

The Essence of Existence and the Quest for Survival in the Poetry of Dennis Brutus

Acho Lesley Lem (PhD)

Specialization (Postcolonial studies), University of Yaounde I, Cameroon.

Department of English

Email: lesleybrigt@gmail.com

Tel:(+237) 73259471

Abstract: *This paper entitled “The Essence of Existence and the Quest for Survival in the Poetry of Dennis Brutus” examines the apartheid period in South Africa from an Existential perspective through the poetry of Dennis Brutus. We see how Brutus uses poetry to narrate his personal experience with the harsh apartheid regime and how alongside some of his fellowmen, strive to define a purpose in their lives by confronting their challenges. Brutus shows how a harsh system can be suppressed, not from the use of canons or missiles but through will power. Through Brutus’ quest for survival, we establish that the problem of evil which characterizes many communities in the world today is a fundamental challenge which individuals wrestle with throughout life but a positive approach and the hope for change is what makes one evolve and surmount the difficulties. Dennis Brutus advocates for a society where people emerge stronger and more united in the face of adversity and above all, evolve through forgiveness.*

Keywords: *Adaptation, Essence, Existence, Integration, Meaning*

I. Introduction

Life is worth living when characterized by beauty and peace; nature provides this calm and serene in an environment where one can enjoy the green vegetation, listen to birds sing, watch children play, work, reap the fruits of their labor, rejoice with neighbors and give thanks for the gift of life. However, one is always conscious about inevitable factors like pain, suffering and finiteness that also constitute life. Meaninglessness is a condition which the mind finds difficult to tolerate; it leads to boredom, depression, neurosis and even suicide. Man’s search for “meaning” therefore becomes a primary force and not a secondary rationalization of emotional drives. This “meaning” is unique and specific in that it must and can be justified by him alone; only then can he achieve a significance which will satisfy his own essence.

This paper is inspired by Dennis Brutus, a man who has had a taste of the harshness and ugliness life can offer alongside many South Africans. During the period of Apartheid, he strives to give a “meaning” to his life, family and country. Brutus lived in horror and only found solace in writing which is the method he used to struggle through suffering. Living through the harsh apartheid regime, shows man’s capacity to rise above fate. Those who lost the will to live as seen in “Letters to Martha” [1] sought refuge in practices like “coprophilism”, “necrophilism”, “fellatio”, “penis- amputation” and “homosexuality”. The artistry and creativity in Brutus gave him “the how” to live: living as a poet and an instrument for protest. His life reflects what Karl Gustav Jung describes in *The Poet* when he says: “Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him his instrument.... An artist is ‘man’ in a higher sense- he is ‘collective man’- one, who carries and shapes the unconscious, psychic life of humankind. (Jung 595, [2]). Art which Brutus manifests through poetry makes him an instrument who portrays the woes of his society. As a conscious man, he shapes the unconscious lives of South Africans by making them see hope beneath their suffering; as a “collective man”, his cry is that of the nation.

This paper examines Dennis Brutus’ portrayal of the horrors of Apartheid South Africa with the aim of proving that pain, suffering, struggle and survival are important constituents in molding human vision towards life. The study reveals the effect of prison on South Africa and shows that suffering is an important element of life that brings about the transformation of the individual and the society. Reflections on these issues call to mind questions like: What constitutes the essence of existence and what are the basic values and destinies

of human existence? How does Brutus use poetry to reveal the horrors of existence? How does suffering and pain participate in molding Brutus' vision of life? And finally, how does the horror of apartheid help in revealing the inner value of humanity in South Africa? Hypothetically speaking, the essence of existence is derived from the ability of human beings to find meaning in their lives by understanding what suffering is and how to cope with it. Suffering leads to fulfillment which can only be achieved if man looks optimistically at his challenges.

As a great poet, Brutus attracts several critics who analyse and contribute to his works. Romanus Egunu in an article entitled *Pictures of Pain: The poetry of Dennis Brutus* [3] says some critics have dismissed Brutus' protest against apartheid as insincere; arguing from a view of Brutus' early poems, Egunu stipulates that the poet displays that he is in mental agony because of the suffering he and the oppressed undergo. This state of mental agony in our opinion however enriches Brutus' poems because as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic perspective suggests, writing acts as a therapy to purge repressed thoughts. This implies that apartheid gives Brutus a strong inspirational background because his poetry acts as an outlet to his repressed thoughts.

Gessler Moses Nkondo in an article entitled *The Domestication of a Tradition* [4] surveys traditional and Western poetic influences in Brutus' poetry. He sees Brutus as learned, skeptical in his work, with an insistent, almost fierce side of a Western Latin tradition evident in his work. Furthermore, he sees love as a recurrent theme in Brutus' poetry; he celebrates it as a beneficial element which helps in building personality. However, in the midst of love, there is always something breaking, something "sinister, ugly or mean". This sinister force is brought out through the horrors they undergo through the brutality of the system; it is this brutality that instigates the urge to fight for survival.

II. The Quest for a Meaning in Life

The preoccupation of humanity and mankind throughout the years has been the quest to know and understand the truth beneath their existence. The journey to discover truth or understand why certain things happen lies within the horizon of self-consciousness. The more human beings understand humanity and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and their very existence becoming more and more pressing. From his quest to discover the truth and inevitability of evil in the world, Brutus comes to realization of the social attitude of endurance which man must cultivate if he must survive the face of harsh social realities. Imprisonment was a form of deprivation which the Boers used to usurp meaning in the lives of South Africans. In "On the Island" Brutus describes the gloomy conditions of their cells which secluded them from the rest of the world:

Cement -grey floors and walls
cement -grey days
cement -grey time
and a grey susurration
as of seas breaking
winds blowing
and rains drizzling

A bald existence
so that one did not need to look
at doors or windows
to know that they were sundered by bars
and one locked in a grey gelid stream
of unmoving time. (Brutus 71, [1])

Beneath these walls which bar existence, Brutus is preoccupied with the notion of knowing himself. The admonition "know yourself was calved on the temple petal at Delphi as testimony to a basic truth to be adopted as a minimal norm by those who seek to set themselves apart from the rest of creation as human beings; that is as those who know themselves. Knowing oneself is based on existential questions like who am I, where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil and how do I tackle it? these basic questions of life are examined by Brutus in the various poems he wrote in prison and in exile as he x-rays the South African apartheid society and its horrific atrocities. His poetry and his life are weapons which he uses to counter the impending evil the society is going through:

Let me say it
for no-one else may
or can
or will
or dare

I have lashed them
the marks of my scars
lie deep in their psyche
and unforgettable
inescapable. (Brutus 92, [1])

The inhumane treatment meted on Brutus make him question his existence and the only way he seeks to answer these questions is through poetry. He defines his origin by first recognizing his identity which is his land; the journey he undertakes is a journey of achievement through suffering and evil which he acknowledges as inevitable elements of life. These elements push him in to exile but he doesn't give up; his innermost desires still instill hope in him.:

It is a way of establishing one is real;
personal, intimate and civilized:
to shout, be violent or importune
will not do in this context,
but a confrontation, male-female,
is possible, even if not legitimate or moral:
so one hopes, strives, speculates:
it is the wish to be accepted as a person
something real and living. (Brutus 80, [1])

The desire to be accepted, respected and loved keeps every man active and hoping. Even in exile, Brutus hopes for a peaceful South Africa which will one day fulfill the dreams of its citizens. Just like America, he wishes that South Africa too will be:

The home of the brave
and the land of the free
to massacre:

the land of liberty
and freedom of choice
of subjection for others:

the land of plenty
and quality education
for people of quality (Brutus 144, [1])

The questions of existence have their common source in the quest for life; a quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the answer given to these questions decides the direction, mood, essence and existence which people seek to give in any situation.

Throughout the history of apartheid and in the works of various authors, poets and musicians, South Africans have attempted to overcome the factors which make them accommodate or adjust to the struggle. Constantly threatened by the Boers, Brutus as a poet has portrayed the various levels through which he and his people have struggled to attain their full humanity. From the South African situation as exposed by Brutus, men relate to their world in a critical way. They apprehend the objective data of their reality as well as the ties that link (one datum to another.) through reflection-not by reflex as do animals. And in the act of critical perception; men discover their own temporality by transcending a single dimension, they reach back to yesterday, recognize today and then take a decision to come up with a tomorrow. This is exactly all that the various participants in the struggle against apartheid and especially Brutus have done. The struggles against apartheid did not submerge the people but they emerged from time to create consciousness.

The South African and Brutus lived through the system of apartheid and their existence contributes to the stand which the various actors contributed to the eminent collapse of apartheid. In this paper, to exist is more than to live in the South African context because it is more than simply living in the world; it is to be with the world as well. This capacity for communication between the "Being" which exists and the objective world gives to existence a quality of critical capacity not present in mere living. Transcending, discerning, entering into dialogue that is communicating and participating are exclusively attributes of existence.

The South African experience through Brutus has driven home the human enduring fact of "integration" with one's contact as distinguished from "adaptation" as a distinctive human activity. "Integration" results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality to the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjugated to the choices of others. As a result of adaptation, his decisions are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer intergraded; rather he has adapted.

Adaptation is not what the South Africans and many other categories of people who fight for full humanity were striving for. Brutus' quest for life as well as those of his people is for a life as an "integrated person". The integrated person is person as subject; in contrast, the adaptive person is person as object. "Adaptation" represents a weak form of self-defense; if man is incapable of changing any challenge discomfort or reality, he adjusts as seen in the behavior of some of the South Africans. "Adaptation" is behavioral characteristic of animal sphere exhibited by man to satisfy his or her quest for life therefore, adaptation to especially painful situations is symptomatic of dehumanization. In the various poems of exile, prison experience and even love, Brutus has portrayed the general and cognitive philosophy that existence determines the quest for life whose product is "sonum bonum", a good life, a life free from stress that is not imposed. Throughout history, men have attempted to overcome the factors which make them accommodate or adjust in a struggle-constantly threatened by oppression to attain their full humanity.

South Africans during the time of Brutus experienced a dynamic movement of black consciousness and ethnic self-assertion; it is this that pushed Brutus to embrace the exiles, prison periods and writing. It can be said therefore that as men relate to the world and their society by responding to the challenges of the environment, they begin to dynamize, to master and to humanize reality. They add to it something of their own making, by giving temporal meaning to geographic space, by creating culture- something which is their own. This interplay of people's relations with the society and with their fellows does affect or permit societal or cultural immobility especially in cases of repressive power as was the case with south Africa.

We have witnessed with so many cases of repressive regimes especially South Africa that as men create, recreate, and decide, "Historical epoch begin to take shape". And it is by creating, recreating and deciding that men (should) participate in their epochs. Brutus contributes in these creative, recreative and deciding aspects when he decides to continue to write and even tastes the cold and harsh conditions of prison. Through this, history of resistance is created and that epoch begins to take shape. South Africa during the time of Brutus entered a historical epoch which like that of black power in America put up a stiff resistance to apartheid and led to the subsequent collapse of the system. A historical epoch like that of South Africa in the time of Brutus is characterized by a series of aspirations, concerns and values in search of fulfillment. Paulo Freire writing about the pedagogy of the oppressed says that; "the concrete representations of many of these aspirations, concerns, and values as well as the obstacles to their fulfillment constitute the themes of that epoch, which in turn indicates tasks to be carried out" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 91-92 [5])

Brutus portrays in his poems that he is a radical existentialist; radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen. It is predominantly critical, loving, humble, communicative, and therefore a positive stance. The man who has made a positive radical option does not deny another man's right to choose, nor does he try to impose his own choice. He can discuss their respective positions; he is convinced he is right but respects another man's prerogative to forge him correct. The radical existentialist however has the duty imposed by love itself, to react against the violence of those who try to silence him; those who in the name of freedom kill his freedom and their own. Every relationship of domination, oppression, exploitation, is violent whether the violence is expressed by drastic means or not. In such a relationship the dominator and dominated alike are reduced to things- the former dehumanized by an excess power, the latter, the lack of it. Instability is created when the oppressed legitimately revolts against their oppressor; however, it is they who are usually labeled violent, barbaric, inhuman and foolish.

Among the innumerable rights claimed by the dominating consciousness was the right to create violence and to implement it as was often the case of the apartheid system. Oppressors consider themselves violent; that is why Brutus has to be radical. Radicals cannot passively accept a situation in which the excessive power of a few leads to the dehumanization of all. They no longer want to be at the position of mere spectators, they censor their arms, rise above simply expecting a change by chance but instead make moves for retaliation. No longer satisfied to watch, they decide to participate in the quest for change; this decision however disturbs the aggressor or dominator who engages punitive measures which traumatizes the oppressed but ironically makes them to strive harder for survival.

III. Conclusion

The situation of South Africa has shown us that many a people exist in time, they inherit, incorporate and modify. Men are not imprisoned within a permanent "today"; they emerge and become a separate people. We have discovered that as the people of South Africa and Brutus emerge from time, they discovered their voice, status, and sort the means to free themselves from "the today" they were living through. The case of South Africa and the situation of Brutus indicates that the normal role of human beings in and with the world is not a passive one because people are not limited to the natural biological sphere but participate in the creative dimension as well. South African victory over apartheid records that inheriting acquired experience, creating and recreating, intergrading and positively responding to challenges gives meaning to our essence of existence.

References

- [1]. Brutus, Dennis. *A Simple Lust: Collected Poems of South African Jail & Exile Including Letters to Martha*. London: Heinemann, 1963. (1)
- [2]. Jung C Gustav. "The Poet": *The Norton Reader*. ed. Arthur M Eastman. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, (1984). 593-98. (2)
- [3]. Egunu, Romanus. "Pictures of Pain": *Contemporary Poets*, 6th ed, edited by Thomas Riggs, St James Press, 1996. (3)
- [4]. Nkondo. M.Gessler. "Dennis Brutus Overview:" *Contemporary Poets*. 6thed edited by Thomas Riggs , St James Press, 1996. (4)
- [6]. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000. (5)