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## DENNIS BRUTUS “PROTEST AGAINST APARTHEID”

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### Abstract:

*In a lecture published in Protest and Conflict in African Literature (1969), Dennis Brutus discusses voices of dissent of other South African writers. He discusses the circumstances and the details of situation in terms of the writer's existence.*

### KEYWORDS:

Protest Against Apartheid , Literature , circumstances .

### INTRODUCTION:

Dennis Brutus was banned from writing and publishing anything. These two bans were indirectly served upon him. In 1961 the government passed an Act designed to punish people who committed sabotage, and as a result of interpretation of this Act, Brutus was banned from writing. He was released from prison in 1965 and the bans which had been served on him were all lifted the day before he was released. But it was just a short break from 'bans'. He was imposed with a new set of bans until 1970. These bans included three which almost certainly sounds curious. First, he was banned from writing at all. This implied –merely to write was a criminal act. In addition, he could not even draft anything which might be published. In fact, the Banning Order specifically forbade him to compose slogans so that, even a string of words could be considered illegal. Further, he could not write, publish, or prepare anything which might be published.

It was a rather complicated situation. While going through this critical patch, he met Alex la Guma's wife. Alex la Guma was working on a novel while he was under house-arrest. His wife narrated to Brutus how Alex la Guma completed his novel. He would deposit the pages under linoleum so that if he was raided while Alex was writing, the Special Branch or political police would find only one page in the typewriter but wouldn't find the others.

This is a rather oblique way of approaching the subject: Protest against apartheid in writing. In a society where writing was completely banned, writing, whether good or bad, is a tough challenge. Writing constituted a form of protest against apartheid in South Africa. When writers began to express, to communicate they were cut off the community. They were not to speak, not to address, or express their thoughts. It worked the other way as well. Those who wanted to listen could not listen- it cut both ways. This gives us an idea of sterility, the barrenness which was created in South Africa in cultural terms. In fact, Brutus was able to read Alex la Guma's novel in Britain. Had he been found in possession of it while he was in South Africa, it would have been a criminal offence.

This was the position of writers in rather extreme terms. Despite living in such a sterile situation, people did protest against apartheid. They came from every section of the population. Noted writers include Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, as well as people like Alex la Guma and Arthur Nortje, and a host of others. Some are unknown and are likely to remain unknown because they dared not be published. Some were secretive about their writings and circulation of manuscripts because they feared police action.

Brutus defines the ways in which South African writers expressed their protest against apartheid. He takes a critical look at the writings of Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Alex la Guma and in terms of

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drama, Athol Fugard and Arthur Nortje.

#### SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS THROUGH BRUTUS' LENS:

Alan Paton started a new era in South African writing. Brutus feels Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* set in motion a new kind of cycle. This novel has a rather simple story. It is a narration of a black man in contact with a society which he doesn't really understand – a society in which he finds himself either unable to cope, or he finds himself sucked into the worst elements of that society. He ends as a criminal and the society is accused of having made him a criminal. The narration is rather straightforward.

One must not think in colour categories, but it is very difficult to resist thinking of Alan Paton as a white man, a sympathizing white man standing outside the South African society with all its complexities and dynamic tensions and reducing it to what is almost a parable, a simple story told with a certain lyricism. It is a kind of poetic prose; but the way the story is narrated moved people, it caught their attention. It was made into a film, a play, and, among other things, it touched certain springs in the feelings of white South Africans. It is almost as if a serious novel on the theme of disintegration of African culture and society, a serious novel on the misfits in African culture. The novel made an impact on African society.

Alan Paton has had imitators who deservedly are not known outside South Africa. Many botched novels, short and long stories that try to relate pretty much the same story of the African, the simple African who comes from the reserves, who is sucked into the complexity of an urban location- life in the shanties among the tsotsis and the skollies, the hooligans and ruffians- and who finds himself a victim of society. Hundreds of the Afrikaans novels written by the Afrikaner deal with the same tale. The simple boerenooi, the young girl from the farm who goes to Johannesburg where her morals fail. Usually, she ends up as a prostitute in one of the sleazier white suburbs. But it is the same story of a person failing to come to terms with a complex and tough society. One finds a repetition of this over and over again.

Paton has stated certain simple truths, and, this is his way of protest against apartheid. This is his protest. *Cry, the Beloved Country* is one of his direct attacks on the society. Paton also wrote a pamphlet which he wrote when people were being moved out of their homes, a thing which he calls, 'The People Wept', which is movingly beautiful, a most poignant document far surpassing *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

Brutus' then moves onto Nadine Gordimer. She is, of course, everything that Paton is not. Brutus finds her books infinitely more complex, just as her characters are more complex. Her characters are extremely sophisticated people. Their emotions, their perceptions, and the problems which confront them are wholly of another order. But Nadine Gordimer, too, is making her protest against apartheid. This is her theme, and so her last book *The Late Bourgeois World* has been banned in South Africa. The book has been banned because the principal characters, both black and white, at the end of the novel are on the edge of not merely an emotional but sexual experience. While the South African Government might not frown on black and white people having emotional relationships certainly, sexual relations are forbidden. People felt *The Late Bourgeois World* was banned because Nadine Gordimer suggested the possibility of a sexual relationship. Brutus differed with the people. He felt the whole novel is by implication, a criticism and a condemnation of white society in South Africa. The novel exposed the ruthlessness, the lack of feeling, the lack of communication not only between black and white, but also between white and white.

For Brutus, what Nadine Gordimer has tried to convey in *The Late Bourgeois World* is that white South Africa is becoming dehumanized, that it is afraid to live and feel as human beings do because it has agreed to live by a set of rules which are themselves inhuman, and that once it has accepted that premise, it must watch its own humanity withering away. Some atrophy must set in. This, Brutus thinks, is her criticism; this is her protest. Nadine Gordimer would find the same lack of humanity in other societies too. This is because there is in her the kind of impersonality that one finds through a microscope. She does not herself react to feeling. In her books even the emotional relationships are forced, are conjured up, are synthetic. Though she is condemning South African society for being dehumanized, Brutus feels, she is one of the most sensitive writers, is also the standing, the living example of how dehumanized South African society has become – that an artist like her lacks warmth and feeling, but can observe with a detachment, with the coldness of a machine. There is in her no warmth and feeling.

Midway between Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer is Athol Fugard. Though Brutus has never seen his play (because *The Blood Knot* first played in South Africa was shown in some centres for white audiences only). Subsequently, an arrangement was made to have separate nights – one night for blacks after a week for whites. Brutus was then invited to go on one of the 'white' nights, and sit with the man who worked the lights. But Brutus rejected this concession. Thus Brutus could not see *The Blood Knot*. But Brutus was more concerned with Athol Fugard's protests against apartheid.

Paton chose a simple narrative form. Gordimer's is a complex and sophisticated form which amounts to an oblique attack on the whole value structure of South African society. Fugard's is, of course,

dramatic. He wanted to present the whole problem of apartheid (and it is his overriding problem, the one that dominates his work) in terms of clash. He has in *The Blood Knot* cleverly approached it from both angles – it is both conflict and unity- for the white and the black are, as they often are in South Africa, blood brothers. One has turned out to be black, and the other one has turned out to be white. In terms of the society, they are expected to live in different worlds and have completely different set of values. The problem for the two brothers is how to reconcile themselves knowing that they really belong to different worlds. They discover the conflict which is implicit in both of them. They discover, too, a kind of bond which they cannot break. They must fight, they must beat each other, but they must also love each other – and this is the knot which ties them together.

Fugard has, of course, deliberately reduced this by such a symbol to a purely physiological association. It is a blood knot. Dan Jacobson has presented this same problem with infinitely more subtlety in his *A Dance in the Sun* (1956) where he shows the immense and quite beautiful dependence of the black servant and the white master on each other. A much more complex presentation altogether, but Fugard's is dramatic and, as much as in drama, the solution is a purely dramatic solution. It says nothing for the society. It offers the society no solution except that there will be this perennial drawing apart and drawing together. This is the knot which ties them.

These are the three ways in which people have protested against the spirit of apartheid. There is a long list of pamphlets, articles, and even books which have been written, which are explicit non-literary or non-creative denunciations of apartheid of which the finest ever to come out of South Africa was Alfred Hutchinson's *Road to Ghana* (1960). This had pace and momentum, simplicity and directness, and best of all, a freshness of language, a new minting of idiom and of image unparalleled to any other South African writer. But Hutchinson lost much after his immigration to Britain. Perhaps his intimate contact with the English language blunted his ear, his tongue. Certainly, and very regrettably, the freshness is lost. When he wrote *Road to Ghana* he seemed to be the most promising South African writer.

Brutus also talks about Arthur Nortje. Nortje and Brutus won Mbari prize for their poetry at the same time (but Brutus returned the money because he objected to accepting prizes on a racial basis – it was a competition for blacks only). They had this much in common – that they both won Mbari prizes, and also that Nortje was Brutus' student during his high school.

Nortje is far and away the best poet to come out of South Africa. What is striking is that his best poetry was written in Britain and was written only recently after his decision of not returning to South Africa. He wrote keeping himself well in check because he was afraid that if he spoke out and then had to return to South Africa, he would go to prison. He has resigned himself of not returning home. Since he made this acceptance his poetry has acquired a tremendous freedom. But even before it reached this new capacity, it was already of such freshness and power that Brutus considers him to be the best poet to come out of South Africa. Nortje is doing a terrific job than what he did before. He focuses in himself and in his work the essence of protest against apartheid, and of the problems which confront the man who seeks to protest against apartheid. Nortje is man of talent – and it doesn't matter whether he is black or white- the man of talent who dares not allow himself to develop because to do so, to look truthfully at South African society, and then to describe truthfully reaction to that society, can only land him in prison.

For many people the position is much sadder. There are people in South Africa who have accepted apartheid, who have accepted the society and therefore whatever they write is limited. Whole areas of expression are shut out for them and these are things they see around them. They will see a man being beaten at the nearest bus stop because he doesn't have a pass on him, but they must not react to this because this is the part of society about which they must not speak. It is an area they cannot traverse in their work and, therefore, they cannot permit themselves to allow it to enter their experience, their perceptions, because it would demand to be expressed, or at least to work itself into their writing.

So in South Africa a situation existed where one finds barrenness of worthwhile writing because people accepted certain values in that society. Though questions pertaining commitment, involvement and engagement remain untouched. Dennis Brutus thinks it is simply true that an artist, a writer, is a man who lives in a particular society and takes his images and ideas from that society. He must write about what he sees around him and he must write truthfully about it, or he must come to terms with what is ugly in it, and pretend that it is not there or that is bad. Having done that, he cuts himself off from large areas of experience, large areas of expression. This is the price that he must pay because he has cut himself off from his fellow men. He has denied himself access to their feelings, the ability to enter into their experience and sympathize with them. Once he has deprived himself of this, his work must suffer as a consequence.

And this is why there is protest, in writing, against apartheid, and why they must go on protesting.

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