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**PROTESTING THE APARTHEID: A READING OF  
 DENNIS BRUTUS' POEMS**

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**Abstract:**

*Dennis Brutus, a South African Poet who emerged as a major literary voice during the 1950s and the 1960s, was born in 1924 in Harare, Zimbabwe. As a creative writer, he is associated with the Literature of Protest against apartheid in South Africa. His poetry is so powerful in its appeal and effectiveness that he has been considered as the most appropriate model for the young writers of South Africa. He is primarily studied as a Prison Poet and as a Protest Poet. One of the most important features of this type of poetry is that it is concerned with the immediate social realities. Moreover, the basic purpose of such poet is to convince the people around him. That is to say, as opposed to the poems that deal with the remote subject matter, the poems in this category are concerned with the immediate social realities. In addition to Brutus' concern with the immediate social realities and the hardships of the blacks in apartheid South Africa, his poems vividly and excellently present the picture of inner (mental) working of the narrator or the persons presented in the poem. In so doing, the researcher thinks, Brutus has effectively employed the technique of 'presentation of inner/psychological realities' in order to intensify the accounts of the reality. Accordingly, the present paper modestly tries to investigate the depiction of psychological realities in the poems of Dennis Brutus which form the very base of his techniques to protest against and to unveil the evil and inhuman workings of the apartheid government.*

**I**

Developing his interest in politics during the 1950s, Brutus began the campaign against racial discrimination in sports. He is largely responsible for the exclusion of South Africa and Rhodesia from Olympic Games. He is kidnapped by the secret police of South Africa and was sentenced to eighteen months of imprisonment. With such famous personalities of South African politics as Nelson Mandela, Govan Beki and Walter Sisulu, he was imprisoned in the notorious prison called Robben Island.

Starting his career as a poet in the 1950s, his first collection of poems - *Sirens, Knuckles and Boots* was published in 1963 when he was in prison. The poems in this collection are influenced by the techniques of English poets like Donne, Tennyson, Browning, Hopkins and Eliot (Abraham). Commenting on this collection of poems, Simon Gikandi (2003: 114) writes that the poems in this collection:

[W]ere characterized by the poet's attempt to balance classical poetic forms with the political themes that interested him, to mesh public issues such as the destruction of landscape and his own deep sense of alienation with private reflections on feelings, including love and loss, which he considered to be an inevitable consequence of oppression.

His second collection of poems, perhaps the most influential of his collections, is *Letters to Martha* (1968) which represents a break from the ornamentation of the earlier poetry. It is the result of his decision during his imprisonment to write simple poetry for ordinary people. The poems in this collection are in the form of letters written to his sister-in-law, Martha, since he was banned to write poetry after his release from the prison. With regard to the poems in this collection, Gikandi (2003) writes:

In addition to being direct and simple, the poems in this collection are haunting expressions and description of prison life and the terror of confinement and political repression.

The other collections of his poems are - *Poems from Algiers* (1970) and *China Poems* (1975). Brutus' poetry is published in almost eleven collections. During the period of apartheid struggle in South Africa, these collections occupied a central place in politics and poetics.

## II

Since Brutus is primarily represented as a Prison Poet and as a Protest Poet, it is essential to know what exactly the concerns of such poets are. A creative writer who is devoting himself to prison literature is primarily expected to narrate the prison experience: the warder-goaled relations, the plight of the prisoners, their deprivations and the relations of the prisoners among themselves. As such the human characters are to be included. Similarly, a Protest Poet is expected to describe the protest in the form of outward behavior of the people. Here as well the human characters are important to make the poem of its type. In both his concerns as a Prison and a Protest Poet, Brutus is concerned with human characters. It is also essential here to make a distinction between the romantic / utopian poems that largely deal with subject matters away from the realities of social life and the poems about prison and protest. In the case of the latter poems, the poet should be careful in creating life-like and convincing personalities to effectively make his point. It is here that the presentation of the psychological / inner realities helps the poet intensify the picture of the grim realities of prison life. The psychological / inner workings of the minds of the characters also signify their discontent and protest. Therefore, Brutus' poems are distinct in the sense that they manifest both outward and inner protest.

As Brutus' poems are concerned with protest and prison themes, they centre on the relation between the ruler, whose brutal government system of apartheid has deprived the ruled of many things, and those who are ruled by the system and also the relation between the warder and the goaled. In the apartheid system, the life of the ruled is controlled to such an extent that they are not permitted even to laugh, leading to inciting 'a smouldering flame' in the minds of these people. However, when the ruler increases the pressure to put out this flame, the mind of the ruled says:

Put out this flame, this heart, this laugh!  
Never! The self at its secret hearth  
nurses its smoulder, saves its heat  
while oppressions' power is charred to dust.

Brutus here does not dwell on only the outward realities of the description of the oppression, but points to the psychological condition of the oppressed people. In the mind of their minds, these people are secretly nursing the smoulder which will overthrow the oppression's power. This is a typical technique employed in order to create the feeling of protest.

Brutus at times shows his power to metaphorically concretize the inner working of his mind. Talking about his grief for the fellow people, he writes:

Only the louse of loneliness  
Siphons the interstitial marrows  
of my brain: the inaccessible itch  
mesmerizes hands, heart and flesh  
Devouring all my scabrous desolate tomorrows.

However, he realizes that the heart cannot compute with the trajectory of the desire. Whatever have been the wish and desire, they cannot be logically explained. He wants his land and his people to be happy, but, in reality, he finds hunger 'mushrooming' in his land. Due to the contrast between the reality and his desires, the poet's heart:

... knows now such devastations;  
Yarning, unworded explodes articulation:  
Sound-swift, in silence, fall the rains of poison.

The reality is unbearable to such an extent that it causes 'rain of poison' in his mind.

Brutus has also quite vividly and excellently described the feelings of the prisoners. The first letter of *Letters to Martha* represents the first psychological reaction of the prisoner:

After the sentence  
mingled feelings:  
sick relief,  
the load of approaching days  
apprehension -  
the hints of brutality  
have a depth of personal meaning.

The 'mingled feelings' also include 'exultation, the sense of challenge and confrontation' and also of 'self-pity'.

Brutus has also referred to religious practice in prison and its possible reasons. For the weak, Brutus argues, the resort to god is meant to 'invoke divine revenge/ against a ramping injustice'. However, the general picture of prison life is:

... in the grey silence of empty afternoons  
it is not uncommon  
to find oneself talking to God.

Such references help the poet to convey the helplessness of the prisoners which make them suffer the brutalities. The only alternatives for them are either to seek 'divine revenge' or 'go lunatic'. Such is the outcome of the prison life under the apartheid rule.

The prison depicted in *Letters to Martha* is not a place for the sensitive mind. The prisoners are seen involved (either voluntarily or by force) in many sexual disorders: 'coprophilism, necrophilism, fellatio; penis-amputation'. Unable to bear the reality, the sensitive minds seek relief in lunacy - one of them:

... hedged his mind with romantic fantasies  
of beautiful marriageable daughters  
the other sought escape  
in fainting fits and asthmas  
and finally fled into insanity.

The depiction of these harsh situations that the prisoners have to bear is a kind of protest from humanity in general and South-African sensitive poet, in particular. However, Brutus is highly dissatisfied regarding the behavior of the people who are outside the prison. The agony of the poet is that the fellow people for whom he is fighting for do not seem to be aware of the hardships that the prisoners have to go through.

In order to ease the prison life the prisoners are seen 'cushioning' their minds with 'phrases, aphorisms and quotations' so that 'the cursing blow' of imprisonment may be bearable. However, the most important is the acceptance of the prisoners of themselves as 'prisoners', because once such an identity is accepted, it is really difficult to erase it; and it remains in the mind 'deep down'. Brutus seems to think that the basic root of all these things is 'fear'. Therefore, he calls it 'a deadly enemy'. He narrates the impact of this enemy:

How it seeks out the areas of our vulnerability'  
and savages us  
until we are so rent and battered  
and desperate  
that we resort to what revolts us  
and wallow in the foulest treachery.

Brutus seems to be of the opinion that 'fear' is the root cause of the predicament of the native African and also of the prisoners. Therefore, one should avoid it. However, it is not possible for any African to eradicate it from their mind. As Brutus says "fear is immanent as sound in the wind-swung bell". The plight of the

apartheid affected people is that they cannot predict when they will be targeted, beaten and imprisoned:

The sounds begin again;  
the siren in the night  
the thunder at the door  
the shriek of nerves in pain.

Then the keening crescendo  
of faces split by pain  
the wordless, endless wail  
only the unfree know.

Importunate as rain  
the wraiths exhale their woe  
over the sirens, knuckles, boots;  
my sounds begin again.

Tactfully, no human character is mentioned here; only the association: siren in the night, thunder at door and shriek of nerves in pain. Who these poor, affected people are, nobody knows. However, Brutus here refers to the universal condition of blacks in apartheid South Africa. If fear and violence is prevalent to this extent and without any discrimination, the innocents are constantly under pressure. The account of the unpredictable, hostile situation also makes the readers to protest against it.

### III

To conclude, Brutus is seen employing the vivid and clear description of the psychological states of the characters/narrator in order to further intensify the sufferings of South African black people in general and prisoners in particular. Moreover, such techniques provide Brutus an option to unfold the possible feelings in the minds of these people. Generally, instead of using a detailed realistic and, at times, naturalistic description of prison realities, this technique creates the intense desired effect in the minds of the readers. One needs to be aware that during the period of struggle against apartheid, the poems of Brutus were very popular and influential. That is to say, one of the reasons of writing poetry for Brutus is to create a feeling of protest in the minds of peoples, and the depiction of the psychological workings in the mind of the persons has served the purpose.

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