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MODERN AFRICAN POETRY AND THE LEGACY OF DENNIS BRUTUS

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ABSTRACT

The story of Modern African poetry cannot be complete without the late South African Poet, Dennis Brutus. Until his death in 2009, Dennis Brutus was a fierce voice against oppression of any kind, and one of his tools was his poetry (especially of the latter years). Many Modern African Poets have followed the example of Brutus in using poetry as a weapon in decrying all forms of injustice. This paper examines the impact, the influences of Brutus' poetry on African poets after him. It concludes that what Brutus inspires in these poets is vision, is resilience, is the fact that poetry can be put to use against the forces of evil.

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1. MODERN AFRICAN POETRY AND THE LEGACY OF DENNIS BRUTUS

Dennis Brutus (November 28, 1924 - December 26, 2009), was a poet, a human right activist, a sports enthusiast, a journalist and an educator. He fought, though without carrying arms, against apartheid policy in South Africa before the extermination of that obnoxious policy in 1994. He was an African poet of repute whose poetry reflects the different reactions, at different times, to the issue of oppression and suppression of the African masses by a minority. Today, the story of African literature in general and of poetry in particular, cannot be told without the contributions of Brutus. Many African poets, consciously and/or unconsciously, have reflected the ideals that Brutus lived and died for in their poetry.

Though Brutus' early poetry was not overtly combative, his depiction of life in South African prisons of his time as seen in Brutus (1963) or Brutus (1968) exposed the consequences of living in an unjust system. This in a way is also Brutus' way of rising up against apartheid. Emmanuel Obiechina (1977) have also said that literature's exposure of the ills in a society is the literary artist's own way of correcting those ills.

When Tijani (1973) wrote in *African Literature Today 6* ("Can a Prisoner Make a Poet? A Critical Discussion of *Letters to Martha* by Dennis Brutus"), he was examining Brutus' poetic enterprise in terms of 'established' poetic conventions. By Tijani's argument and/or evaluation, Brutus' poetic delivery, in terms of content and form, may not have 'poetic rules'. Rules obviously made by people whose experiences and general social environment may not have been the same with Brutus' at the time of Brutus' writing. However, whatever may be the appropriateness (or lack of it) of Tijani's point, what seems indisputable, and indeed the core of this paper, is that as a person and a poet, Brutus has left a legacy that has directly and/or indirectly affected African poets and poetry .

In Brutus' latter poems, especially the poems published in *Poems to the People:* *Feinberg (1974)*, there is a call for revolutionary actions. This is because, again, there are the "faces split by the pain/the wordless, endless wail/only the unfree know" as a result of the sirens, knuckles and the boots. Brutus' first collection of poetry published in Nigeria by Brutus (1963) while he was in prison is titled *Siren, Knuckles and Boots.* This collection portrays police brutality in apartheid South Africa. The title of Brutus' first poem in *Poems to the People…* ("The Sounds Begin Again") indicates the continuity of apartheid police' brutal actions. However, in these latter poems, Brutus calls for revolutionary actions from the oppressed. He tells the oppressed to "Arise! The brassy shout of freedom stirs our earth/…/Better that we should die, than that we should lie down" (2-3). The Poems "At a funeral", "The Guerrillas (For the fighting men in South Africa)", "There was a Girl", and "Tribute for Steve Biko", are all tributes to the dedications of those who lost their lives in the process of standing for justice. These poems are an acknowledgement, by Brutus, of the actions of the fighters. It is no surprise that in "To Those Who Persuade Us" Brutus blatantly rejects passiveness or any other method of negotiating the people's liberty outside action:

It is time for action
enough of craft and cunning
and calculating wisdom;
I have seen enough of that
Over the years,
and waited patiently
and trustingly
for it to fruit in fury:
While my brother's rot:
we will be fobbed off
with promises
and gestures
no longer:

It is time to prove our resolve

……. …….

In action. (9)

This revolutionary impulse is also reflected in the poems of other South African poets like Kerapatse Kagesitsile, Barry Feinberg, Mazisi Kunene, Cosmo Pieterse, among others. Kgositsile vows that the struggle would continue, that the people should not be broken despite "the unbridled brutality of these beasts ("Aluta continua – Dr Duma Nwokwe"). He is resolute in the fight to reclaim the land because "DIS LAND IS MINE" (Emph. Authors – "Child of Crisis" for Zeke & Dennis). For David Evans, this fight, even through poetry, must carry the colour of red, it must bear revolutionary stings – "if we must have flags/let them always be red" ("If Poets must Have Flags"). A.N.C Kumalo's "Red our Colour" prefers "Poems that tear at the oppressor's face/and smash his grip" (*Poets to the People...* 58).

While Brutus' poetry is affected by the unjust apartheid system, the poetic imagination of the Nigerian poet, Obi (2006), is fuelled by the injustice experienced by her people of Nigeria's Niger Delta region as a result of the discovery of oil in that region. Just like gold and other minerals in South Africa encouraged the hold to power and oppression by the whites and the debasement of the blacks in South Africa, so does the presence of crude oil accentuates the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta by the multinational oil companies who represent political and economic cartels of the world.

Obi was born in the Niger Delta region. Oloibiri, her village, was where oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria and exported in 1956. In the poem titled after her village name "Oloibiri", Obi indicts the multinational oil companies of exploitation and articulates all that is to be said about the life-threatening predicament of the communities in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta. After the "Zebra string of pipelines running through my belle/causing me to ache from relentless exploitation", Oloibiri lays "on the altar of faded glory/only tears running through my veins" (*Tears in a Basket* 7). There is a sad irony, that the Niger Delta itself suffers neglect while the wealth from its bowels makes others rich:

Niger Delta…

……..

With the milk from her breast

She moulds dusty earth into mansions

While her children peep through tattered huts (18).

Indeed, "her children who give bountifully/…feed on remnants"(18). The result is that the people are "wrapped in cobwebs of pain" (19); pain that has enveloped their thinking and eroded their joy:

How do we think

When our thought are images lost in muddy streams,

Dangling on hooks that mock our existence?

How can we sing

When our folksongs are distorted grunts
Raking up our sorrowing lungs?
Why do we even smile,
When beneath our plastic joy
Painful tears flow freely (*Tears in a Basket* 19)

Other Nigerian poets like Ojaide (1990), Bassey (1995), Osundare (1983), Ukam (1997), Eghagha (2002), among others, also reflect some of these ideals Brutus stood for. Bassey (1995) chronicles the oppression and brutality that characterise military juntas in Nigeria. "August 25", "Gunrules", "They took our today", "Evil reign", "BACHA Stove" among other poems, decry the senseless decrees that are 'Barricades of freedom' and fusillades of oppression' (19). In "Gunrules", the Head of the Military Junta, nicknamed 'High Prince of Gunrule' is a primitive accumulator who specialises in stealing the national wealth and then sowing discord among the people:

Why rule our nations
Why steal our rations
Why pitch one section
Against another section (*Poems on the Run* 46)

On the other hand, the subordinates in the military ('Evil Sentinels of the wicked gates') Kill/Plunder/Demolish/Rape/Shoot/Maim/Despoil/Shatter/Batter'(P.35– "Rock Cocktail"). This is reminiscent of the activities (brutality) of apartheid police in South Africa (Brutus' *Sirens, Knuckles and Boots*).

Bassey's "A Pregnant Watch" is a dedication to:

… Courageous folks
Who bear the pains of this fire
Who stroke the fires of this rage
Who stand at the front and the rear
Of this
Bat
Tle
For
What
Right
Ly
Is
OURS (34).

In “Tombstones count for naught” dedicated to Tai Solarin, Bassey argues that despite all that the forces of oppression tried to do to Tai ‘they failed’. Each stanza extols an aspect of Tai’s struggle for justice and equity and the various plots made to pull him down. And each stanza ends with an exclamation: ‘But see how you failed with Tai!’. Tai, to the poet, is an embodiment of the people’s struggle for liberation:

He was our song, our poem
And our drilling rig
He was our labour, our leisure
Our laughter and our cry
He washed our scars
And stitched our veins
He was the flame and the axe
The general up at the front (30–31. emphasis mine)

As Etiowo (2010) asserts, the word ‘our’ is recurrent in almost all the poems in *Poems On…* that express the plight of the oppressed. Bassey sees this plight as a collective responsibility (‘our day', 'our battles' 'our struggles’ (37). He is concerned about ‘our people’s cries’ (34), ‘our bleeding land’ (38), ‘our woes’ (41), ‘our roofless huts’ (42), ‘our sad tears’ (49), ‘our hungers, our fears’ (42). Like Dennis Brutus, Bassey completely identifies with the oppressed and suppressed.

John Ukam’s purpose of writing poetry is mainly:

…. to charge revolutionaries and other
progressive forces in our society to stand up
against the agencies of death and imperialism,
neo-colonialism and the scourge of backwardness
in our society….and to fight imperialism and its
many surmountable daughters (iv).

With the above ‘manifestoe’, his poems become a pad for protest and revolution. He refuses to be on the side of the “killers of our brotherhood/Looters of offices, rapists of our sisters” (13). He harks "Against the suppression and alienation of man/Against greed and misgovernance and pride" (55). To Ukam, the country has become “the home of the people/whose consciences are seared with…seats of iron/…/where the people’s will is tangled down”. His desire?

… the justice of the poor,
To feed and dwell with those that lack
To mourn with the bereaved and the many oppressed
(*Little Cobra* 38).

It is not therefore suppressing that a great number of Ukam's poems are dedicated to people, and not just ordinary people, but people who are dedicated to liberation struggle or the cause of

freedom. These include such African heroes succh as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Steve Biko. Others are Ken Saro-wiwa, Gani Fawehinmi and Claude Ake.

The above Nigerian poets do not just decry injustice (of any kind and shape) but also see the need for overt action. The call for action by the oppressed and the deprived follows the Marxist creative/critical posture. Marxists believe that literature should be put to the use of the masses. Eagleton (1983) upholds that literary works should engage themselves in "the struggle for men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression"(vii). Thiong'O (1993) also opines that literature should identify with the oppressed of the world, articulate their aspirations, and also be able to move them or rekindle in them the fire for action. There must be an overthrow of the system or forces that keep them bound, whether it is in the form of colonialism or neo-colonialism. Nnolim (1986) upholds this view when he declares: "we expect art that is propagandist, art that tends towards proletarian concern" (31).

The Malawian poet, Jack Mapanje, also uses his poetry to decry oppression, of any kind – colonial, neo–colonial, religious, secular, etc. Mapanje, who lives in London now, is a poet and human rights activist. Following his writing, especially Mapanja (1981), Mapanje was detained in Mukuju Detention Centre near Zomba for more than three years.

The politicians in Mapanja (1993) poetry, and nation, torture, kill and send people into exile. Decrees are promulgated to silence opposition. ("No Creon, There's No Virtue in Howling"). Mapanje decries the corrupt political system that exploits the masses for the benefits of the rulers. The masses, and others symbolized by 'Anenenyi' (those "whose only crime is to believe in non–corrupt, just and free society"). These ones pick "tea for a weekly handful of cheerless, foggy tickies" in the mornings; in the afternoon they "clambered up distant craggy hills to sell party cards – A credulous captive to some dreamer's dementia!". Those who toil have nothing to show for it. The image of "The Splintered bare feet chugging homeward", "cracked hands" and a family shared dinner of "pop maize," is that of suffering, neglect, poverty and general decadence. At his death, "a crushed paraffin Tincan lamp keeps vigil over Anenenji's fire place; alone".

To drive home the lack of identity and non–individualistic status of the exploited by their rulers, at the death of the former, "Nobody, no mound or tombstone stands to say where/or what justice he might have suffered" (15–16 "Vigil for a Fellow Credulous Captive"). This poem reminds one of Brutus' apartheid South Africa, where every black is just another black to be abused and misused; where every black is just another black without a sense of individuality; where every black is just like another black without a right to decent and comfortable existence, living or even dying.

The issue of land – natives being deprived of their ancestral lands by colonial and neo-colonial agents - is part of the oppressive history of South and East Africa. In the poem "The Farms That Gobble the Land at Home", Mapanje poetically re–enacts the forceful acquisition of the people's land and the latter's loss of means of unfettered livelihood. In this poem, like in most South and East African situations, the original land owners are turned into "WETs (Wage–

Earning–Tenants)". The caterpillars on patrol crush everything on their way and the people are forced into docility by the "Peace and Calm Law and Order" decrees.

The cry against this injustices, against this "hacking at people's innocent necks" as is seen, has found voice, like Brutus, in Mapanje's poetry. Like Brutus too, this desire to "Unchain these truths" has earned him underserved imprisonment. Again, like Brutus, Mapanje's imprisonment has provided him with poetic impetus. His prison poems form a great part of his collection Mapanja (1993). He recalls the betrayal of friends including intellectuals, university lecturers (47). He decries the humiliating, ill-treatment of prison inmates, people imprisoned "without charge without trial" (53/60). Like South African's Reuben Island, where Brutus was detained, Mapanje's Mikuyu prison is meant to break the 'rebellious' spirits of its occupants (inmates). However, while Brutus' was occasioned by an oppressive racist system, Mapanje's incarceration is a consequence of a corrupt self-serving post–independent (dependent?) leadership that is intolerable of critical views. Mapanje refers to these leaders as "Vultures" (91–92). Like the Nigerian poet, Ojaide (1990), the image of vulture here is used to signify the carnivorous tendencies of the leadership to destroy others in order to keep themselves in power. It is a pointer to the killings and general wickedness of State apparatus to keep certain neo–colonialist elements in charge.

The Congolese poet, Jean-louis N'tadi, who was detained for four hundred and twenty-three (423) days, chronicles the plight of writers: they are intimidated, hunted, trapped, jailed. Peace is taken from them. Sleep is denied the writer as he is almost perpetually in flight from tyrants and dictators. However, the poet is optimistic of the victory of good over dictatorial inclinations. He says:

> But no matter how long you've held sway
> sleep will come, and reason will bring daylight in
> like some rare commodity: grace will make
> a holy shambles of this fight!
>
> ("INSOMNIA" in Okoro 44)

For Kenya's Wilson Wahome, democracy was/is a mockery ("The Girl Died of Democracy"). Another Kenyan poet, Kimuthai Too, holds the same view in his poem "Power! Power for Blood?". Election was not free and fair; opponents were killed. A little boy could not understand why the land has so many crosses. The mother's answer is a summation of the agony in the land:

> Mum, why is the land full with crosses?
> People died. They died in numbers. Hunger. poverty-
> Tribal warfare.
> My people died fighting for justice
> The rich. The politicians. Killed all!
> Everyone was crucified
>
> (in Okoro 104)

Ironically, even the church which would have been a place of succor and a shield is a political field of blood-letting. The priest, in trade for a Ministerial position for himself and Ambassadorial

appointment for his relatives, sells out members of his church to be massacred. The slain church members are suspected to belong to the group that "didn't vote for Mheshimiwa".

The message of Abdoulaye Djibo Harouna from Niger Republic is that those who stand in the path of truth and justice, though weary, will never die. In his poem "The Message" (dedicated to Ngugi Wa Thiong'O), he celebrates the courage, the resilience of fighters of injustice like Ngugi. In doing this, one can say Harouna himself is on the path of war against any form of injustice. This is because one cannot celebrate what one does not believe in or stand for.

The Zimbabwean 1995 National Poetry Award winner, Albert Nyathi, says in his poem "Struggles" that no matter how the people are robbed, there is still hope. The seven line poem reads:

They crush
The tired souls
The cheated
The robbed
The discouraged
The discontented
But still dawn will break
(in Morris 30)

The "They" here, again, signifies all the forces of oppression. No matter the instruments employed by these forces, they cannot stop the dawn of hope, of victory, of liberation. Nyathi is saying, like the Biblical Psalmist (Psalm 30:5), that though weeping may last for the night, there shall be joy in the morning.

2. CONCLUSION

What Brutus inspired in African poetry is vision, is resilience, is the fact that a poet can stand on the side of the oppressed; is that consistency in a just cause can yield positive results. This seems to be the sustaining force in the poetry of many poets of Modern African Literature.

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