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## **The Fight for Social Justice in Richard wright's Native Son and Athol Fugard's Sizwe Bansi is dead**

### **La lutte pour la justice sociale dans Native Son de Richard Wright et Sizwe Bansi d'Athol Fugard est morte**

#### **Résumé**

Lorsque les peuples sont opprimés et dépourvus de leurs droits, ils trouvent des moyens propres à eux pour exprimer leur mécontentement et lutter pour des meilleures conditions de vie. Plusieurs écrivains africains et africain-américains ont écrit sur des questions sociales. Certains mettent l'accent sur la justice sociale comme vécue dans leurs sociétés. Comme tel, cette étude vise à ressortir une étude d'interface (c'est-à-dire celle d'un lien ou d'une relation, (comparer et contraster) sur la question de la justice sociale entre deux œuvres littéraires, *Native Son* de Richard wright, un Africain- American et *Sizwe Bansi is dead* de Athol Fugard, un Africain. Nous démontrerons comment Richard wright et Athol Fugard exposent la discrimination et l'exclusion arbitraires dont sont victimes les Noirs dans une société biraciale et en Afrique.

**Mots Clés** : Abus de pouvoir, discrimination, exclusion, Justice sociale,

#### **Abstract**

When people are oppressed and deprived of their rights, they find their own ways to express their discontent and fight for better life conditions. Many African and African American writers have written on social issues. Some focus on the issue of social justice as experienced in their societies. As such, this paper aims at the interface study (that is the relationship, compare and contrast) on the issue of social justice between two literary works, Richard wright's *Native Son* and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is dead*, written respectively by an African American and African author. We set out to denote how Richard Wright and Athol Fugard expose the deliberate arbitrary discrimination and seclusion that Blacks fall victim to in America, and in Biracial societies, in Africa.

**KEY WORDS**: Abuse of power, discrimination, seclusion, social justice

## Introduction

Starting from the slave narratives to the most recent writings of Richard Wright and Athol Fugard, Social Justice has been a major theme in African American and African literary writings. They decry injustice as seen from their present-day vantage point. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* are pierced by a sense of a soul-searching process in a society that seems to discriminate against them and discourage them from any thought of progress. In this paper, we will be examining the black condition especially on issues that pertain to life struggle, racism, social cohesion and the conditions of the Black man and woman in a social setting that discourages the Black male let alone the Black woman.

## Definition

Social justice is justice in terms of distribution of wealth, opportunities and privileges within a society. Classically, it ensures that individuals both fulfilled their social obligations and receives what was their due from society (Wikipedia-social justice). As such, social justice assigns rights and duties in the institutions of society that enables people to receive the basic benefits and burdens of cooperation. According to the United Nations, 2006 document, social Justice in an open world: the role of the United Nations states "social justice may be broadly understood as the fair distribution of the fruits of economic growth." (Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations, p 10).

### I. Historical and contextual background

#### I.1. History of social justice

Political philosopher John Rawls draws the utilitarian insights of Bentham and Mill, the social contract ideas of John Locke and categorical imperative ideas of Kant. His first statement of principle was made in a theory of justice where he proposed that, "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override; as it echoes in Kant's political liberalism, where society is seen as a "fair system of cooperation over time, from one generation to the next." Income-related inequalities, notably in the ownership of capital and other assets, in access to a variety of services and benefits, and in the personal security that money can buy, are growing. There is also greater inequality in the distribution of opportunities for remunerated employment, with worsening unemployment and underemployment in various parts of the world affecting a disproportionate number of people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale (Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations). Social justice is a relatively recent concept, born of the struggles surrounding the industrial revolution and the advent of socialist (and later, in some parts of the world, social democratic and Christian democratic) views on the organization of society (Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations, p 13).

## I.2. Context of production of the two novels

*Native Son* and *Sizwe Bansi is dead* are produced in two different countries, *Sizwe Bansi is dead* is set in the early 1970s, during the Apartheid regime. It relates in an extended flashback the way Sizwe Bansi reluctantly came to assume the identity of another individual in order to get on with his life. Crucial to the story is Bansi's passbook, an official document that, under apartheid, all black South Africans were required to carry at all times. In addition to a photograph and other descriptive information, the passbook stipulated where the holder could live and work.

As for Richard Wright, in *Native Son*, he was resolute to make his readers feel the reality of race relations by writing something "so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." The protagonist of the novel, Bigger Thomas, hails from the lowest rung of society, and Wright does not impart him with any of the romantic aspects or traits common to literary heroes. Rather, given the social conditions in which he must live, Bigger is what one might expect him to be, hostile, alarmed, fierce, hateful, and resentful.

## I.3. Similarities

Both novels *Native Son* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* share numerous aspects and themes that range from racism to economic disparity. The fruits of economic growth are not shared equally. Moreover, the main protagonists face injustices related to the color of their skins. They are both black. They seem to have no access to good jobs. In fact, they cannot even pretend to aspire to a better day because their horizons are limited by the harshness of their daily lives. Bigger Thomas and Sizwe Bansi both live in macabre living conditions not to say precarious. Their housing conditions are no better than one another and their job status are the lowest of their societies. For example, when Buntu and Sizwe Bansi came across Robert's Zwilinzima's body, they discovered that he lives in Men's Quarters, which they describe as a "Bloody concentration camp". Similarly, in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas lives in South Side Chicago, South Side Chicago is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago inhabited predominantly by a black majority. South Side Chicago is one of those parts of the city where a stranger does not venture in. Shootings are very common in this neighborhood.

This leads us to inquire if unjust societies are responsible for creating the criminals that come out of them. They simply push the person to the extreme end of his patience or his sincerity. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Sizwe is pushed to the extreme to fake and forge the dead man's papers. Equally, in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas is pushed by the system to commit a crime he did not intend. After they came back from the evening, he helped Mary Dalton to go into her room, late that night; Bigger has to help Mary up to her room because she is too drunk to stand up by herself. However, at that moment, Mary's blind mother comes to the door to see if her daughter has made it home safely. Afraid that she will catch him in the room alone with a white woman, Bigger covers Mary's head with a pillow

to keep her silent and accidentally asphyxias her to death. Previously, Bigger's mother has warned him against taking part in gang activities, she says to her son "You'll regret how you living someday," she went on. "If you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right, you'll end up where you never thought you would. You think don't know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy, just remember that." She turned and looked at Buddy. "Throw that box outside, Buddy."(1.117)

Additionally, Lawyer Max and Buntu share somehow some traits in their reasoning. They both believe that society does not leave many options for Sizwe Bansi and Bigger Thomas. Max defends Bigger at his trial; he claims essentially that American society boxes black men and women in. He argues that society gives them no options in life and denies them the basic right of all humans to fulfill their destiny in relationship to the measure of intelligence and talents they were born with. This creates anger, shame, and fear, and ends up into crime, such as Mary's murder. Likewise, Buntu explains to Sizwe Bansi that he has no other option than to take the dead man's identity in order to be able to stay in town. Should he fail to do so, there will be additional consequence such as immediate expulsion from the city, jail. However, the biggest trouble he would get in is when he gets back home to his wife and kids. What will he bring them? What will they eat? How is he going to explain them what is happening to him? For all these reasons, he has no whatsoever interest in going back to Elizabethville. That is why he finally accepted to take the dead man's identity.

#### **I.4. Differences**

Though *Native Son* and *Sizwe Bansi is dead* share many similarities, they are also different in many ways. *Native Son* is produced in the United States of America while *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is produced in South Africa. In *Native Son*, Wright shows conflicts between whites and blacks or even Blacks against Blacks. Both white and Black male characters threaten female characters with sexual assault, exploitations, oppressions, desertions, etc. Whereas, in *Native Son*, women characters in general are victims of inequality, prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, Black women characters in particular are victims of the same. They are dependent and dominated. Both female characters presented in the novel explicitly Bessie and Mary Dalton threaten Bigger. Subsequently Bigger rapes Bessie before he finally kills her when she questions his authority.

### **II. Obstacles to social Justice**

#### **II.1. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead***

##### **II.1.1. Unequal Access to opportunity in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.**

As early as the third page upon the decision of the auto plant to increase the car plant expansion... Styles says: "I'll tell you what that means... more machines, bigger buildings... never any expansion to the pay packet. Makes me fed up. I know what I'm talking about I worked at Ford one time" (*Sizwe*

*Bansi is Dead* P3). In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* the Black skin is discriminated and segregated against. Though on his land, he feels in exile, move to a rank inferior to the white man. Access to Jobs that pay well is only for whites. Whites exercise administrative Jobs whereas the blacks are relegated to a second-class citizen status. Blacks have access to low paying jobs only such as menial and mining jobs that are tiring and pay less.

When Sizwe Bansi writes to his wife, he says, "There are so many men, Nowetu who have left their places because they are dry and have come here to find work!" (*Sizwe Bansi is Dead* P30). This suggests that finding a residence here is not an easy task let alone finding a job and or a somehow comfortable room. Styles who was born and raised in Port Elizabeth recounts his life story to Sizwe Bansi in the following terms: "Hai, Sizwe! If I had to tell you the trouble, I had before I could get the right stamps 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!" (*Sizwe Bansi is Dead* P34). As for Buntu's wife, even though she is married and has a son, she works at a clinic the whole working days of the week and comes home only on weekends. The condition of the Black women in this book is worse than that of the Black man. They both suffer and struggle together to make their lives a bit better by earning some income.

### II.1.2. The Living condition of the Blacks in *Sizwe Bansi is dead*.

Racism informs us much about the different themes and events that run through the play. A people's literature revolves around their personal and communal experiences of life. That is why literary works written, by African Americans and Africans; portray the morose conditions in which Blacks found themselves.

*Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is set in an Apartheid regime by which different races that make up the country do not have equal political, social and economic rights. Such is the context in which *Sizwe Bansi is dead* is produced. Segregation and Racism are rampant and Black is seen as the unwanted color. They are ill-treated and taken for inferior to the Whites. In *Sizwe Bansi is dead* every Black person has to carry a record card with him to control his movements and activities. To the white man, the Black man is only a number. Before a black man can take up residence in a new town, he has to produce the book as evidenced in the passages where Sizwe Bansi now Robert Zwelinzima writes to his wife to inform her of his living conditions: "So now Nowetu, for the time being my troubles are over, Christmas I come home. In the meantime, Buntu is working a plan to get me a Lodger's Permit. If I get it you and the children can come here and spend some days with me in Port Elizabeth" (*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, P 44). Whether the black person goes at work, on the road, to buy clothes even in the church he has to carry the book.

In fact, a black person cannot own property. He has no patch of land to call his own. This is seen in the situation of Outa Jacob. Until he died, he had no rest, no peace. The hard-arc-ed experience that Old Outa Jacob went through is illustrative of the morose socio-economic situation the vast majority of blacks live in. Jacob spent all his time on searching and securing a Job, but instead, he has felt insecure all his life. Jacob is an Old man with a wife and children to feed yet he was not able to make it until he finally dies penniless leaving behind a family to suffer. This is later reinforced when Styles says; “Now at last it’s over. No matter how hard arced the Boer on this farm wants to be, he cannot move Outa Jacob. He has reached home.”(*Sizwe Bansi is dead*, p 9)

In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* the condition of the Black woman is worse than that of the Black man. Buntu’s wife is a house cleaner for a white family; she is allowed to come home only on weekends. Her son has to live with his grandmother. This is clearly evidenced on page 27 where Buntu explains to Man his marital condition in the following words “Ja, my wife attends this Birth Control Clinic rubbish. The child is staying with my mother” (*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, p27). The town where Sizwe came from there is only one shop and the white proprietor had a woman working for him. Where men like Sizwe could not find jobs, gleaming hopes tor employment for women were no existent. So, Sizwe’s wife is confined to stay at home even though she is able and willing to work if she finds one. Man, later evidences this when he addresses Buntu, He says: “The place where we stay is fifteen miles from town. There is only one shop there. Baas Van Wyk. He already has a woman working for him. King William’s Town is very small and too many people. That is why I don’t want to go back”(*Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, p 27).

## **II.2. In *Native Son***

### **II.2.1. The Living Conditions of the Blacks in *Native Son*.**

*Native son* opens with the protagonist (Bigger) faces down and fights a huge rat that has invaded the Thomas’s one room apartment. One is struck by the family’s poverty and lack of options. This abject poverty led an entire family to live in a cramped one-room apartment. Consequently, Thomas and his friends have no many alternatives and so they prepared to rob a white man’s business. Bigger Thomas seeing no prospect of getting the kind of job that he has dreamt about accepts his mother advice and goes to the Daltons’ a wealthy white family to get a chauffeuring job. His first task is to drive Mary Dalton to University but instead, she directs him to a building where she meets her boyfriend. Moreover, the two young people drive Bigger around, trying to befriend him, but ultimately making him feel ashamed and angry to be black. These evidences divide between the two races. There is a huge gap between the living conditions of blacks and whites.

However, women also experience the harshness of life. In *Native Son*, there are allusions to the inferiority of women to men. As early as the first

couple of pages of narrating the story, we are told that Bigger Thomas scares his Sister with the dead rat. She screamed and begged her mother for protection. This shows that Bigger is The Man, he convinces Bessie that they have to leave together because she knows too much. Once he gets her alone, however, he rapes her. Afraid, she will give him away whether he takes her with him or leaves her behind; he hits her with a brick, and then throws her into an airshaft in an abandoned building.

Additionally, Bigger taunts his sister with the rat's dead body, demonstrating his power over her. This is one of the few times Bigger has any power, and he uses it to intimidate others, something that many of the white characters do with their power. This is to say that even the black man afflicts wrong on the Black woman, as suggested in this passage where Vera sought help from her mom "Bigger!" Vera gasped convulsively; she screamed, swayed, closed her eyes, fell headlong across her mother, and rolled limply from the bed to the floor. "Bigger, for God's sake!" the mother sobbed, rising and bending over Vera. "Don't do that! Throw that rat out!"(66-70).

## Conclusion

*Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *Native Son* narrate the story of men and women who attempt to change their lives in a society, which does not easily allow them to change their lives for the better. The vexation and seclusion Bigger and Sizwe Bansi fall victim to are all symbolic of the white oppression on Black people. *Native Son* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* deal with the story of the Black Man's struggle to define himself /herself and free himself/ herself from the shackles of white society. Both authors created their characters to portray the Black misery in their respective societies. Throughout this paper we have seen that both Black man and Black woman are victims of oppression. This misery is made-up by the white supremacist idea to oppress and segregate others who are Blacks. In these two literary classics Blacks face many obstacles to social justice ranging from an equal distribution of wealth to low paying menial jobs. There are some steps forward in reclaiming the rights of the masses, especially with the advent of Advocacy and Human Rights activists who stand by the oppressed. However, that alone cannot be sufficient, we need to take our responsibilities, and we have to seek to understand one another in order to strive to overcome our differences. Unless we continue to educate ourselves and voice out our discontent, social justice will continue to be an ideal difficult to achieve.

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