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DRAMA AND THE RHYTHMS OF SOCIAL REALITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ATHOL FUGARD'S *SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD*

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ABSTRACT

*The inextricable relationship between art and society cannot be overemphasised, as no work of art exists in a vacuum without that identification with as well as reflection of the social relations in which it is created. The implication, therefore, is that issues that border on social realities have been the major or dominant motif of writers the world over, Africa not exceptional. This paper undertakes a sociological survey of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and directs its focus from the thrust of sociological theory. It lays emphasis on those prevailing social realities in Apartheid South Africa that informed the creation of the play, and highlights the subtle and salient effects of the Apartheid system as obtains in South Africa of the time, using this well crafted play as a paradigm.*

Key words: Art, artist, society, social reality

INTRODUCTION

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

(Mandela)

The above epigrammatic declaration by Nelson Mandela, the legendary symbol of the struggle for the liberation of the suffering blacks in South Africa as captured in the blurb of his book, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, foreshadows the dreams and aspirations of the creator's of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, our play in context. Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* was written during the Apartheid regime in South Africa, it is renowned to be the most typical of all plays that reflect the apartheid era. This paper undertakes a sociological survey of the play. The starting-point will be from defining the sociological evaluation of art, especially by considering its theoretical framework from both its general and distinctive perspectives. It will also undertake a brief historical background of the Apartheid system, to provide a sound platform for a better understanding of the underlying world view of the play. The paper, therefore, will take a synoptic approach to the play in order to further illuminate its thematic concerns. However, since the main focus of the paper is the consideration of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* from the thrust of sociological theory as already stated, emphasis will be placed on those prevailing social realities in Apartheid South Africa that informed the creation of the play. This sociological perspective will highlight the subtle and salient effects of the Apartheid system as obtains in South Africa of the time.

Implications of the Sociological Theory of Art

In a broad sense, Haralambos, Holborn, and Head define sociological theory as "a set of ideas that provide an explanation for human society" (934). Invariably, the sociological perspective of art is that which sees art basically as a representation of the society. The sociological theorist's main concern in

art is the realistic depiction of life as it is lived in the society. He is, therefore, a realist for whom art can only be art when it portrays a true picture of the life of a given society either in relation to its culture, politics, religion, etc.; and for whom drama by extension, must take its base from the happenings in the society, on those factual aspects of life than the ideal; aimed ultimately by pointing to those ills inherent in the society, towards affecting a reformation or regeneration of the same society.

It is pertinent, therefore, to reiterate here that issues that border on social realities have been the major feature or dominant motif of writers the world over. The reason for this is not farfetched. Man by nature is a product of the society, and as such cannot alienate himself from the realities of this same society. His art, therefore, is obviously a product of the social life, which draws its themes from incidents, issues, and problems inherent in this society. Perhaps, Adolfo Sanchez Vasquez captures this reality more aptly when he categorically asserts that the artist – whom these writers represent – “cannot (afford) to be indifferent to the social relations in whose framework he creates” (113).

On a documentary perspective, Bamidele had identified Hypolyte Taine as crucial to the history and development of a theory in sociology of Literature, in an approach referred to as positivism in sociological theory. He explained that interest in Taine’s approach is basically geared towards “the historical background or the culture from which a work emanates” (8). To this end, understanding any work of art, therefore, will derive more from understanding the nature of the society that gave rise to it.

The Setting or World of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

An understanding of the play will derive principally from understanding the society that produced it, that is – South Africa. To understand the society of South Africa enclave also, is to understand the system of government which operated the Apartheid system – a racial and discriminatory system which segregated the black majority populace from the white minority group; the latter being the only legal ruling group. The word Apartheid means “separateness” in the Afrikaans language – a language which is associated with a system that has kept races apart and produced so much hate – and describes the rigid racial division between the governing white minority populace and the black majority. Apartheid, says Gary van Wyk, “is a political philosophy” introduced in South Africa by the “Afrikaner Nationalist Party” as part of its campaign in the 1948 elections. With the party’s victory in the election, Apartheid, therefore, became the official policy for South Africa. However, as Davis wrote, evidence abound that South Africa had a long history of racial segregation and white supremacy.

Apartheid laws, therefore, which classified people into racial groups, determined where members of each group could live, what jobs they could hold, and what type of education they could receive. These laws also prohibited most social contact between the whites and the nonwhites population, authorised segregated public facilities, and denied any representation of nonwhites in the national government. Among these obnoxious laws that dehumanised blacks in South Africa was the ‘Influx Control Act’ – the pass system which controlled the blacks’ movement and made it mandatory for all blacks to carry identity cards no matter how highly placed they were. This grew out of the attempt to confine the blacks in the various homelands that were exclusively carved out for them. People who openly opposed Apartheid were considered Communists and government passed security legislation which in effect turned South Africa into a Police State. These laws gave the police the right to arrest and detain without trial and without access to families or lawyers, which in turn left courts scarcely any means of intervention. As Sisulu puts it, “state terror against the oppressed became the order of the day” (vii).

Apart from racial segregation, the system also thrived on economic exploitation of the black majority for whom menial and dangerous jobs which attract meagre remunerations are reserved. This is as a result of the capitalist economy which the whites have fashioned for their selfish interests, to the detriment of the black owners of the land who only mine minerals for their industries and those of

their European allies, and serve them as domestic hands in their houses for survival. Apartheid, therefore, imposed appallingly heavy burdens on the blacks in South Africa. There exist a deep economic gap between the wealthy whites, and the poor black masses. The whites were well fed, well housed, well cared for, while the majority of non white suffered from widespread poverty, malnutrition, and disease. Consequently, despite the growth of the national economy, for most South Africans life was a struggle for day-to-day survival.

Worse still, in such atmosphere of poverty and exploitation, the black townships were also characterised by much violence and killings by blacks who attack each other in desperation and hunger. The situation in South Africa as at the time the play was written was so grim that not until the Apartheid System became dismantled by the government of F. W. Deklerk in 1990, the black in South Africa did not live as human being and was always forced to accept such ridiculous packages which Sizwe grabbed in the play.

Synopsys of the Play

The story revolves principally around two men, Styles and Sizwe, about their experiences in the hands of the obnoxious system that is Apartheid, and how they are able to surmount its hardships. The play opens in Styles' photographic studio. Styles, a photographer reveals his new status as a man who can afford the luxury of a newspaper which a few years back he did not dream of. In a rather entertaining dramatic monologue, the effect of Apartheid is captured vividly in the narration of events and his years as a labourer, with particular reference to Henry Ford's visit. He recounts the deceit and hypocrisy of the white bosses, all to the detriment of the blacks, and the pain and torture the blacks go through in order to live. Yet, they are forced to wear false smile, in order to hide their sorrow.

As soon as Sizwe walks into Styles' studio to take a photograph meant for his family back home in King Williams Town to notify them of his new employment status, a new tempo in the development of the play was ignited. Just the mere asking of his name from Styles in the process, opines Ezenwanebe (2008), got him muddled in a hesitation that saw him struggling "to reconnect" and "reconcile his two identities" (108). He barely overcomes the confusion that assailed him in that process when Styles prods him with further questions and suggestions that provokes him amid a freezing jaunty poise, to relive before the audience, all the horrible experiences that "killed" him, as he captures them in his letter to his wife. It is therefore, in the narration of this traumatic experience that most of the actions of the play take place, in a series of flashbacks dramatised as play-within-the-play.

In this flashback and play-within-the-play, Buntu is introduced; to whom Sizwe narrates his horrible police raid experience, and the consequent reality of his endorsement to vacate Port Elizabeth where he has come to seek for greener pasture within three days, back to King Williams Town, from where he came, without the hope of any job. He does not have any right of stay in Port Elizabeth, yet he is reluctant and apprehensive to leave. However, Buntu takes great pain to analyse to him the reality of the ugly situation of Apartheid, and further invites him to a drinking spree, perhaps to relive him of the tension and anxieties of his experience. As they return from this outing, they encounter a corpse which turns out to be that of Robert Zwelinzima. Thus ensues the whole trauma of argument and persuasion, and 'indoctrination' to grab a new chance of survival, in transposing his passport with that of the dead man; so that he dies as Sizwe, to live as Robert Zwelinzima, from where the play derives its title, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

Thematic Concerns of the Play

Theme emphasises the main idea which the writer expresses in his work. While it must not be confused with the 'motivating' idea, that driving force which Krapenhenko, quoting Rasheed Ismailia describes as "the chief and most fundamental factor in all human actions" in which "art" as an "embodiment of thoughts and living image" (21) is no exception, it emphasises the basic idea in a play which the writer dramatises through the conflict of characters with one another, or with life events. Therefore, although there are several themes that could be identified in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, however,

the central theme can be said to be that of political injustice and economic exploitation. This is painted right from the opening of the play, with Styles' narration of Mr. Ford's visit and the horrifying experiences of the blacks in the hypocritical hands of their white bosses. This theme runs through the play as exemplified in the Ciskeian independence and the pass system – the segregation, identification and movement control system that constantly puts the blacks in check; and the 48 years old man's exploitative case. Other themes may include: man's inhumanity to man, the search for freedom by South African blacks, and intrigue as a means of (survival) keeping body and soul together.

In the play, there is ample exposition of the Apartheid System and its effects on the blacks. Among the issues to be noted also in the discussion of the theme of the play are: life and death as inextricably linked, with death as the only solution to peace in a trouble infested world; dehumanisation and frustration of the black man, with particular reference to Sizwe in his tearing off his cloths – baffled with the white man's inability to recognise his manhood, and the explanation of Buntu on the idea that all blacks are ghosts; insecurity, as can be recalled of the risky atmosphere of Ford Company and the reality of violence and crime in black townships.

A Sociological Perspective on *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*

A sociological work centers principal attention on the society in which characters live, its effects upon them, and the social forces that control (their) action.

[Dictionary of Literary Terms]

Sizwe Bansi is Dead, says Julian Mitchell, therefore, analyses “the South African society in terms of how it affects (the) people's lives” (310). Refocusing on the thematic concerns of the play will be necessary at this point, with particular reference to the political and economic exploitation in South African society of the time. In this regard, it will be pertinent to note the powerful political instrument which Apartheid as a system of government has become in the exploitation of the blacks in South Africa. As a segregation system, Apartheid has clearly drawn a racial discriminatory boundary between the black majority and their white minority counterparts, thus empowering the minority whites politically, socially, and economically at the expense and detriment of the majority blacks.

What this situation portends becomes much grimmer considering the fact that besides these whites being the minority group, they are annoyingly, originally but ‘strangers’ in South Africa. However, the situation in South Africa only became an extreme experience with the formalisation of Apartheid which projected more glaringly, the depths of the underlying motives of the ‘invading’ white minority – to swoop on the natural resources of predominantly Gold with which God endowed the blacks in the land, and dispossess them of these resources and their enjoyment of them, and make both the possession and enjoyment of these resources their exclusive reserve.

In order to consolidate on achieving their obnoxious objectives, with political power in their kitty, therefore, the white minority had to come up with several instrumentations to subjugate the blacks – what Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the legendary Nigerian Afrobeat ‘maestro’ of the blessed memory would offhandedly dub “conjuration of magic” – instrumentations which are embodied on Apartheid system, and characterised by racial discrimination through which they continuously asserted that power and superiority over the blacks. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, therefore, is replete with these instrumentations.

The cause of Apartheid in South Africa as reflected in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, was obviously furthered by the establishment of the ‘Ciskeian Independence’; a settlement system in which blacks were meant to be confined into separate ‘homelands’, while the whites live in developed reserve areas. This development is also such that centres the whole economic activities in these white dominated or rather controlled areas, to the effect that a ‘pass system’ is introduced through ‘Influx control Act’. This makes it mandatory for blacks to carry identity cards before they could access such areas for the obvious reason of the whiteman's scarce employment, either as a factory worker, or as a domestic servant, who is further confined under the watchdog of the whiteman in concentration camps. Failure to provide this card on demand at any point in time, therefore, becomes a severe punishable offence,

which explains the incessant raids by white authorities in these camps. This card thus becomes a monitoring device to control the movement and activities of the blacks. Yet, they are in their father land, and could not express their fundamental liberty even in movement.

Sizwe as a man had come all the way from King Williams Town, to Port Elizabeth, to look for employment. He did not have such valid record card on one of such raids. He says: "I was in big trouble", and further tells us his experience:

I was staying with Zola ... But one night ... I was sleeping on the floor ... I heard some noises and when I looked up I saw torches shinning in through the window ... then there was loud knocking on the door. When I got up Zola was there in the dark ... he was trying to whisper something. I think he was saying I must hide, so I crawled under the table. The headman came in and looked around and found me hiding under the table ... and he dragged me out ... I was just wearing my pants. My shirt was lying on the other side. I just managed to grab it as they were pushing me out ... I finished dressing in the van. They drove straight to the administration office. (23)

The consequence of that offence was his immediate endorsement back to King Williams Town, for the purpose of further repatriation to his home district. However, the grim portrait of Apartheid in South Africa is painted right from the opening of the play, with Styles' narration of Mr. Ford's visit and the horrifying experiences of the blacks in the hypocritical hands of their white bosses. Styles says it was,

A Thursday morning. I walked into the plant ... Everything was quiet! Those big bloody machines that used to make so much noise made my head go around ...? Silent! Went to the notice-board and read: Mr. Ford's visit today! ... General Forman Mr. 'Baas' Bradley ... called us all together ... 'Listen, boys, don't go to work on the line. There is going to be General Cleansing first.' (4)

All work is surprisingly suspended for the purpose of yet another surprise of a tasking sanitation exercise that perhaps, never took place in all his six years of service in the factory only to impress the august visitor. As if that was not enough, he was further instructed to,

'Tell all the boys that they must now go to the bathroom and wash themselves clean.' (6)

Styles yet informs us:

When we finished washing they gave us towels ... Three hundred of us, man! We were so clean we felt shy! ... From there to the general store ... new overall comes, wrapped in plastic. Brand new, man! ... Then next door to the tool room ... brand new tool bag, set of spanners, shifting spanner, torque wrench – all of them brand new – and because I worked in the dangerous test section I was also given a new asbestos apron and fire-proof gloves to replace the one I had lost about a year ago ... I walked back heavy to my spot. Armstrong on the moon! (6)

Styles is further instructed to tell the 'boys' to look happy as soon as Mr. Ford arrives, and to further slow the pace of work in order to allow them to sing and smile in the process. He delivers it more contemptuously:

Gentlemen he says when the door opens and his grandmother walks in you must see to it that you are wearing a mask of smiles. Hide your true feelings, brothers. You must sing. The joyous songs of the days of old before we had fools like this one next to me to worry about. (7)

We are presented with the pain and torture which the Blackman goes through in order to survive. The blackman's horrifying experiences and the hypocrisy of the whites are, therefore, brought to an ironical climax in the vehemence with which the black workers were ordered back to their duty posts by their white bosses, immediately the visitor departed, to make up for production loss of their sham display. Styles informs us that:

It ended up with us working harder that bloody day than ever before. (9)

More ironical, however, in the economic exploitation in Apartheid is the fact that the search for the employment opportunity for the Blackman can only fetch him but menial and dangerous jobs which, besides being his exclusive reserve, attract only meagre wages in which he had little or no option if he must exist. The blackman's economic dilemma is therefore further captured in Sizwe's apprehension and frustration when Buntu recommended the mines job to him. He responded in apparent dismay:

I don't want to work in the mines. There is no money there. And it is dangerous, under the ground. Many black men get killed when the rocks fall. You can die there. (26)

The 48 years old man's experience also speaks volume of the oppression and economic exploitation of the black in South Africa. He could only get promoted in his working place strictly on the basis of the presentation of an 'education' certificate, despite his old age and long years of service. Yet, the system is such that would have completely deprived him of the opportunity of going to school as a child or in his youth, either because he did not have the opportunity, or his parents were not disposed. What else could have explained such a senseless and inconsiderate condition and calculated attempt to deprive the old man of his right if not for sheer oppression and mindless exploitation?

Dehumanisation

The foregoing predicates a further dimension of sociological perspective in considering the play, that is, the angle of dehumanisation. The socio-political and economic structure in Apartheid South Africa, as already stated, is such that places the white minority as the only superior and legal ruling group. Apart from disfranchising the blacks and grossly marginalising them in many vital areas like education and employment, it is such that grossly also eroded every shred of dignity of the blacks. This lack of human dignity experienced by the blacks asserts Mandela "is the direct result of the policy of White supremacy", which only "implies Black inferiority" (187). The best recognition and identity this structure has given the blackman, therefore, is only as a number – the native identification number. That is why he must always carry the record card which bears his identification number everywhere he goes, failure of which he finds himself in serious trouble. His whole life and activities is therefore, centred on this book. Its loss becomes the complete loss of his identity. The individual black thus becomes far less important than the book; portraying the level of dehumanisation to which the black was subjected.

The blackman, therefore, is not considered as a human being, rather as a number and a means of cheap labour. That is why the menial and most dangerous jobs are his exclusive reserve, despite the meagre remunerations attached. Mr. Ford's factory and the mines examples are apt representations of this reality in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. The dignity of the Blackman is also further set out for ridicule where grown men are referred to as boys even by a little white boy, to the extent that he exists only as mere ghost of himself. Buntu captures the blackman's dehumanisation experience in the following succession of queries to Sizwe:

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 the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out, 'Hey, John! Come here' ... to you, Sizwe Bansi ... isn't that a ghost? Or when his little child calls you 'Boy' ... you, a man, circumcised with a wife and four children ... isn't that a ghost? (38)

It is perhaps, the pressure of all this dehumanising experience and the resultant frustration that forces Sizwe to strip bare to the full glare of the audience – apparently baffled with the whiteman’s inability to recognise his manhood, to prove it himself. Our sympathy is rather provoked by his apparent frustration:

What’s happening in this world, good people? Who cares for who 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. I’ve got a head to think good things. What’s wrong with me? ... I’ve got legs ... I’m strong! I’m a man. Look! I’ve got a wife. I’ve got four children ... What has he got that I haven’t ...? (35)

Similarly, funny, this strange action by Sizwe is but a poignant portrayal of the abused psyche of the abused black South African whom he represents, and who often is perhaps assailed by an intense suspicion of himself as being incomplete and lacking some vital attributes of human species. Quta Jacob, much like Sizwe, also symbolises the oppressed and the dehumanised black under the Apartheid System. He had expended all his youth and energy in the service of the white man. Incidentally kicked out of his job by an employer’s son who never liked him, when the old man was no more, Quta Jacob was forced to take to the road with his family. Encumbered by old age, with limited employment opportunity for him, and his load on his back, his numerous responsibilities never abated either. So did he wander with his burden to his death, homeless, penniless, and completely forgotten by all who had exploited him.

Ironically, however, Quta Jacob’s death only symbolises the blackman’s ‘real’ arrival and transition to a peaceful home, even though exploited, homeless, and rejected ‘the other side’ – his total freedom and release from the meaningless and purposeless struggle of life, in an obnoxious system where man’s inhumanity to man thrives. Buntu further translates the situation thus: “The only time we’ll find peace is when they dig a hole for us and press our face into the earth” (28). What this then means is that the blackman’s perfect peace in South Africa can only be ensured when he is dead and buried.

Insecurity

One of the direct consequences of the exploitation of Apartheid System in South Africa is the sheer impoverishment of the blacks. The Blackman was plunged into a complete state of lack, materially and spiritually, besides political. Practically, the black in South Africa owns nothing, even himself, since his life has been turned into that of servitude. He could not even afford to cloth himself by buying from the shops – a luxury, which is far beyond him, but forced to go to the sales house – which rather conjures up a sense of a place where rejected items are stored and consequently sold at cheap rates. Worthy of note here is Sizwe Bansi’s experience, among other vivid images of poverty and deprivation as painted in the play. Invariably, nothing could make a man feel as insecure as not being able to meet, even his basic needs.

Worse still, however, in such atmosphere of poverty and deprivation, the black townships were also characterised by much violence and killings by blacks who attack each other, perhaps, in desperation and hunger, as moral standards depreciated to the lowest ebb, that no single day passes by without somebody being stabbed or assaulted. Buntu tries to emphasise this in his attempt to give an explanation to the cause of the death of the corpse which they later discovered was Robert Zwelinzima, when he infers that:

Tsotsies (Black hooligans) must have got him. (32)

In all, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is a work of art that is in perfect consonance with the realities of its society, both in setting and characterisation. We see a society that is typically identifiable, and real human beings with typical traits of human nature: ambitious, domineering, exploitative, having feelings, problems of life, etc., with normal (prose) language of everyday life, explored through convincing realistic techniques.

The language of the play which is realistic and identifiable to the people in its raw, vulgar, and colloquial dimensions, coloured by clichés and slang of the masses of the people aptly summarises the social and economic reality of the setting – South Africa. However, the rawness and vulgarity of language does not shock the speaker nor the audience who otherwise would have been outraged, because the same environment produces both the speaker and the audience.

Noteworthy here is the scene in which Styles translated Mr. Bradley's speech to his mates, "Big-shot cunt from America" (6), "this old fool says there is hell of a big day in our lives" (7), noteworthy also is his foul statement on Henry Ford as "Big bastard", or the workers' curiosity to know whether Ford "is a bigger fool than Bradley" (7), etc. There are also several cases of the use of "shit", "bloody", etc., in the play. The play, therefore, is endowed with parody and expresses the anguished and the abused psychology of the people. In general, the play mirrors through its language, the extent of exploitation and injustice in South Africa.

In the light of the foregoing, Styles' courage in taking a bold step to extricate himself from the shackles and predicament of the obnoxious system in which he finds himself deserves a big salute, as such feat is never achieved without deeper insight and sheer determination. He informs us that after Mr. Ford's visit experience, that he took a good look at himself and his long years of working in the factory, and decided he did something much better with his life than continue working there; and this marked the birth of the idea of the establishment of the photographic studio.

Therefore, the obstacles he struggled with and finally surmounted to be where we saw him may after all be symbolic in foreshadowing the stiff struggle for survival of the Blackman which runs through the play. However, what becomes even more symbolic here is the meaning which Styles' photographic studio has given to the lives of the blacks as represented in the play. It has turned the world of the black into a fulfilment, which constantly eluded him, in contrast to that which obtains outside it. Styles' camera (lens) therefore, becomes a real symbol of the fulfilment of the blackman's dreams and fantasies.

CONCLUSION

From a sociological critical lens, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* fits perfectly into our focus of interpretation and analysis of a good sociological drama. The creators of the play obviously had succeeded in mirroring the realities of the ills of the South African society, as they reinforced, therefore, the urgency with which change was really needed in that society. Through realistic character and characterisation, we are able to feel the heavy pulse of oppression and dehumanisation with the people. Through the aesthetics of perfectly woven techniques, the main and sub-themes of the play have been reinforced. Generally, the play has captured vividly, therefore, the socio-political and economic realities of Apartheid South Africa, explored through good dramaturgy by representing grim images and themes as obtains in this society. Little wonder, Ogbé aptly asserts that "art should be committed to the aspirations of the people who use it" (57); and in consonance with Bertolt Brecht's philosophy of using it to arouse critical interest for reasoning, one cannot overemphasise the contribution of this work, therefore, in redirecting the consciousness of the black South Africans towards their sufferings and the urgency with which to take their fate in their own hands. On this note, may we fall back once again to Mandela's statement – as aptly epiloguous as it appears – as a final submission to this analysis:

Year after year they have raised their voices to condemn the grinding ... inhuman exploitation (nay injustice), and the whole policy of White domination. But instead of ... freedom, repression began to grow in volume and intensity and it seemed that all their sacrifices would end in smoke and dust. Today the whole country (nay world) knows that their labours were not in vain. (My emphasis) (21)

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