



Metadramatic Features
in Athol Fugard's
Sizwe Bansi is Dead (1972)

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Abstract:

This paper displays how the South African dramatist, Athol Fugard, in his play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972), reflects the dilemma of peoples' identity in South Africa during the apartheid time. Fugard resorts to a number of metadramatic features so as to discuss peoples' ability to beat the apartheid's system through their abandoning their identities. These metadramatic features are the consciousness of the dramatist and the character, self-reference, literary and real-life references, role-playing within the role, portrayal of human perception, play-within-the play, and the doubleness of the meta-enunciative perspective of the metadramatic dialogue.

Keywords: Athol Fugard, Apartheid, South Africa, Metadramatic features.

ملخص:

تبرز هذه الورقة البحثية الملامح الميتادرامية التي استخدمها أثول فيوجارد للميتادراما في مسرحيته سيزوي بانزي ميّت؛ ليناقدش مشكلة الهوية التي بددتها الحكومة، حتى تصل إلى مآربها في السيطرة على جنوب أفريقيا واستعباد ذوي البشرة السوداء. وتبيّن هذه الدراسة أيضًا إدراك الجموع السوداء بذعنها وخنوعها لظلم الحكومة واستبدالها. فضلًا عن ذلك، فقد قدمت هذه المسرحية نموذجين: استايل وبنسو، يعرفان آلية سحق نظام الفصل العنصري، والتغلب على قوانينه. فبدلاً من تكبده عناء العمل كعبد عند أصحاب البشرة البيضاء، قام استايل بفتح استديو للتصوير، وبدأ بجني قوت عيشه من عمله الخاص كمصور. أما عن بنتو فقد كشف عن طريقة للتخلص من عبء بعض من القوانين مثل إعادة توطين السكان الأصليين، ومنع الاستقطان الغير قانوني، وذلك بتزوير هوية سيزوي. ولعب عنوان المسرحية: سيزوي بانزي ميّت دورًا كبيرًا في إبراز أهميتها. حيث تعني كلمة سيزوي - بلغة سكان جنوب أفريقيا - بلد، وكلمة بانزي تعني كبير أو واسع، أي أن العنوان يتضمن اقتناع فيوجارد التام بأن بلده - جنوب أفريقيا - ميّت.

Dilemma of Black Peoples' Identity in

Sizwe Bansi is Dead (1972)

Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* shows that "a man must die [or change] in order to live" under the apartheid (Isherwood). According to Sorgo's "Review: Sizwe Bansi is Dead", the play mirrors the "angry and poignant indictment of the dehumanizing effects of the notorious pass laws which stripped black South Africans of their identity". These laws were imposed to subject peoples' lives to the white supremacy.

The title of the play; *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is a metadramatic allusion to the problems triggered by the government's leverage on peoples' life in the apartheid time. As the word "Sizwe" means "the nation" in Xhosa, which is the language of people in South Africa who are known as Bantu people, while the word "bansi" means "large or broad" (Vandenbroucke 119). By his statement of the death of the nation, South Africa, the dramatist alludes to the turbulent conditions which people endure. What makes Fugard believe that his country is dead is his witnessing of numerous peoples' torture while working for a few months as a clerk in the Native Commissioner's court at Johannesburg. In his *Notebooks*, Fugard expresses his experience: ""[d]uring my six months in that Court Room, I saw more suffering than I could cope with. I knew that society was evil before I had that experience, but seeing the machinery in operation taught me how it works and in fact what it does to people"(7). Fugard knows how hard it is to be circumscribed in one place and could not have the permission to travel to another place because of a card or a passport. Due to his "daring representation of a black and a white actor on the same

stage in an apartheid-bound" in his play *Blood Knot* as well as *Blood Knot*'s broadcasting on British television, Fugard's passport was withdrawn (Wertheim 17).

Fugard draws the plot of this play on a well-known feature of the apartheid era; the problems of the passbook. He sets the play in a photographic workplace where people went to have pictures for certain purposes. According to the stage directions, the setting is:

Styles's Photographic Studio in the African township of New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. Positioned prominently, the name-board:

*Styles Photographic Studio.
Reference Books; Passports;
Weddings; Engagements; Birthday
Parties and Parties.*

Prop.—Styles. (Fugard et al. 3)

None of these purposes—taken photos for passports, weddings, engagements, parties— is abnormal, except for taken pictures for reference books. The reference book, also known as the passbook, was designed by the South African's regime so as to set black people apart from the white folks. Began in 1923, the government issued The Native Urban Act and forced all black people to hold licenses named passes during their existences in town and cities. The minister of Native Affairs in South Africa in 1950, Hendrik Verwoerd, banned black folks from being employed in cities and towns unless "all these who were already there had been absorbed by the white labour market" (Ross 119).

In 1952, The Pass Laws enacted in order to enforce all black folks who are over 16 years old to carry the reference books. These books were designed to restrict these people, the people of color, as much as possible by means of requiring the places where these people dwell and for how long time they will stay. These cards or books contain certain information of the holders such as their names, pictures, fingerprints, and the duration through which their cards will be valid (the duration these folks will spend in towns and cities).

Uttering the name of the reference books, Fugard strikes a keynote metadramatic reference to a long history of peoples' struggle and resistance during the apartheid period. The Town Topics' newspaper inscribes that the play "reveals the rich universality and timelessness of human beings struggling to assert their identity against the oppressive forces of a society that would deny them that right". Black people repeatedly protested against these acts issued by the government to enslave and subjugate them. The most significant demonstration was the Sharpeville massacre, Ross stresses that the strategies of all demonstrations "did not have the same effect for the 5,000 or so people who had gathered in front of Sharpeville police station"(129).

Since the very beginning of the opening scene, Styles, the owner of the photographic studio, metadramatically cites headlines of the newspaper he holds. Wertheim accentuates: "[t]he opening scene in which Styles reads newspaper headlines was one such spot at which improvisation helped keep the play au courant"(80). Reading the headlines is a thoroughly metadramatic feature, in one sense, the news is followed by Styles' comments

and interpretations to real-life events like the troubles China could make in South Africa. In additional sense, using this prop, the newspaper, trespasses the boundary between fiction and reality. Styles cites:

Storm buffets Natal. Damage in many areas...trees snapped like... what?...matchsticks...'

[*Turning the page, another headline.*]

'China: A question-mark on South West Africa.' What's China want there? Yo! They better be careful. China gets in there (Fugard et al. 3).

Through his warning of the impacts that China might have on South Africa, Styles, as the stage directions indicate "[*Stops abruptly. Looks around as if someone might be eavesdropping on his intimacy with the audience*]". Consequently he makes the addressees/the readers his "allies against perhaps the Special Branch that might be listening to his potentially communist comments" (Wertheim 80). Styles' speech is another metadramatic adoption of Beckett's plays, especially *Waiting for Godot*. In this context, Shava highlights that Styles' "monologue, which is roughly as long as Lucky's gibberish speech in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, is a caustic attack on American investment and multinationals in general" (132).

Fugard also adopts Brecht's alienation effect (a technique by which the author creates a sense of bewilderments to challenge the audience). Likewise, Styles directly speaks to the audience and comments on another headline, which is "Car plant expansion. 1-5 million rand plan", and explains that no one will bother himself

with the non-white employees (Fugard et al. 3). This is because all of this money will be invested in producing more machines and constructing bigger erections. His comment is grounded on an actual experience Styles, played by John Kani, endured when he worked at Ford factory. Styles narrates that when he has worked at this factory the employees read in the newspaper that "So and so from America or London made a big speech"(4). This speech ends with bombastic promises of the improvement of the non-white workforces, but the words were written just in the newspaper, nothing came to life; no one benefited from these pompous promises. To be specific, Styles criticizes the hypocrisy of the society wherein white rich people pay no attention to fulfill their promises.

Conscious enough of how hard his life will continue to be if he does not begin his business and stop being someone's boy, Styles decides to begin his own business. It was not easy at first to face his family, especially his father whose reaction is: "You call that work [working as a photographer]? Click-click with a camera. Are you mad?"(10) Even after his attempt to explain his viewpoint to his father; "Daddy, if I could stand on my own two feet and not be somebody else's tool, I'd have some respect for myself. I'd be a man", Styles' opinion is in no vein since his father replies: "What do you mean? Aren't you one already? You're circumcised, you've got a wife". Styles' father's reactions are metadramatic clues of how the system of apartheid affected people and convinced them to subjugate themselves in order to live in South Africa.

Nevertheless, Styles' family are not the only obstacle he faced in order to begin his own business. The procedures he follows are the other obstacle that Styles faced, he narrates to the audience:

I applied for permission to use the room [that his friend, Dhlamini told him about it where he could open his business] as a studio. After sometime the first letter back: 'Your application has been received and is being considered.' A month later: 'The matter is receiving the serious consideration of the Board.' Another month: 'Your application is now on the director's table.' I nearly gave up, friends. But one day, a knock at the door—the postman—I had to sign for a registered letter. 'We are pleased to inform you....'

It took several months to take permission to use a vacant room as a studio, which is ironic because the moment Styles opens this room, he had been sobered up. He describes what he had seen: "window panes were all broken; big hole in the roof, cobwebs in the corners". Notwithstanding these deficiencies that Styles had found in the room, he also saw cockroaches everywhere. These cockroaches were not normal like these "little things that run all over the place when you pull out the kitchen drawer"(11). However, these cockroaches were, as Styles describes, "big bastards, the paratroopers".

Styles had to fight the cockroaches in order to get rid of them and have the room clean. The first weapon to fight these big cockroaches is given to Styles by the Chinaman who sells him two

tins to spray them in the room to kill these insects. The stage directions describe this fight; "[*His two tins at the ready, forefingers on the press-buttons, Styles gives us a graphic-enactment of what happened. There is a brief respite to 'reload'—shake the tins—and tie a handkerchief around his nose after which he returns to the fight*]". While Styles went to sleep after his success, as he thought, to kill all the cockroaches, the insects prepared themselves to the next battle. As Styles narrates:

I went to sleep. Not them [*the cockroaches*]. What do you think happened here? General meeting under the floorboards. All the bloody survivors. The old professor addressed them: 'Brothers, we face a problem of serious pollution...contamination! The menace appears to be called Doom. I have recommended a general inoculation of the whole community. Everybody in line, please.

Prepared enough to fight Styles, cockroaches walked on the floor and on the ceiling of the room as if they restored their control on their own room. Meanwhile, "the old bastard", the leader, set in the floor and "waved his feelers in the air as if he was enjoying air-conditioning" (12).

The cockroaches symbolize the government in imposing itself and its control on the country, South Africa, which belongs to both white and black people. After each folks' resistance, the government came like the cockroaches and imposed its control on peoples' life by issuing more oppressive rules and enjoying its triumph. Annoyed as he is, Styles asks his friend, Dhlamini, to

find another solution in order to get rid of these cockroaches. Dhlamini solves the problem: "You want to solve your problem, get a cat. What do you think a cat lives on in the township? Milk? If there's any the baby gets it.... Insects, man, township cats are insect-eaters". The cat, called Blackie, symbolizes people who have to work in townships in order to get their own livings and feed their families. As the government did not provide people with their needs of foods and money, the only way people will have is to get rid of the government along with ending the apartheid rules. The cat could end these cockroaches as Styles went to the room in the following morning and saw "no cockroach can take his wings off. He's dead". This is a metadramatic indication of the concealed power of people if they resisted and insisted to end the oppressive rules of the apartheid; they will be like this cat which ends the cockroaches' life in only one day.

Another metadramatic implementation of Brecht's alienation effect is Fugard's usage of a flashback technique (a method used in a dramatic text so as to enhance the text with one of the character's previous experience). In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* the flashback is triggered by the moment when Styles is taking the snap for Sizwe, a customer and a black character who is oppressed by the tyranny of the pass laws. Once Sizwe enters the photographic studio, Styles sits him down and asks him about his name. After his hesitation, Sizwe tells Styles that his name is Robert Zwelinzima. Then in a flashback Sizwe provides the readers with the story behind the name of Robert Zwelinzima when he writes a letter to his wife; Nowetu. Sizwe states to his wife: "[m]y troubles are over...Sizwe Bansi, in a manner of speaking, is dead!"(22) For the reason that this flashback reflects

events happened in another place not in Styles' Studio, the setting of the play has been altered to be in Buntu's home. What this flashback tells the readers about Sizwe is his suffering with the passbook. Sizwe's problem began while he was in the house of his friend Zola. He narrates the story to Buntu, another role played by the same actor of Styles, as follows:

I was sleeping on the floor...I heard some noises and when I looked up I saw torches shining in through the window...then there was aloud knocking on the door. I crawled under the table. The headman came in and looked around and found me hiding under the table...and dragged me out. [...]They drove straight to the administration office...and then from there they drove to the Labour Bureau (23-24).

Then he continues to narrate the process of the withdrawing of his passbook. The white officers made Sizwe "stand[s] to the door", and another white officer took Sizwe's book and "shook his head". They put a pink card and a stamp in Sizwe's passbook which made it invalid for use.

To cast light on the real impacts of such a law, the passbook law, Buntu explains what predicaments the termination of Sizwe's passbook could be. Buntu first elucidates to Sizwe, who is illiterate and incapable of reading and understanding, the commands which have been written on his book. Buntu reads: "You are required to report to the Bantu Affairs Commissioner, King William's Town, within three days of the above-mentioned date for the...."(24). Unable to continue reading, as he is stunned

by noticing the expiration date written in Sizwe's passbook, Buntu articulates that Sizwe's time for being in New Brighton has been terminated. Demonstrating that Sizwe should not stay in this place: "You should have been home yesterday", Buntu afflicts Sizwe that he is in a big Trouble. The following dialogue highlights that there is no solution to end the risks that Sizwe, whom Fugard just named him "Man", could face because of the termination of his reference book:

Man. I don't want to leave Port Elizabeth.

Buntu. Maybe. But if that book says go, you go.

Man. Can't I maybe burn this book and get a new one?

Buntu. Burn that book? Stop kidding yourself, Sizwe! Anyway suppose you do. You must immediately go apply for a new one. Right? And until that new one comes, be careful the police don't stop you and ask for your book. Into the Courtroom, brother. Charge: Failing to produce Reference Book on Demand. Five rand or five days. Finally the new book comes. Down to the Labour Bureau for a stamp...it's got to be endorsed with permission to be in this area (24-25).

Buntu continues to reflect the difficulties and the complexity of the procedures that Sizwe should follow in order to get another passbook. Buntu also stresses the idea that the

government never treated people as human beings; the authority, instead, treated them as numbers written in their passbooks. He explicates:

White man at the Labour Bureau takes the book, looks at it doesn't look at you!—goes to the big machine and feeds in your number... [*Buntu goes through the motions of punching out a number on a computer*] card jumps out, he reads: 'Sizwe Bansi. Endorsed to King William's Town....' Takes your book, fetches that same stamp, and in it goes again. So you burn that book, or throw it away, and get another one. Same thing happens... But this time it's also into a van and off to the Native Commissioner's Office; card around your neck with your number on it; escort on both sides and back to King William's Town (25).

Fugard hereby emphasizes that the government uses all the possible ways even technology to subjugate people of color.

On their way home after returning from Sky's place, where they were "served ice cream and cool drinks" (29), Buntu and Sizwe found a corpse of a dead black man with a valid passbook inside his pocket. When Sizwe proposes that they should inform the police about this dead man, Buntu reacts: "Police Station! Are you mad? You drunk, passbook not in order... 'We've come to report a dead man, Sergeant.' 'Grab them!' Case closed. We killed him"(33). Buntu's declaration of Sizwe's being out of his mind for doing the right thing every human being should do with the dead people is a metadramatic clue to the government's

framing the case to the other black people. In other words, Sizwe's invalid passbook is not the only thing that prevents these black people from reporting a human being's death, it is also the fact that the government will accuse them of killing him without even investigating the case. Due to Buntu's insistence on leaving the dead corpse and going home, Sizwe asks the audience: "What's happening in this world, good people? Who cares for who[m] in this world? Who wants who? Who wants me, friend? What's wrong with me? I'm a man. I've got eyes to see. I've got ears to listen when people talk"(35). Sizwe stresses that he is a human being in a manner that echoes Shylock, a Jewish character in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. According to Town Topics Newspaper; "'Sizwe Bansi is Dead,' South Africa Under Apartheid, Resonates Powerfully, Timelessly in McCarter Revival", "Sizwe asserts his pride and dignity as a man [through] echoing Shylock's angry declaration of his humanity as a Jew".

Returning home, Buntu, like Mr. Styles, knows how to beat the apartheid system; he sits down and changes the dead corpse's passbook to be Sizwe's book. The stage directions read:

Buntu opens the two reference books and places them side by side on the table. He produces a pot of glue, [and] then very carefully tears out the photograph in each book. A dab of glue on the back of each and then Sizwe's goes back into Robert's book, and Robert's into Sizwe's....When he is finished, Buntu pushes the two books in front of Sizwe (Fugard et al. 35-36).

Buntu provides Sizwe with an opportunity to work in New Brighton without getting involved in the prerequisite procedures to acquire a new passbook. This opportunity is simply to take an advantage of the dead corpse' passbook. Isherwood observes, in his article; "In South Africa, This Dead Man Does Tell Tales", that Buntu "decide[s] to turn the dead man into an unwitting tool of rebellion against crippling government regulations". Buntu hereby is the surrogate dramatist for crafting the life that Sizwe should live. In other words, Buntu is writing the script for Sizwe's impending life and he attempts to convince Sizwe as follows:

Man. [*Shaking his head emphatically*]. To! Haai, haai. No, Buntu.

Buntu. It's a chance. . . It's your only chance!

Man. No, Buntu! What's it mean? 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. [...] Tomorrow I contact, my friend Norman at Feltex. He's a boss-boy there. I tell him about another friend, Robert Zwelinzima, book in order, who's looking for a job. You roll up later, hand over the book to the white man. Who does Robert Zwelinzima look like? You! Who gets the pay on Friday? You, man! (Fugard et al. 36)

To change your identity is not an easy decision to take, but what Buntu tries to explain to Sizwe is that the important thing he should care about is his passbook not his name or identity. Sizwe herein realizes that his name, the first thing he owns in his life since the moment he was born, is not important. He reacts: "I don't want to lose my name, Buntu". Buntu retorts: "You mean you don't want to lose your bloody passbook!"

Playing a voluntarily role-playing, Buntu becomes Sizwe's teacher so as to give Sizwe another opportunity to live and afford his family. Isherwood confirms: "Buntu becomes [Sizwe's] tutor in deception when the men hit upon the scheme of stealing the corpse' pass book and allowing Sizwe to die so that, under an assumed name, he may live to support his family". It isn't easy for Buntu to persuade Sizwe to abandon his name and assume a dead man's name. Buntu explains: "I was only trying to help. As Robert Zwelinzima you could have stayed and worked in this town. As Sizwe Bansi...? Start walking, friend. King William's Town. [...] You've got to be there by yesterday"(Fugard et al. 36). Continuing to guide Sizwe, Buntu imagines the whole situation that Sizwe would endure if he lost this chance and went home. Buntu explains: "But once you're back! Sit down on the side of the road next to your pondok with your family...[C]ough your bloody lungs out with Ciskeian Independence"(37). Besides, many problems that Sizwe may face because of his manipulation in the passbook, like how his wife and children will accept his new identity, can be solved. According to Buntu's viewpoint, Sizwe's wife and children will adjust themselves to the new circumstances.

The portrayal of Sizwe's perception as he could finally recognize that he is already a phantom is another metadramatic feature. In her "Review: Sizwe Banzi is Dead", Toby Zinman confirms: "what Banzi comes to realize is that black South Africa is a country filled with 'ghosts'". Sizwe refuses this new passbook because he hated to live like a ghost. Buntu helps Sizwe to realize that he is already a ghost:

Buntu. Wasn't Sizwe Bansi a ghost? [...]When the white man looked at you at the Labour Bureau what did he see? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number? Isn't that a ghost? [...] when his little child calls you "Boy'...you a man, circumcised with a wife and four children...isn't that a ghost? [...] All I'm saying is be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into (Fugard et al. 38).

Likewise, Buntu helps Sizwe imagine what will happen when he begins his work as Robert Zwelinzima at Feltex.

Additional metadramatic feature is an inserted type of the play-within-the play technique to which Buntu resorts in order to make Sizwe completely aware of what will happen if he succeeds to be Robert Zwelinzima. The play begins with Sizwe's attempt to buy a suit with money he got from his working at Feltex. It goes as follows:

Buntu. 'I've come to buy a suit.' Salesman is very friendly.
'Certainly. Won't you take a seat. I'll get the forms.

[...] first I'll need all your particulars.'...Your name, please, sir?

Man. [playing along uncertainly]. Robert Zwelinzima.

Buntu. [writing]. 'Robert Zwelinzima.' Address?

Man. Fifty, Mapija Street.

Buntu. Where do you work?

Man. Feltex.

Buntu. And how much do you get paid?

Man. Twelve...twelve rand ninety-nine cents.

Buntu. N.I. Number, please? [*Sizwe hesitates.*] Your Native Identity number please? [...*Buntu picks up Robert Zwelinzima's passbook. He reads out the number.*] N—I —3— 8— I — I—8—6— 3. Burn that into your head, friend. (39)

Buntu helps Sizwe keep in his mind the number written in Robert's passbook. He reads the first number and makes Sizwe repeat after him as if Buntu is schooling Sizwe. Buntu continues his instructions by indicating that this solution, of being Robert, is not utterly perfect. He explains the solution's weakness; he urges Sizwe to stay out of troubles. Buntu instructs Sizwe: "stay out of trouble. Trouble will mean police station, then fingerprints off to

Pretoria to check on previous convictions". Becoming aware of how it is a black man's life in South Africa, Sizwe comments on Buntu instruction: "Buntu, you know what you are saying? A black man stay out of trouble? Impossible, Buntu. Our skin is trouble".

Taking into consideration that the play embodies three black people who could overcome the seemingly everlasting apartheid system, Fugard metadramatically mirrors the power that these marginalized characters have. However, this sort of power is not the common one; power of authority, it is the second type of power which has been introduced by a great philosopher in the 19th century; Michel Foucault. That is to say, the play represents the dispersal of power at two levels within the apartheid time; the power of authority and the power of repression (Olaiya 75). This second type of power postulates that people could beat and overcome the brutal systems only by breaking through the rules and the norms of these systems. "The fact that", Olaiya writes, "unsophisticated people like Sizwe evaded 'the perpetual gaze' of a panoptic system whose surveillance seems to be all encompassing demonstrates the ability of human beings to surmount the most elaborate and powerful control"(82). In other words, Buntu and Sizwe's operation to turn Sizwe into Robert Zwelinzima indicates that the apartheid system can be manipulated and overcome. Also, Fugard's portrayal of Mr. Styles shows that an ordinary black man can take a risk and be his own master by building of his own business which is Styles' photographic studio.

In conclusion, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* mirrors people's everyday struggle in South Africa. Fugard employs metadramatic features in this play so as to reflect how black people could be a source of threat if the government continues to force and humiliate them. Moreover, Fugard uses the metadramatic strategies: self-consciousness of the author and the characters, self-reference, literary and real-life references, role-playing, depiction of human perception, and play-within-the play to draw attention to some problems caused by apartheid. These problems are the authority's abuse of people who could succeed to tackle this mistreatment. Throughout the multiple layers of meaning; which are improvised so as to address the reader/the audience, the true recipient, the play also indicated that the South African people could beat the apartheid system in their daily lives like what Sizwe did with Buntu's assistance. Also, the characterization of Styles mirrors some of the real-life problems that people confronted because of their dark-skinned color.

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Metadramatic Features in Athol Fugard's

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