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DR. J. Kwanya

TLT 405: South African Poetry and Drama

Navigating the moral maze: Decision-making under oppression and exploitation. The dilemma between ethics, morality and survival, In Athol Fugard’s play “Sizwe Banzi Is Dead”

Athol Fugard was born in June 1932 in a remote village in Middleburg, South Africa. His father was Afrikaner and his mother English-Speaking. His first work in theatres was a piece known as the rehearsal room which had a multiracial cast openly rejecting segregation in South African theatres. This led to most of his works be banned by the apartheid government. His play , “Sizwe Banzi is Dead” Presents a crystal clear exploration of life especially for black minority under South Africa apartheid regime, where the struggle for survival often collides with moral imperatives. The play delves in complexities of maintaining one’s dignity and certain morals which the society expects of you in an oppressive system designed to strip away both of them. Through the use of some characters in the play such as Buntu, Sizwe and Styles I am going to portray moral ambiguities that arise when individuals are forced to make difficult choices under systematic oppression. By critically examining the play’s central ethical conflicts, character decisions and the their broader implications we can gain insight into nature of morality in extreme situations and the psychological toil and torture of living under unjust systems.

I will also analyse the play or look into it under lens of different theoretical frameworks. For instance I will employ Utilitarianism as proposed by John Stuart, where I will evaluate the consequences of characters actions. Emmanuel Kant’s Deontological ethics will provide a framework for examining the inherent rightness or wrongness of decisions made by the central characters in the play. Furthermore, Jean-Paul Sartre’s concepts of freedom and responsibility, will be used to explore the characters’ moral agency. I will also incorporate Franz Fanon’s work on pyschological effects of colonialism and Homi Bhabha’s concepts of Mimicry and hybridity.

The central ethical dilemma in Sizwe’s life begins when a decision comes ups where to assume dead mans identity who they found on there way home. Sizwe was drunk and Buntu needed to relief himself so he just stopped and dissapeared to urinate in a nearby thicket and soon comes out scared after finding that he was urinating on a dead body which had been killed by Totsi. Since Sizwe is faced with prospect of being forced to leave Port Elizabeth due to restrictive pass laws, his friend Buntu suggests that Sizwe takes the identity of the dead man, Robert Zwelinzima. Howver at first Sizwe is reluctant as he suggests that they took the body to the officials but Buntu is reluctant as that may land them into trouble as the police are likely to false accuse them of the homicide. Sizwe’s fate now lies in the identity of the dead man as he cant afford to feed his wife and the children if he goes back as there are no jobs there. He eventually takes the identity of the dead man, this decision forms the crux of the play’s moral conflict. From utilitarian persepective one could argue that sizwe’s risky decision to finally steal and assume the dead man’s identity leeds to greater good overall, as it now allows Sizwe to remain in port Elizabeth, secure a job, support his family and three children and potentially improve their lives. The consequetialist approach would argue that the positive outcome of the act despite how risky it was given the consequences he may have undergone of the white authorities had realized what he had done and the fact that he had to live forever under dead man’s name. The overall outcome outweigh the moral dubiousness of the act itself.

However, from a deontological ethical lens I would question the inherent rightness of such an action regardless of its consequences. The act of stealing Roberts’s identity after been killed by the Totsi,even after urinating on his dead body and he is also a fellow blackman who probably his parents back at home depend on him, violates the principles of honesty and respect for the dead. This ethical viewpoint would argue that the end does not justify the means. The role of Styles’ a photographer who facilitates this identity transformation makes us question the level of ethics complexity in that society.He tells Robert, “this is not important my friend.You think all thoser monkeys carrying newspapers know how to read?They look at the pictures. This is going to be beatiful,I must send this to magazine. All right Robert now move back remember what I told you. Just walk towards me and right into the city of the future.I will take a picture ready now come, Robert…” He goes up seems hestistant when Robert requets for only one photo. May he expected to be paid a lot. The city of the future which he is telling Robert to walk in is a symbol freedom which might me imagining might come soon and he is fighting for it. Styles business of taking photographs for passbook makes him an ally of the apartheid government which is an oppressive system, yet he also takes part and provides a means of resistance and survival for his community. His moral character symbolises the moral ambiguity that rules the play, highlighting the difficulty and challenges that black south Africans undergone in maintaining ethical purity in oppressive system of the apartheid.

Sizwe Banzi’s moral Journey which is full of challenges forms the heart of the play. Initially his great resistant to the idea of assuming identity of another man who is dead already, he struggles with the loss of his name and by extension his sense of self. His internal struggle reflects the existentialist dillemma of maintaining authenticity of being yourself in the face of external pressures. Sartre’s concept of “existence precedes essence” is relevant here as Sizwemust create his own essence in a world that seeks to define him. His friend, Buntu who is both an enabler and moral guardian of Sizwe, Presents a complex ethical figure. His approach to survival during that apartheid regime raises lots of moral question as he is the one who pitched the idea of asumming dead man’s identity to sizwe after realising Robert had an already working passbook and a working permit, which were esentiall for survival in port Elizabeth if you were a black man. His suggestion raises questions about the nature of moral responsibility in extreme cirmustances such as life and death. Buntu’s action can be seen as a form of resistance against an unjust sytem, yet they also involve some degree of moral compromise such as dishonesty. Furthermore, the photographer also occupies a unique ethical position. His photography business thrives on the very same system he subtly subverts, creating a tension between personal survival and community resistance. Sytle’s character illustrates the complex moral calculations individuals must undertake carefully when living under oppression, balancing personal gain with collective welfare.

Fugard through the play also explores the role of families and the community and how they collectively shape and influence ethical decision making among characters such as Sizwe and his friend Buntu. The characters decisions are not made in isolation but they are influenced by their relationships and responsibilities to others. For example Sizwe wants to help his wife and children back at home that why he takes a risk of faking his identity. He write her left to his wife Nowetu back to his home, he says, “Dear, Nowetu, I have got wondferful news for you in this letter.My troubles are over, I think you would not believe it, but I must tell you . Sizwe Banzi, in a manner of speaking is dead!i Will Tell you what I can”( page 170) This act of writing a letter to his wife and deciding to tell her the truth shows that he did what he had to do not for selfish gains but for his family. This communal aspect adds depth to the ethical considerations, moving beyond individual morality to encompass collective survival and resistance.When Sizwe visits Buntu after running from Zolas place after the fear getting arrested since he lacks passbook Buntu welcomes him as a brother. Buntu tells Sizwe Zola told me you were coming. I did not have time to explain anything.Just asked if you could spend a few nights here. You can perch yourself on that sofa in the corner . I am alone at the moment . My wife is a domestic sleep-in at kabega park….only comes home weekend”(170).The solidarity and brotherhood shown between characters , particularly in Buntu’s willingness to help Sizwe his friend, demonstrates a strong bond and form of ethical behavior that prioritizes community welfare in oppresives regimes over strict adherence to legal or conventional moral codes.When sizwe is asked by Buntu what his problem was he says tha t he had no permit to stay in port Elizabeth” I have Got no Permit to stay in Port Elizabeth” He says ( page !70) . The black community were forced to carry passbooks everywhere and were required to have a permit in order to work even in the informal jobs which were reserved only for the blacks in South Africa. Buntu explains to him what he requitred to do and was difficult and almost impossible at that time and if he could have gotten caught he could be in trouble, but he also needed a job to take care of his wife and kids.”You are required to report to the Bamtu Affairs Commisioner, King William Town, within three days of the mentioned date for the … you should have been home yesterday ..for the purpose of repatriation to home district for influx control you are in trouble sizwe”(171). This shows how illetracy also had affected sizwe since he did not know the content of the letter meaning many blacks were receiving less or no education. And the fact that they were contolling inlux of bantus or the blacks symbolises how many of them wre coming to towns in search of jobs just like Sizwe who according to the contents of the letter he was suppose to be in home village symolising how the blacks had no freedom of movement during the apartheid regime.Also the white men who were majorly the employers were paying the black labourers peanut and oppressing them. This can be seen when they were told to smile and appear happy during the visit of an American at the time when they were working in the ford company. They made sure this very minimal amounts could not guarantee them a comfortable stable life so that they could kept working day to day till they grow old and weak. This raises question about the nature of ethics in a society where the legal system itself is fundementally unjust by design from the colonial masters.

To fully understand and comprehend the ethical dimensions of “Sizwe Banzi is Dead” It very important and crucial for us to consider the historical context of apartheid South Africa and the atrocities that were taking place during that time enabled by the white colonialists which now becomes an irony since Fugard been a white man himself, was opposing those atrocities different from his fellow white men. Some say this might be due to his wide travelling when he was working in ship meeting different people in different parts of the world shaping his view on how all humans were equall and should be treated with dignity. The play was written and performed during a time of severe racial oppression and economic exploitation among the blacks. During that period the very existence of black South Africans was criminalized and the apartheid adminstration made sure that these was controlled by the use of pass laws and also other dicriminatory legislation for the indeginous population.

In this context actions that would otherwise be considered unethical in other circumstances take a different moral valence out of the normal one. The decision to assume a dead man’s identity, while ethically questionable by a normal society in isolation, in Sizwe’s case it becomes a form of resistance and survival against an inherently unethical evil system. This historical perspective invites to consider how moral frame works might shift, turn, get ignored or evolve under extreme societal pressures such as those Buntu and his friend were undegoing but atlast they had make a hard decision which gurantees there survival against all odds. Without a doubt the play, “Sizwe Banzi is Dead” suggest that ethics under oppression is not even a matter of clear cut choices and decisions but it is a constant negotiation and debate between survival, dignity, and collective resistance. The enduring relavance of this play by Athol is embedded in its ability to provoke reflection on how we as humans with concious we might act when faced with impossible choices, and what it means to maintain one’s humanity in the face of oppressive regime such as the apartheid government in South Africa.

Athol Fugards Play, Sizwe Banzi not only provides insight into the specific historical context of apartheid South African where the ruling minority were exploiting, racially segragating and oppressing the indeginous people of South Africa, but also offers a broader meditation on the human capacity for resilience, adaptation and moral courage in the face of opression which the Blacks were undergoing under the colonial adminstrators. Buntu tells sizwe that no one could led him and he could start any business without the permit and the pass book. “Who is going to lend money to a somebody endorsed to hell and gone out in the bush?And how are you going to buy your potatoes at the market without Hawker’s Licence? Same story Sizwe. You would get there because of that bloody stamp in your book. There is no way out , Sizwe. You are not the first one who has tried to find it. Take my advice and catch that train back to King William’s Town. If you need work so bad go knock on the door of the Mines Recruiting Office. Dig gold for the white man. That is the only time they don’t worry about influx control”, This statement from Buntu shows how it was difficult for Black majority South Africans were been oppressed and how the whites made life difficult every black man to survive without licences, permits and passbooks. It also reveals that some indecent jobs which were risky and dangerous such as mining gold for the white man no permit was required.

The play also challenges us to consider our ethical boundaries and lengths to which we might go to preserve our dignity and ensure our individual survival in a world that often demands impossible choices. The bold decision that Sizwe took ensured his survival in Port Elizabeth where those of his kind were considered aliens upon lacking the passbook. This is ironic since they were the indeginous people in South Africa. Sizwe at the end gets a Job and he can now take care of his family and himself.