



The Expatriate experience of Struggle for Identity in South African Drama: Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Andrew Whaley's *The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco*- A comparative study

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Abstract

*This paper examines the ramifications of identity in Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and Andrew Whaley's *The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco*. The plays x-ray the processes of individual and national self definition in apartheid South Africa and decolonized Zimbabwe. The central characters in both plays are mired in the crisis of identity formulation as a result of the events of colonialism and the processes of decolonization. Fugard's play depicts the dilemma of the oppressed in constructing self identity in a society that oppresses and devalues. Whaley's play problematizes the question of identity in independent Zimbabwe. The plays reveal the capacity of the human spirit to rise against oppressive and de-humanizing strictures and create new images and identities in a colonized and decolonized milieu. The plays also capture the specific and universal human experience in the search for self and national definition and conclude that people are what they make themselves.*

*However, for my article presentation I have chosen the title called "The Expatriate Experience of Struggle for Identity in South African drama: Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* Andrew Whaley's *The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco*- A comparative study" in which I explored the anthropological and historical survey by conveying the expatriate experience of struggle for identity in south African drama which writes by appealing it's humanist call for dissolving barriers between nations, peoples, and communities on the grounds that world civilizations were syncretised long before the divisions introduced by the territorial boundaries of nation-states.*

Keywords: Identity, Colonialism, Decolonization, Oppressed, De-humanize, Continent.

1. Introduction

Colonialism and its aftermath created a crisis of identity on the African continent. Firstly, the imposition of Western religion, education and language by the colonizers debilitated the moral and socio-cultural bases of the natives. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, it attempted, and to a large extent succeeded, in creating divisions and disaffection (the former, being more a product of post colonialism), among the African elite and proletariat. The division among the elite for example, is underscored by the question of Negritude and that of the African personality which arose among the African literati, in the search for a truly African identity or revalidation of African heritage, also known as cultural nationalism. Such divisions have tended to complicate the issue of identity reconstruction in post colonial Africa. This is particularly so for the ordinary African, who became

more and more disillusioned and disaffected by the non performance of the political elite who emerged at independence, only to pursue values that are selfish and antithetical to wishes of the people and their sensibilities. Crisis of identity arises from the fact that a people who were once colonized, now, are confused in finding their real identity, detached as it were, from previous history and not attached to the atmosphere of decolonization. Identity connotes a sense of whom one is it is a dynamic and engaging process of self definition, whether individual or group within a socio-political milieu. Dictionary.com defines identity crisis as “a period... when a person seeks a clearer sense of self and an acceptable role in society.”

The predicament of self definition becomes more profound when familiar boundaries begin to collapse, such as colonialism brought about, by creating new ‘colonies’ and ‘settlements’ by force, in the scramble for Africa’s juicy resources. Even more, is colonialism’s attempt to undermine indigenous African culture and arts through varying degrees of suppression of indigenous African performances? Culture defines a people. For Africans, it represents the values, ethics and aspirations, expressed in ritual performances, folktales, songs and dances of the people in which performers and spectators are active participants. It also mediated their socio-economic system and class formation. Indigenous art forms therefore, provided a strong bond of communality for the people. The colonialist quickly recognized the importance of indigenous art on the life of the people, because of its large body of adherents. As David Kerr observes, “they realized cultural forms held the symbolic key to the religious and moral bases of indigenous society” (18). Indigenous African performances were therefore, branded as ‘paganic rituals’ which must be eliminated or suppressed. They saw in the performances, because of their interactive nature, a capacity to subvert the more fundamental economic and political interests of the colonizers. According to Sam Ukala, the performances were regarded “as index of a cruder barbaric past, as facilitators of the functioning of a primitive and static society or a vent wish of a socially and sexually repressed oedipuses’ (13)

Furthermore J. Plastow (139) tells us how the Dutch Settlers and their British Superiors, in Southern Africa, collaborated in repressing traditional African performances, by forbidding what they called ‘primitive Dances’ such as the *Mande Dance*, under the witchcraft suppression Act of 1899. However, the administrative policies adopted by the colonizers and the African responses to them, determined the level of deculturation that occurred.

In South Africa, ‘Urbanization’ policy was introduced by the apartheid regime with two main objectives in mind: to create ‘Black Townships’ where black labor will be within reach of white exploiters, and to further supplant African traditional culture by encouraging natives to massively migrate from their communal homeland to the townships. Having come from different rural communities with different languages, there is no platform in the townships to express indigenous art. Thus, in South Africa, institutionalized racist hegemony, a scattered zoning system for black suburbs and the establishment of a migrant labor system, completely dislocated the black population. Having created a large urbanized proletariat, westernization and individualism became accentuated, as the deracinated blacks began to imbibe a new culture, forged out of European models. Two distinct theatre types emerged from the new urban culture. ‘The popular theatre,’ rooted in the musical tradition of the people and the ‘Township Theatre’, which became a tool for criticizing the monolithic apartheid system and also for expressing the denials, frustrations, pain and anger of the blacks. Ironically, both theatre forms were ‘guided’ by white’s liberals, who provided the platform and sponsorship for the performances. Whites became creators and co-creators of the emerging urban black theatre. For example, Bode Osayin tells us that the ‘Ipi Tombi’ musical extravaganza that became the star performance at the 2nd Black African Festival of Arts and Culture FESTAC 77, was created by Bertha Egnos and her daughter Gail Lakier, who jointly wrote the songs from Zulu

language” (159) Also, Ian Benhardt established the ‘Bareti Players,’ an all black theatre group and Barry Simons who helped in developing the market theatre that provided outlet for Black Consciousness Theatre to thrive. The reality of this situation, which emerging black artists found themselves, complicated for them, the issue of re-defining black cultural and artistic identity.

While colonialism sucked the blacks from their cultural roots in South Africa and thus became victims of what James Marcia calls, ‘identity foreclosure,’ pre-colonial cultural forms in Zimbabwe developed and became politicized by their exposure to colonialism. Through the use of parables and other forms of allusion, indigenous song and dance was transformed into an allegorical political protest against colonialism. An example is the ‘Pungwe Dance’ which David Kerr, citing Roskidd, describes as “a highly participatory form of cultural celebration, learning and mobilization.”(213). This indigenous dance took on a renewed significance during the liberation war as an effective medium of conscientization by Zimbabwean Freedom Fighters, in their attempt to mobilize peasants against the oppressive Smith regime.

However, while the theatre in Zimbabwe was highly segregated during the liberation struggle, at independence, clear lines began to blur. As in other parts of Africa, freedom gave birth to ‘uncertainty’ for the black population, and a conflicting perception of their new identity.

This paper examines the predicament of self definition, identity formation and the African’s desire to reconnect with communally shared human values in two South Africa play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard and *The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco* by Andrew Whaley.

2. Sizwe Bansi is Dead: Deconstructing and Reconstructing Identities

The play derives from the social condition in South Africa during the apartheid regime which requires all blacks and colored citizens to carry an identity book. The ‘book’ also known as ‘pass,’ is restrictive in terms of travel and employment, for blacks within the country. Labor Bureaus were established in townships to ensure that only those (blacks and colored) who have ‘valid’ documents to live and work in particular townships are permitted to do so. Port Elizabeth is one of such townships. The play is set in ‘Styles Photographic Studio’ in New Brighton; a black ghetto is Port Elizabeth. It opens with Mr. Styles the photographer, reading the headlines of a Newspaper and commenting on nearly every story. He is quite elderly but sociable and verbose. A particular article about the expansion of a car plant prompts him to recall his days as ‘foreman’ at Ford Motors, his former place of employment. In an engrossing monologue, he tells a humorous story about the company’s preparation to receive its president who comes from America. The various phases of general cleaning embarked upon in order to hide the true state of the Car Plant and the provision of new clothes and working tools to give the workers a false sense of identity; A work free day was even declared and songs learnt to welcome the expected visitor, but the ‘big baas,’ when he arrives, takes three steps into the company premises and back and was gone. Workers were made to double up for production lost and, they ended up working harder that day than ever before. Styles tells us he realized how much of his life has been wasted working for the whiteman as a ‘black monkey’ and his decisions to do something more dignifying, and create a new identity for himself. He tells of challenges confronted and obstacles surmounted in order to secure a shop next door to a funeral shop so he could start his own business of photography. This marks a turning point in his life. Styles photographic Studio becomes a ‘theatre of dreams’ for blacks in search for identity, a place where family identity could be preserved as the pictures enabled families to stay connected, and ancestral heritage sustained. The significance of this is captured in part of styles monologue “

When you look at this, what do you see? Just another photographic studio? Where people come because they ‘av lost their Reference \book and need a photo for the new one? ... No

friend. It's more than just that. This is a strong-room of dreams. The dreamers? My people. The simple people, who you never find mentioned in the history books, ... who would be forgotten, and their dreams with them, if it wasn't for styles. That's what I do. Put down, in my way, on paper the dreams and hope of my people so that even their children's children will remember a man, 'This was our Grandfather' ... and say his name. (12-13)

It is apparent from Styles monologue that the inhuman working conditions which the proletariat is subjected to, is deliberate and an act to perpetuate servitude. It leaves the subject with no time and energy to think about human dignity. It also reveals the insensitivity and disregard for the poor and less privileged by the in authority. However, it raises possibilities for change and more importantly, man's innate capacity to redefine him. The play continues as Styles' musings are interrupted by a man, Sizwe Bansi, who comes to take a photograph to send to his wife. He is hesitant and apprehensive, but soon relaxes and even becomes excited as Styles deploys his craft to get him ready for the photograph. The reason for his behavior is revealed as he dictates a letter that will accompany the photograph to his wife, he is facing a crisis of identity. He tells his wife; Sizwe Bansi is dead, yet alive. Through the use of a complex dramatic technique, Sizwe tells his story. He is in Port Elizabeth from King Williams's town to seek employment in order to meet family needs. However, his passbook declared it illegal for him to reside or seek employment at Port Elizabeth and must therefore return to his township with three days. He decides to defy the order. He is introduced to Buntu by his friend Zola for possible assistance. Buntu narrates his own bitter experiences. To seek temporary relief, he takes Sizwe to Sky's place for a drink where they stumble upon the corpse of a dead man, at an alley way near Sky's place. Buntu discovers from the dead man's passbook that he has an identification number and a valid work-seeker's permit for employment in Port Elizabeth. He takes the dead man's passbook and Sizwe's passbook home where he performs an operation by transferring Sizwe's photograph into the dead man's passbook and vice versa. He urges Sizwe to accept the new passbook and become the dead man whose name is Robert Swelinzima, for that was his only hope to stay and get employed in Port Elizabeth. Sizwe's initial reaction was to resist the idea of swapping his identity with that of a dead man. He is concerned about his name, his identity as a person, his wife and children registered in school under Bansi. He says, 'I don't want to lose my name. Yet, faced with the option of not being able to provide for his family, he caves in uncertain of his action. K Mercer contends that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty". So, Sizwe dies, and re-birthed as Robert Zwelinzima,, with a new identity number, midwived by Buntu. In the process of rebirth, Sizwe asks a fundamental existential question" who am I? Buntu's attempt to provide an answer in his response "a fool who is not taking his chance," does not convince Sizwe "How do I live as another man's ghost" he queries. Buntu fires back by asking if Sizwe Bansi isn't a ghost. And tells him to stop fooling himself and be a real ghost. But, for how long? This is at the core of the play's theme which raises the question of the meaning of life and a metaphysical inquiry into the nature of human identity. Does Sinzwe Bansi's identity card really define who he is? With self esteem brutalized by apartheid indignities, can he sacrifice his name and what it represents in order to assume another man's identity, and in so doing defy the system? Ask Lindsay Johns. Well, again, Buntu seems to be providing all the answers, he says, "Shit on names man! To hell with them if in exchange you can get a piece of bread for your stomach and a blanket in winter ... shit on our pride if we only bluff ourselves that we are men (43). Buntu's speech suggests the level of degradation apartheid has inflicted on the African's self esteem. Therefore, in their shared experiences, Styles, Buntu and Sizwe are forced to reconstruct their identities in response to the universal defiance of the human spirit against dehumanizing strictures. Institutionalized racism is confronted by human capacity to seize opportunities to defeat racist limitations. Fugard contextualizes

the ability to resist oppressive impositions and reinvention of one self. However, this recreation of self, according to Ashcroft et al. “need to be contextualize because it is the construction of identity that constitute freedom and human beings are what they themselves, even if they are subjects of oppressive discourse” (112).

Although racism has been overthrown in South Africa, the play provides an historical perspective as well or a moving assertion of humanity on stage. The intention is to expose the effects of obnoxious laws on common people who truly desire a better living condition. Alexis Soloski agrees with the view, he says that the play “functions as an outcry against the practices of dehumanization and eloquently captures the universal desire to find and hold one’s place in the world.” Although the play may not be classified as revolutionary or radical, it makes a profound political statement which has birthed revolutionary ideas. This underscores the universal appeal of the play.

3. The Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco: Rediscovering Identities

The play is born out of a newspaper story of a supposed combatant found in a hillside cave in Zimbabwe’s Eastern border with Mozambique in 1987. He claims to have been in hiding not knowing that Zimbabwe had attained independence seven years ago. Several questions arose about his actual identity – whether he was a fraud, a madman or a genuine combatant. Whaley found this story quite intriguing, particularly, the uncertainty surrounding the man’s identity. He found a correlation with the kind of uncertainty that pervades in Zimbabwe since liberation from the colonial masters. The play therefore, probes the existential question of what has become of Zimbabwe independence. The play’s intention, Whaley tells us in an interview with *Aesthetica*, “is to de-clutter and rediscover pieces of our common humanity and pride.”

Set in a prison cell in post-colonial Zimbabwe, the play opens with Chidhina, Jungle and Febi, three cell mates who are being detained overnight for getting drunk and assaulting a policeman at a local bar. Then, a fourth person Fiasco the character around which the play is centered, appears from nowhere to join the other three. His identity is unknown to the others and he refuses to speak, for he has been in a mountain cave for eight years, during which time the struggle for liberation had been won. In order to get him to reveal his identity, the others decide to perform a slapstick version of their own histories. Identity is established in relation to certain differences among individuals and groups. Stuart Hull (1989:10) avers that in the relation of ‘self’ and the ‘other’, “identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a numbers of intersecting discourses”. As they examine their individual and national identity through play-acting, Chidhina, Jungle and Febi are force to confront the reality of what has happened to them six years after independence. Fiasco also begins to remember bits and pieces of his former life, first his identity number, then name and a past in which he claims to be a freedom fighter. This claim provokes Chidhina, who sees Fiasco as a deserter while others like him was facing bloodshed and war.

Chidhina becomes violent and attempts to snuff life out of Fiasco for bringing back memories best forgotten.

The self-narratives, which structure the identities of the prisoners and their interactions, represent or reflect different responses to independence in Zimbabwe which the cell itself symbolizes. Childhina, reacts with hostility, Febi with ridicule while Jungle with curiosity. Fiasco is confused, yet they become mutually defining as is made that what is fought for is all too easily forgotten. This is particularly painful for Childhina. In the prison cell, he vents his frustrations on Fiasco who tries to identify with them.

“Never you are not with me. You, coming from one fucking prison on your bloody mountain to this. No you came down, into the system, so you must know We are government in here, you learn our rules - emergence power declaration. we are not just poor people you can piss around with more fucking bullshit, you are not some fucking bullshit, you are not some fucking vukura putting on puppet masks and preaching socialism with Swiss account while they put us victims of capital and international bankers and owners, and we sit here in this shippit ... when even now they are shaking hands at dinner parties and farting back lies to us next week in the papers, throwing black freedom at us while they eat butter and we wait. No. we are suffering and he must suffer too. (103)

This overt political statement clearly reflects the predicament of a disillusioned populace, for whom the meaning of the struggle started disappearing as post independence euphoria waned. The political elite transformed into masters, have simply replicated the hierarchies and power structures that existed under colonial rule. In a more sober mood, Chidhina captures the anxiety, fear, prejudice, hopelessness and mutual suspicious that characterize post independence Zimbabwe.

Every day, George, we are disappearing ... we already disappeared, George, into history like our people hunting for their I.D. numbers ‘come back tomorrow, bring a birth certificate, convince me your were born, you must go to Chirhu, that is the area where you where born, ah sorry no, we are closed ... come bade Thursday, bring you school record ... people ... marching up and down to this office and that waiting while the clerk is finding his pencil or his girlfriends telephone number ... and telling you they are closing, this is the wrong office ... These people are becoming invisible, trying to find their identity. Six years, eight years, who cares. (120)

Yet, the play is not so much a cry for revolution as a reflection on the consequences of independences. As an allegory of Zimbabwe’s past, Whaley tells his story in a fantastical mode, comingling misremembered history, trauma of broken dreams and play acting. The prison cell is a metaphor for independence and the challenges which confronts a nation as it forges a new identity. Within this stricture, the reinvention of self becomes an index in the process of identity formation. While Febi and Jungle attempt to explore reevaluate and reclaim identities, Fiasco is experiencing the trauma of reintegration with society. He is reborn; get a new identity which he is probably not prepared for. Is he reborn to offer a new lease of life for the country which liberation has failed to midwife? Is he a leader, teacher or Saviour? Or a Fraud? His Christ-like mode teaching addresses the poor and disposed of the country, urging them to resist the urge to become followers of leaders who will always prove massively flawed and to realize their potential to create change and freedom and a better identity. Yet he continues to remain ambiguous. However, the pervasive symbolism in the play overrides such ambiguity in the narrative which is deliberately misleading so that meaning becomes difficult to grasp. Fiasco, the prison cell and the bizarre rebirth which occurs as the play oscillates between truth and fiction can only make sense as metaphor for post independence Zimbabwe. It is within this framework, the playwright problematizes the question of identity in the process of self and national rediscovery.

4. Conclusion

Theatre is a reflection of life. It captures the dynamics of human existence and stands as a means of maintaining the mentality and identity of a people. Beyond this, it serves as a catalyst for socio-cultural and political consciousness. Theatre also conveys values which either support or question those prevailing society. Through a unity of different dramatic genres, Athol Fugard and Andrew Whaley probe deeply the event of colonialism and the processes of decolonization in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *the Rise and Shine of Comrade Fiasco*. The hierarchical order imposed by colonialism and its legacies are interrogated as well as the philosophical assumptions which underline

the order. They further explore the dimensions of metaphysical, cultural, religious and social reality in telling the story of the oppressed in Southern African and their attempt to redefined and give themselves an identity that will make them acceptable in society strip of human values. Ngugi wa Thiong'O avers that

Imaginative power and perception of an artist is not conceived in abstract, but rather within the ambience of a human society. His works therefore becomes a reflection of that society, which includes the economic structures, its class formation, its conflict and contradictions, its political and cultural struggles (74).

The plays also revealed that identity is differently construed. Thus, the question of identity continues to provoke discourse as most of Africa is still in search for an acceptable political and cultural frame work for self definition. This is compounded by the dialectics of exclusion and inclusion in the process of identity information which Omolola Ladele tells us “fosters conflicting models of understanding identities.” So, the debate continues, particularly in the post colonial context where the people have started to interrogate the oppressive identity foisted by colonialism's trajectory and the need to reconstruct their identities by creating new histories, new definitions and methodologies of operation. However, the process must be rooted in self awareness, self realization and consciousness of collective humanism. Both playwrights have demonstrated these values in their plays.

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