as a result of failure on the part of governmental policies or corrupt activities of those in positions of authority. He writes down his observations and crafts them into a theatrical performance to either warm or correct the system. He, in doing so, helps in planning the future of the people and through his vision fights against social disharmony, economic degradation, injustice, discrimination, poverty, and corruption, etc.

The ultimate aim is to expose the condition in order to stir the consciousness of the people and at the same time attract the attention of those in authority to become aware (if they are not) of the real situation on ground, all in an effort to mould a better society. The expression, “Socio-economic influence,” has to do with the effect that a particular thing, action or deed has on the life of a person or lives of persons in the society. This implies that the playwright is basically influenced also by the society he finds himself and the development surrounding it.

Athol Fugard in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* writes extensively on the level of poverty occasioned by the apartheid regime in South Africa. He showcases the different levels of poverty: political poverty, material (economic) poverty, as well as spiritual poverty. As a result of the peculiar social system in South Africa, the Blacks are in abject penury, economic hardship, physical suffering. Athol Fugard, creatively tries to portray all these through the characters in the play.

When Styles asks Dhlamini for a solution to the menace of the cockroaches, he is advised to get a cat. A cat does not normally feed on cockroaches. Cats are commonly used to control and check the activities of mice in the house. But because of the adverse economic situation of the people, even the mice have suddenly become a luxury. In an affluent society a cat will even be given milk. Dhlamini tells Styles that only the babies drink milk – if there is any.

Through a series of rhetorical questions, Dhlamini paints a vivid picture of the penury of the black people. In a society where cats do not have access to mice because the children kill them for food, where is the hope of healthy posterity. Styles was given a cat in just one night, the cockroaches were gone. The cat must have gone hungry for a longtime. There is no portrayal or suggestion by the playwright in the play that the adverse socio-economic situation of the blacks is as a result of laziness, rather it seems to be an established accompaniment to their lives (Fugard 51).

Sizwe in the play is being depicted as a symbol and object of poverty. Without a job and a house, what has he to offer his family? Manhood is not only measured in terms of how many children one can father but in being able to stand up for oneself and being able to afford the luxury of pride. In this regard, all Blacks are poor. When Sizwe, out of frustration asks the audience to assess him and see if one really wonders if he is serious “Buntu”, he says “does the book tell you I’m a man?” The book of course is the passbook and this is the most potent and eloquent symbol of the devastating economic effect of the government’s failed policies on the citizens (Fugard 52).

Athol Fugard in exposing and tackling the economic recession in South Africa during apartheid, in his play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, has vividly painted for us the pictures of different forms and levels of economic survival in the lives of his characters.

DRAMATIC EXPLORATIONS OF ATHOL FUGARD

Political Theatre, afforded Athol Fugard the opportunity and advantage of utilizing the stage to affect the lives of the audience. In the dramatic explorations of Athol Fugard to utilize the stage to affect the lives of the audience in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, certain styles and techniques could be discerned through which the playwright preached politics. Some of them include:

1. **SETTING:** The geographical setting of the play is South Africa, where apartheid was practiced as a policy. The play is principally set in Styles' photographic studio. This studio is used as an escapist world for frustrated souls. It is situated next door to a funeral parlour. The studio is presented as a bubbling place while the funeral parlour is a solemn place.

While Sizwe tells and acts out his story in the studio, it metamorphoses into Buntu's house, and then to a local bar. With minimal setting and props, the play is stagey and easy to produce. The restriction in setting could also be a statement on the lives of the blacks in apartheid South Africa.

2. **THEME AND LANGUAGE:** The play is a statement about life and death. The experiences of the three characters: Styles, Sizwe and Buntu, under a bitter political system, make them resort to finding peace in death. Sizwe is called to "live" in Robert Zwelinzima. Buntu "kills" him by replacing Robert's picture with Bansi's in the passbook. Fugard uses "silent characters"; the Blacks are dead emotionally, the joy of life eludes them. The only respite is dead.

Also, the play has no violent scene or language. The theme is all about struggle (protest play) but the playwright creatively crafts the play so as not to incur the wrath of the government. The language of the play is simple to understand. The message is direct and padded with lots of humour to purge the emotions.

3. **SYMBOLS AND IMAGERY:** There is an effective use of symbols and imagery in the play. They are well used to present concrete events, places and institutions or even persons which Fugard may not want to mention directly.

The studio is a symbol of the nation itself; the cockroaches are the white oppressors, while "Doom" represents the feeble attempt to eradicate apartheid. "Another Book" represents the Book of Judgment. The camera is symbolic; through the lens, Styles sees what people want to look like. The technique of using symbols and imagery is effective because it allows the playwright to attack social issues without fear of being harassed by those in authority.

4. USE OF SIMPLE PROSE: Fugard avoids the use of poetic or high-flowing language. Instead, he employs simple and direct dialogue. This he does by giving dialogues to characters to talk about lives and predicaments. He uses direct address- to underscore the point that apartheid is a negative system. He also uses direct address to involve the audience in the action of the play.
5. FLASHBACK TECHNIQUE: The most important, is the use of flashback where scenes are recalled into the present for several reasons. Such an approach facilitates an understanding of the present and future from the past. For instance, Styles' flashback of his years in the factory under Mr. Ford is what led him to become a photographer.
6. USE OF MIMES AND REMINISCENCES: in using mimes and reminiscences, much is said in silence, and this has a strong effect on the audience. With these techniques, Fugard is able to dramatize the political upheavals as well as satirize the despotic government in South Africa.
7. CHARACTERIZATION: Athol Fugard vividly paints good pictures of different forms on his characters in the play with distinct traits and dialogues. Examples include the tenacity of Sizwe to live and work in Port Elizabeth and the crafty nature of Buntu. Athol Fugard's dramatic exploration in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* clearly shows that he is a playwright with creative artistic ideas. He is a political playwright of global repute.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The essay is titled: “Re-writing the Society through the Dramatic Explorations of Athol Fugard in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*” reveals that the play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, has both economic and political implications which the playwright has been able to ingeniously weave in an artistic manner. Fugard, no doubt, is a political playwright. This work has been able to demonstrate how dramatic writing could be used to re-write the society, depicting it the way it is and proffering solutions for a way forward.

The study also reveals that the theatre has the potentiality to depict the impact of economic recession, poverty, terror, human degradation and racial discrimination in the society.

As a political theatre, the play proposes a new socio-economic and political structure. The techniques used by Fugard stand as examples to the budding and professional playwrights, to use their works in making economic and socio-political statements without necessarily resorting to violence.

Drama is a potent tool for societal reform and mutation. Its resources, if properly harnessed and channeled, could bring about the long-needed peace and transformation which every society needs. This study has been able to prove that.

All structures of apartheid in the South African society have since been pulled down and the South African nation is enjoying relative freedom under the leadership of her original citizens with a sound economy (the best in Africa so far).

It is hoped that other African elected governments would see the need to work towards a free, responsive and progressive society where policies, mostly economic, can be formulated to create a conducive environment where the citizens can live happily without facing the odds of economic recession.

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