
SUFFERING AS A ROUTE TO FREEDOM: CHALLENGING THE PROBLEM OF EVIL THROUGH THE POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS

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ABSTRACT

This paper entitled “Suffering as a Route to Freedom: Challenging the Problem of Evil Through the Poetry of Dennis Brutus” discusses the traumatizing experiences South Africans endure during the period of Apartheid and the *raison d'être* for inflicting such inhumane treatment on fellow human beings. We Investigate the cause of this problem of evil as well as the means the subjugated victims use to cope with the traumatizing experiences within confined prisons as well as those out of prison. From a philosophical and psychological perspective, we investigate how man strives to give a meaning to his life by finding a “why” and a “how” to live through suffering. We question how long one can be ascetic in the face of suppression and what happens when man reaches the level of apathy where he no longer fears death? Does he retaliate against the oppressor? against his own fellowman who is also a victim? Or against both the oppressor and his fellowman? This research will establish that Brutus and the South Africans who survive the horrifying experiences of Apartheid succeed because they identify the problem and individually as well as collectively chose a “why” and “how” to live through it.

Keywords: Existence, Essence, Evil and Apartheid.

1. INTRODUCTION

Man has within himself that inborn power of emotion and reflex to react to things; pain, hurt and inconveniences. For example, if you put your hand on a hot object, you will react immediately unless you have lost your sensory system but also you will be burnt. The way an individual reacts to anything that affects his comfort varies from person to person. This is because no two individuals are the same, therefore, they would choose freely and differently on how to react to matters that threaten their comfort. The problem of evil is the problem of how one can cope with difficulties. How one can respond to the reality of pain, suffering and struggle. This problem is the quest to know where these elements of pain come from. The problem of evil is the philosophical response to the negations that man faces daily. In our daily lives, we come to a reality whereby man is confronted with challenges and confrontations; therefore, his preoccupation is to determine how he can overcome them. This struggle and effort to understand and solve the challenges of life is the problem of evil. As a quest for existence, life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problem and to execute the task which is set for everyone.

We all seek answers to questions, especially those that disturb us; how shall I live to achieve satisfaction in life? What does it mean to lead a meaningful life and how can such a life be brought about? These questions touch the heart of struggle, and such a struggle is always to wade off the inconveniences, the pain, the suffering to maintain satisfaction. These questions expose the problem of evil; how can man cope with impending danger, pain or destruction in life? Dennis Brutus, one of South Africa’s greatest writers and freedom fighter through his poems shows us the transformation he goes through in prison because of the horrific

experiences and how after a failed suicide attempt, he chooses to survive the hurdles no matter what it takes; he chooses to give meaning to his life and the future by indulging in writing. Brutus' writings have attracted several critics who analyse and contribute to his works; some argue against his poetic prowess while others hail him as a great poet. David Sweetman in an excerpt *Children of the Lion* suggests that Brutus' popularity comes from those works of his that are meant to be chanted in prison'. He sees most of Brutus' poems as an exile pilgrimage and adds that many of Brutus' poems should never have passed his editor because most of them are simply drafts. Looking at Brutus' recollection of Robben Island, he says that the non-African reader will probably appreciate most of his quieter poems, concerned with love and landscape. Sweetman is right in comparing Brutus' poetry to an exile pilgrimage, but he fails to see that every pilgrimage has an aim. Brutus presents his pilgrimage through pain and suffering to create awareness that even in difficulty, man can find a way to succeed.

Another critic who disagrees with Brutus' talent as a poet is Bahdur Tejani who in his article *Can Prisoner make a Poet?* criticizes the lack of chronology and conviction about prison in "Letters to Martha". He believes that Brutus' situation as a coloured in South Africa raises doubts about his commitment to the oppressed blacks, given that the coloured population is in a privileged position compared to blacks in the apartheid system. Tejani's sort of criticism can be considered unjust when considering the coloreds as privileged; this is because they are hybrids and first live the psychological trauma of being considered neither-nor. Looking at the level of segregation, they suffered the same trauma as the blacks; Brutus' prison mates were of all races except white; this implies he and the blacks in spite their difference of race are all victims of suppression therefore he can speak for all the suppressed races.

Romanus Egunu in an article entitled *Pictures of Pain: The poetry of Dennis Brutus* 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* 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, amid 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; in other words, it leads to a quest to find a reason for survival.

Brutus in an article entitled *Protest Against Apartheid* discusses the difficulties he faces as a protest writer:

I was banned from writing, and I was banned from publishing anything these two bans were not directly served upon me. As a result of an act of round about 1961, which was designed to punish people who committed sabotage, and as a result of interpretation of this act. I was banned from writing. In a strictly legal

sense, even to write was construed as sabotage. Therefore, I was, in that sense, banned from writing. (Brutus,93)

Brutus discusses other writers who in spite the odds, struggled to free their society through writing in different ways:

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 wants to present the whole problem of Apartheid (and it is the overriding problem, the one that dominates his work) in terms of a clash . . . (Brutus, 98)

South Africans through struggling sound the note for survival; all the deaths registered would be aimless if nothing was done by others to fight for survival. They succeed to overcome their hurdles because they are optimistic and determined. Their determination is governed by Nietzsche's philosophy which asserts that; "That, which does not kill me, makes me stronger . . ." (Frankl, 77). Brutus sounds the notion of hope throughout the hurdles and struggle for survival; he sees a meaning in suffering, which is why he is optimistic. Frankl also sees meaning in suffering when he remarks: "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity even under the most difficult circumstances to add a deeper meaning to his life." (Frankl, 65). This "meaning" which man strives to achieve is only gotten through struggle; according to Sartre, man invents himself or designs his own "essence", that is, what he should be or ought to become. And so, through struggle, the South Africans are determined to map out a future for themselves

Transfiguration through Evil

Life sometimes boils down to reacting to stimuli, especially those things that cause pain. This is the problem of evil, i.e. how to cope, react and adjust to circumstances which do not give satisfaction is a personal choice which each South African makes in order to give value to his life in spite of the odds. South African prison mates are subjected to harsh and inhuman treatment which makes them resolve to certain ways of coping with the moral evil governing the society. In "Letters to Martha", some prisoners take to defense mechanism as a means of solving the physical and psychological trauma they are subject to. They smuggle nails, screws, sizeable bits of metal in to their cell through their anus

One learn quiet soon
that nails and screws
and other sizeable bits of metal
must be handed in. (Brutus 54)

These bits of metal are used against fellow prison mates who try to attack others. The reason underneath the smuggling of metal into cell even through the anus is nothing other than to struggle for survival. Evil breeds evil: prisoners react to evil by creating more evil because they choose to harm their fellow inmates who are undergoing the same trauma they are subject to. This is strange because one would have thought that the plight the prisoners share is enough for them to console each other but some resort to torture. This is the problem of evil, the problem of how to explain such an attitude towards others in such a difficult situation.

The apartheid system in South Africa was a kind of Philosophical way of life that shaped the life, behavior and satisfaction of the Boers at the detriment of the black majority. That was the good life for man according to them and they therefore did everything to impose and maintain it. According to the Boars, it was a means of attaining the comfort; every human being longs

for even at the expense of others. The quest for satisfaction made the Boers loose human instinct and they were determined to get what they wanted at any expense.

Brutus found comfort in writing but was banned from writing after his release from prison in 1965. The ban was because of the Act of 1961 which was designed to punish people who produced slogans and writing considered as sabotage. Brutus in an article *Protest Against Apartheid* says:

I was banned from writing at all. This meant that you did not have to be published merely to write was a criminal act. But, in addition, could not even draft anything which might be published. In fact, my banning order specifically forbids me to compose slogans, so that in fact, even a string of words could have been illegal. (93)

In spite of this ban, Brutus still saw writing as the only form of giving meaning to his desperate life. Though dangerous, he still wrote "Poems about Prison" and "Under House Arrest" from 11th November 1965 to 3rd July 1966, before going on exile on the 5th of August 1966. The artistry and creativity in Brutus gave him "the how" to live, living as a poet and an instrument for protest. His life is a reflection of 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) 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. He is different from others who only cry in silence; as a "collective man", his cry is that of the nation.

Ultimately satisfaction is dependent on the proper cooperation or attainability of the object of desire. This goes to enunciate the problem of evil where choice of attitude plays a vital role. According to Jean Paul Sartre, humans define themselves in terms of who they become as their individual lives are played out in response to the challenges posed by existence in the world. He further emphasizes this philosophy of his in *Essays on Existentialism* where he argues that "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life". (Sartre, 693) Sartre in this essay wants to buttress the fact that man's essence of existence is closely linked to the way he finds meaning in his life. For him, man invents himself, he designs his own "essence" that is to say, what he essentially is, including what he should be, or ought to become. Man is created with the gift of free will; he is free to choose and determine his actions. What you choose plays a role in obtaining pleasure. The Boers in order to survive choose apartheid and found pleasure in it; evil is the source of their joy. Brutus chooses poetry as a means of riot against the oppressors, a means of acquiring his own pleasure.

Pleasure, satisfaction and good living depend base its existence on frustration, resistance, opposition, anticipation. If there is no evil, we cannot fight for good. If there is pain, suffering and frustration, man now braces himself to find the meaning of his life by countering these obstacles for his pleasure and satisfaction. Strictly speaking therefore, pleasure exists only to the extent that it points to fulfillment in the future. In the case of South Africa and Brutus we see how the various shades of people fight against evil in order to seek pleasure and satisfaction.

These fundamental and simple facts of our existence lead us to the realization that we may have either to relinquish the ideal of ultimate satisfaction and be happy with compromises, a solution most of the people of South Africa adapt to the problem of apartheid which can be termed the problem of evil in South Africa. Many South Africans came to compromise with the beating,

killing and the raids that took place in the face of the people. Some novelists just compromised with the situation and looked as if it was a way of life and took everything for granted. Thus evil was compromised as a result of seeking a life of satisfaction and pleasure even if it were in duress.

In this manner many people resigned to this problem of evil in society. They resigned themselves because they saw that they could not support themselves and others whom they dearly loved as they battled with the evil society. Writing about Arthur Norte a South African poet, In *Protest against Apartheid*, Brutus has this to say concerning his attitude and behavior towards the apartheid system.

In Norte, you have a 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 today, and then to describe truthfully his reactions to that society, can only land him in prison. For many people the position is much sadder, there are people South Africa today who have come to terms with apartheid, who accept the society and therefore what they write is limited ... They will see a man being beaten at the nearest bus stop because he doesn't have a pass on him, but they mustn't react to this because this is the part of society about which they must not speak...so we find a society almost barren of worthwhile writing and barren because people have accepted certain values in that society. (Brutus, 100)

Thus, in the lives of South Africans we see a form of ascetism, an extreme form of resignation. Throughout history, ascetism has played a crucial role in the cultures of mankind. It can be maintained that ascetics are those who think in this direction have identified themselves with their rational nature exclusively. Ascetic practices as we see in some people towards the reaction to the problem of evil in South Africa are intended to give as complete intellectual or voluntary control over bodily process including the emotions which are usually tied to the satisfaction and desires of the senses as possible. In this way ascetics feel as if their body and the desires that spring from it are not part of himself or if they are, that this fact is temporary and contingent. The ascetic becomes a spectator of, not a participant in the life of his emotions. Desires and fears alike can thus be extinguished. With ascetism, the philosophy of resignation and adjustment reaches the peak.

Giving up is one of the ways the South African society which people react towards the problem of evil. Many had to die in prison because they could not stay to survive the odds of the prison experiences. In "Letters to Martha" this aspect of resignation is expressed as a method of coping with the problem of evil. Prison inmates use objects to terminate their lives

...this simple, useful bit of steel
and when the knives suddenly flash
produced perhaps from some disciplined anus
and grasps at once the steel bright horror
in the morning air
and how soft and vulnerable is naked flesh. (Brutus 54)

Writing about his experiences in the prison camp of Auschwitz Viktor .E. Frankl narrates how it becomes easy for the inmates to give up, to resign their fate and give up because torture has become meaningless.

Early in the morning, when it was still dark, the prisoner stood in front of the gate with his detachment, ready to march. He heard a scream and saw

how a comrade was knocked down, pulled to his feet again and knocked down once more and why? He was being punished for this irregular attempt to be relieved of his duties. But the prisoner who had passed in to the second stage of his psychological reactions did not avert his eyes anymore. By then his feelings were blunted, and he watched unmoved. Disgust, horror and pity are emotions that our spectator could not really feel any more. The sufferer, the dying and the dead became such commonplace sights to him after weeks of camp life that they could not move him anymore. (Frankl, 29)

Apathy, the blunting of the emotions and the feeling that one could not care anymore are the symptoms that arise during the apartheid period, to people outside and those in prisons. People and prisoners' psychological reactions to apartheid eventually reached a level that many people became insensitive to daily and hourly beatings and tortures. The evil in society had psychologically traumatized so many that life to them was a matter of resignation and despair. This element of resignation and despair is seen in Letter 16 of "Letters to Martha"

Mister
this is prison
just get used to the idea"

"you're a convict now"

Later one changes,
Tries the dodges,
Seeks the easy outs.

But the acceptance
Once made
Deep down
Remains.(Brutus 65)

The problem of evil was tacked in another aspect as could be seen in the reaction of the people. There was a deeper level of resignation, the type that instead gave strength to those standing upright against apartheid. India's great ascetic and liberator, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Yugoslavia's Cardinal Stepinac typifying the personal strength, power and influence that come with life of reason and resignation. The man, who has truthfully relinquished his attachment to worldly goods, including his life, cannot be threatened by man's ultimate punishment, death. (Is death man's ultimate punishment?) Such men are free to pursue ideals, they have no Achilles' heel; they are strong as iron. The enemy, on the other hand, is intimidated with the threat that he will have the blood of martyrs on his hand. Through resignation, that is the level where threat, punishment and pain mean so little, and yet there is inner freedom to pursue ideals.

Apartheid is evil which became a problem especially for the subjugated blacks and other races in South Africa. From a philosophical perspective, the problem of evil is the doubt that arises on the existence of God. It is the problem of exonerating God for the evil in the world. This problem is first of all a problem of emotion and a problem of faith. How can a God who is all good and who has the power to implement pervasive goodness here and now allow evil to exist?

The problem of evil can be understood by many people according to their life principles and philosophies in understanding the meaning of life. A Darwinian will talk about the evolution

of species; an existentialist will have his own philosophy of life based on whether he is a theist or an atheist. A Christian will also look at life from a different perspective. Brutus, condemning all that happened in South Africa interprets the meaning of life from a religious standpoint. People can undergo severe difficulties because of a secret element which keeps them moving in spite the odds. Martin Luther King, the Black human activist had God as the secret and dynamic source of his inspiration. No matter what happened to him, he had the inner strength to put up with the harsh realities of life.

As human beings, we have the freedom to choose among other options what our secret source of inspiration is. In the poem "Our aims, our dreams, our destinations", Brutus exposes his religious background. He dapples with the problem of evil by discusses his point of view in relation to God. He respects God's attitude which he describes as "benignant", "gracious", "kindly". Though God is gracious as he sees Him, he still wanders like everyone where then this evil comes from. He resigns himself to the ultimate decision of God if things must happen the way they do. He says:

Well if He damn me,
Drive me to damnation
By inflicting the unendurable,
Force me along the knife –blades till I chose
Perdition
How shall I feel guilty? (Brutus 83)

Brutus like many believers must have gone through the lives of people like Job, legendary man of sorrow in the bible. He too questions how good and evil can exist side by side. Brutus in the poem struggles to understand the place of the good, the beauty and the pleasurable as against the bad, the pain and suffering, this could be definitely where the core of his poetry is formed as we see him trying to understand the meaning and essence of his existence. His deep and religious knowledge and experience knows the dogma of his belief and explicitly understands that this evil which people are going through is not something new. His theology tells him that his suffering is just a reminder of what Jesus went through as he says:

but he was human once
or so we are assured
and so can find no human state
beyond the range of his experience
or knowledge... (Brutus 84)

God through his son's incarnation to the world passed through pain, suffering and finally died on the cross to save mankind. He who passes through this way will understand the plight of South Africans. Yet, life is not so easy because Brutus continues to fight to understand this problem of evil:

So we must grapple examine
and agony
engenders desperation...
is he the infinite Hangman?
executioner?
torturer? (Brutus 85)

Faith and trust in God is not quite an easy thing, this is the problem every Christian faces, a God who is powerful and yet does not act according to the mind of the sufferer. A God who knows all but stays silent without acting. Brutus' allusion to Gethsemane highlights what Jesus undergoes and how through the act of suffering and death, he rose again to conquer the evil of Satan. Maybe he is convinced that this same pattern will take place, if it does, his religious faith

tells him that no matter how much evil thrives, it shall be conquered. He asserts that this redemption, freedom from the hands of the Boers will come only through agony. He acknowledges that humanity is a suffering one, yet this same humanity will be transfigured.

2. CONCLUSION

This paper captivates the philosophy of Nietzsche which highlights the fact that “he who has a why to live can cope with almost any how”. South Africans like all Africans have suffered the most through the humiliating colonization and subjugation. Writing is probably the most expressive way to portray feelings and life experiences. No doubt therefore that one of the most acidic protests against apartheid in South Africa has been the poetry of Brutus which this paper uses to discuss the problem of evil and how it transforms the victim and society. Brutus had a “why” to live and thus through poetry has shown us the “how” to go about it. One who lives in political turmoil and dared to raise his voice against the established order, is sure to be taken prisoner someday. As a prisoner he can expect no entertainment or gentle treatment. On the contrary Brutus was ready for torture, intimidation and despicable cell conditions; his fight for survival was matchless. This fight continues to resonate and inspire other persons suffering from subjugation to give a meaning to their lives and fight for their freedom.

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