

**PROTEST AND PRISON NARRATIVES IN THE POETRY OF DENNIS BRUTUS****By Mark Ogbinaka and Aghogho Akpome<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*Dennis Brutus, one of South Africa's most renowned anti-apartheid activists, is one of many African poets who use their poetry to protest against, and resist, repressive governments often leading to run-ins with security agencies and sometimes incarceration. Brutus's prison experiences form an important backdrop to his oeuvre overall and especially his work of protest and political activism. The poems and narratives under focus document his horrifying personal encounters and stories shared with him by other prisoners as well as their coping strategies and modes of solidarity. We explore some of these poems for the ways in which they represent an extremely valuable contribution to the emerging sub-genre of (South) African prison/protest literature on the one hand. On the other hand, the poems foreground the continued importance of literary representations of protest and resistance to the growing cultural archives of hitherto hidden accounts of the struggle against colonialism in general and apartheid in particular. It also highlights the role of such narratives in contemporary African societies where independence has unfortunately not yet brought an end to repressive rule.*

**Key terms:** prison literature, protest poetry, South Africa, apartheid.

**INTRODUCTION**

Abdul-Rasheed Ramallah, Harry Garuba, and Uzoma Esonwanne (2011:275), in their discussion of African prison poetry, argue that 'prison writing seeks to defy the despotism of apartheid and postcolonial regimes.' These comments conform with works resisting apartheid encounters in South Africa. The prison literature emanating from these nations recreates the ills of apartheid and military regimes perpetrated against the citizens. There are times when writers are imprisoned, not necessarily because of their writing, but

for other reasons which make the authorities see them as threats. For instance, Brutus's collaboration with freedom fighters against the Apartheid authority was part of the reason for his arrest.

The number of African writers who have published their prison memoirs, diaries, or other forms of prison literature is remarkable. Johan Jacobs (1986:96), in his account of South African prison literature, groups work by prison writers into various categories such as: biographical works with accounts of

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detention or imprisonment, prison memoirs, fictional works in the form of prison memoirs and novels concerned with imprisonment, and poetry and drama dealing with detention, imprisonment, and interrogation. This kind of prison literature includes Brutus's *Letters to Martha and other poems from a South African prison* (1968), Athol Fugard's *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (1972), and *The Island* (1973). Others are David Edgar's *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978), Jon Blair and Norman Fenton's *The Biko Inquest* (1978:97), Jeremy Cronin's *Inside* (1983), and Strini Moodley's *Prison Wall*. These authors' prison experiences influenced how they engaged with social issues in society. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1998:6) in his appraisal of Kenyan literature claims that the "prison is like a stage, but with the audience outside the walls. Both the prisoner and the state are aware of this audience and it explains some of the behaviour of the state and the artist-prisoner".

This comment portrays prison literature as an avenue conveying information about prison to the public. The time that the writers spend behind bars is undoubtedly the most challenging time of their lives – one of alienation and loneliness – but one that brings out their creativity, which is evident in their portrayal of prison life and its effect on them. Adebayo Williams (1996:355) observes that the hounding of writers that culminates in imprisonment has a great impact on the creation of prison literature in Africa. He further comments that: "Incarceration gave birth to a new sub-genre which was to play a crucial role in the struggle against tyranny and dictatorship on the continent."

Writers from Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Angola have produced literary works focusing on colonial encounters and despotic leadership on the

continent. As one might expect, the nations with the most prison literature in Africa are those with a history of struggle against oppression. In the words of Jack Mapanje (2002: xvi), 'Every African colony that fought for independence from Europe... teemed with its own defiant political verses.' There is usually a sense of sedition in these writings, since they so often expose the shame of torture and inhuman treatment of prisoners. Their oppressors perceive these literary works as acts of incitement. In the spirit of resilience, works by some writers, such as Brutus, were sneaked out of prison for publication or, in other instances, published after the writers' release from jail.

The prison, therefore, is a catalyst for the various themes that revolve around prison literature. The poems relating to Robben Island prison experiences, for instance, are symbolic because they are of historical significance, which reminds us of one of the demoralising memories of the apartheid regime. The Robben Island prison was renowned for the incarceration of numerous freedom fighters of different ethnicity who were like gadflies to the oppressive government. Fran Buntman (2003:3) notes that:

Robben Island has a long history as a site where outcasts and rebel opponents of various settlers and colonial governments were abandoned and imprisoned. Under apartheid, however, Robben Island, often called the Island, was the prison in which most black male political prisoners who opposed the apartheid regime were incarcerated from 1962 to 1991. As such, it included inmates classified by apartheid as African,

Indian, and ‘coloured’ and excluded white men and women of all races.

Brutus was in detention on Robben Island together with the many black male political prisoners of the ANC and PAC political parties accused of organised acts of violence and sabotage against the Apartheid regime who were incarcerated there. These prisoners included figures such as: Nelson Mandela, Andrew Mlangeni, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Dennis Goldberg, and Elias Motsoaledi. Buntman’s later comment on Denis Goldberg ‘who was white and imprisoned in... the Pretoria Local and Central Prison’ (19) shows that white freedom fighters were incarcerated in places other than Robben Island. Buntman goes on to explain that: “From 1963 and 1964, large numbers of political prisoners joined the smaller nonpolitical and political prisoner population already on the Island. There were ‘well over 1,000 political prisoners’ in the early years” (19).

With the detention of over one thousand political and non-political prisoners, Robben Island became a symbol of torture and a metaphor for oppression. Keyan Tomaselli, Maureen Eke, and Patricia Davison (1997:286) note that Robben Island was known as an incarceration centre that affected the prisoners on many levels: “For over four centuries Robben Island has been a place of punishment for exiles and prisoners, and of confinement for the physically and mentally afflicted’. The writers consider being sentenced to prison as a ‘punishment’ which is not only physical, but emotional as well. It does not start in the court or the ride to the prison but probably from the time the person decides to resist the Apartheid government. In their confinement to prison, although physical, the prisoners remain

psychologically resolute to continue the struggle behind bars. The intricacies surrounding the situation on Robben Island prompts Paul Gready (1993:516) to write that: “Accounts about Robben Island include numerous descriptions of ill-treatment, custodial deaths, and inadequate medical attention. Extreme violence was the essential characteristic of Robben Island during this period [between about 1963 and 1968]”.

Gready’s comment summarises the nature of the treatment given to the people incarcerated on Robben Island during the Apartheid era. In the end, the prisoners are left with painful reminders of the brutality and incarceration they suffered. Some of Brutus’s accounts of Robben Island prison embody the chequered experience of the notorious detention facility. His ‘Letters to Martha’ is remarkable for its style, presenting the speaker’s comments from the detention centre of Robben Island. The mentioning of names such as ‘Kleynhans’, ‘Blue Champagne’, ‘George’, ‘Fiks’, ‘Jeff’, and ‘Neville’ in ‘Letters to Martha’ clarifies the fact that Brutus is naming actual living people.

Brutus’s illustration of prison experiences in some of his poetry shows the extent to which people can become frustrated in incarceration, to the point that it is even enough for the victims to be perpetually in a state of depression. Brutus presents a situation where those whose duty is to take responsibility for the prisoners, are never bothered, even when the prisoners are made to pay dearly with their lives. For instance, he depicts the torture prisoners go through in the poem entitled ‘Robben Island Sequence.’ The narrative recounts some of the harrowing experiences inmates went through in the hands of warders. The speaker exposes a gory moment in the stanza below:

neon bright orange  
 Vermillion  
 on the chopped broken slate  
 that gravelled the path and yard  
 bright orange was the red blood 5  
 freshly spilt where the prisoners had passed;  
 and bright red  
 pink bright red and light  
 the blood on the light sand by the sea  
 the pale light yellow seas and 10  
 in the light bright airy air  
 lightwoven, seawoven, spraywoven air  
 of sunlight by the beach where we worked. (*BPP*, 99)

The speaker gives a vivid illustration of the prisoners' journey to and from their work location on Robben Island. They are lined up into columns and marched out for work to unknown destinations at the mercy of the warders. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker ponders in despair at the stain of the 'red blood freshly spilt' along the way prisoners have walked.

His emphasis on vivid colour in phrases such as vermilion, 'bright orange', 'bright red', and 'pink bright red', intensifies the bloody scene in the poem. Although the poem's diction is subtle, the frequent repetition of

words like 'bright' and compounds such as 'lightwoven', 'light yellow', and 'sunlight' project the beauty of the environment. The speaker's clever combination of the visual effects of colours and the brightness of the atmosphere is in contrast to the horror of shed blood spilled along their walkways 'on the light sand of the sea'. The juxtaposition of beauty and blood in these lines recreates the painful irony of the speaker's perception of an idyllic landscape in which human anguish prevails. The speaker laments in the next stanza:

where the bright blade-edges of the rocks  
 jutted like chisels from the squatting rocks 15  
 the keen fine edges whitening to thinness  
 from the lightbrown masses of the sunlit rocks,  
 washed around by swirls on rushing wave water,  
 lightgreen or colorless, transparent with a hint of light:  
  
 on the sharp pale whitening edges 20  
 our blood showed light and pink. (*BPP*, 99)

He gives a graphic description of the hazardous terrain in which prisoners are meant to work. In lines 14 and 15, there is a metaphor that equates the rocks' 'edges' to 'blades' and a simile compares the 'edges' with 'chisels'. The speaker is being hyperbolic here, as he exaggerates the sharp edges with images of 'blade' and 'chisel', as though the rocks were steel tools that deliberately cut and injure the prisoners as they work. Lines 20 and 21 suggest the impact of prolonged ocean waves on the prisoners' feet. Prisoners watch helplessly as the 'blade-edges'

of the seaside rock cut the soles of their feet and as their blood washes into the sea's pale waters. The speaker exposes the near-death experience of a prisoner at the hands of a warden in the next section of the poem:

The menace of that bright day was clear as the blade of a knife;  
 from the blade edges of the rocks,  
 from the piercing brilliance of the day,  
 the incisive thrust of the clear air into the lungs 25  
 the salt-stinging brightness of sky and light on the eyes:  
 from the clear image, bronze-shaped lines of Kleynhans laughing  
 Khaki-ed, uniformed, with his foot on the neck of the convict who had fallen,  
 holding his head under water in the pool where he had fallen  
 while the man thrashed helplessly 30  
 and the bubbles gurgled  
 and the air glinted dully on lethal gunbutts,  
 the day was brilliant with the threat of death. (*BPP*, 100)

The speaker reveals that prisoners are supervised by heartless prison warders. In lines 27-30 the speaker exposes the brutality with which Kleynhans, armed with a gun, torments a fallen prisoner who struggles for survival under 'his foot' in the pool of water. Lines 32 and 33 suggest violence within the prison space amidst the 'day[']s' beautiful

'brilliant[ce]' but the light effect is ominously tarnished in 'glinted dully', an oxymoron that suggests that something unpleasant is imminent. These warders sometimes constitute more danger to the prisoners than the difficult work terrain. In the next stanza the speaker recounts the multifarious injuries the prisoners suffer:

some mornings we lined up for 'hospital'  
 —it meant mostly getting castor oil— 35  
 but what a varied bunch we were!  
 for all had injuries—but in such variety  
 split heads; smashed ankles, arms;  
 cut feet in bandages, or torn and bloodied legs:  
 some, under uniform, wore their mass of bruises 40  
 but what a bruised and broken motley lot we were! (*BPP*, 101)

The speaker describes the unprofessional dispensing of the same medication to prisoners with different ailments in the hospital. He laments that going for treatment 'mostly'—and absurdly—means being dosed with 'castor oil', a bitter laxative, even though they are 'a varied bunch' with different

ailments. These ailments include 'split heads', 'smashed ankles, arms', 'cut feet', and a 'mass of bruises' hidden under prison uniforms. The heterogeneous nature of their injuries ought to be treated differently. The 'variety' of injuries in lines 37-39 suggests the high level of violence in this prison.

The speaker's choice of words in 'bruised and broken motley lot' illustrates the diversity,

not only of injuries, but of the people themselves and how they have been subdued. Prisoners are depressed in different ways just like the ‘variety’ of bruises that beset them. The poem presents circumstances surrounding the excruciating moments to which prisoners are daily subjected. It also highlights the violence, frustration, hard labour, and all manner of assault prisoners are exposed to at the hands of prison warders.

The undignified living conditions and violence in prison are commonly mentioned in prison literature and these are highlighted in the poets’ writings. ‘In Letters to Martha’, Brutus gives detailed accounts of the physical, mental and emotional violence that he experienced in prison. Brutus’s ‘Letters to

Martha’ assumes the form of a letter written in segments to his sister-in-law, Martha, from prison. It is one of Brutus’s symbolic poems that explicate some of the secrets shrouded in the activities of prison through poetry. The poem reveals the prisoners’ state of mind and exposes activities in prison in its eighteen sections. Brutus presents the complex way of life and the violence that constitute the reality of prison experience. The inmate’s attitude is also affected by the various ways in which violence is manifested in prison.

The speaker, who is presumably a man given that the cell in question is a male cell, discloses his fears in Poem 2 where he observes the tools used by prisoners to hurt others:

One learns quite soon  
that nails and screws  
and other sizeable bits of metal  
must be handed in;

and seeing them shaped and sharpened 5  
one is chilled, appalled  
to see how vicious it can be  
—this simple, useful bit of steel:

and when these knives suddenly flash  
—produced perhaps from some disciplined anus— 10  
one grasps at once the steel-bright horror  
in the morning air  
and how soft and vulnerable is naked flesh. (*BPP*, 105, 106)

The speaker is surprised at the variety and effectiveness of the life-threatening objects found in prison. He learns that mundane metal objects such as ‘nails’, ‘screws’, and other ‘bits of steel’ can become weapons among inmates. He highlights these dangerous

objects that have been sharpened into tools of torture. In lines 9 and 10, the speaker suggests that the anus is trained to endure the hardship of concealing weapons. In Poem 3, the speaker puzzles over the cause of violence in prison:

Suddenly one is tangled  
in a mesh of possibilities: 5  
notions cobweb around your head,

tendrils sprout from your guts in a hundred directions:

why did this man stab this man for that man?  
 what was the nature of the emotion  
 and how did it grow? 10  
 was this the reason for a warder's unmotivated senseless brutality?  
 by what shrewdness was it instigated?

desire for prestige or lust for power?  
 Or can it—strange, most strange!—be love, strange love?  
 And from what human hunger was it born? 15 (BPP, 106)

The collocation 'tangled', 'mesh', 'cobweb' and 'tendrils', suggests entrapment. The speaker assumes that prisoners would not have broken the rules if they had not been tricked into doing so by prison warders. He deploys the 'wh' interrogatives, 'why', and 'what', to ponder over the degree of violence and attacks in prison. In lines 8 and 9, the speaker wonders: 'why did this man stab this man for that man?' and 'what was the nature of the emotion and how did it grow?' And in lines 13-15, he asks if it is from 'desire for prestige?' or 'lust for power' that such attacks

are born—but seems eventually convinced that their origin is 'love, strange love', deriving from a mysterious 'human hunger'. The speaker is dumbfounded by the 'strangeness' of love in these lines. The repetition of the word 'strange' suggests that this type of love is unfamiliar to the speaker. Perhaps what is strange is not so much its same-sex nature, but that it is love itself, not just lust, and also that it occurs in a violent place like the prison, where love can be considered an anomaly. In poem 4 the speaker reveals that religion is practised in prison:

Particularly in a single cell,  
 but even in the sections  
 the religious sense asserts itself;

perhaps a childhood habit of nightly prayers  
 the accessibility of Bibles, 5  
 or awareness of the proximity of death:

and, of course, it is a currency —  
 pietistic expressions can purchase favors  
 and it is a way of suggesting reformation  
 (which can procure promotion). 10 (BPP, 106)

The words 'prayers', 'Bible', and 'pietistic', are all associated with religious practices. Lines 5 and 6 suggest that the speaker attempts to account for religious practices on

the part of the inmates. And 'childhood habit', 'accessibility of bibles', and 'proximity of death' refer to the speaker's possible reasons for religious practices. Lines 7 and 8 show

inmates' religious zeal, stressing personal piety and devotion. In the next stanza, the speaker points out the desire in the prisoners to take revenge on their oppressors:

[[[

and the resort of the weak  
is to invoke divine revenge  
against a rampaging injustice;

but in the gray silence of the empty afternoons  
it is not uncommon  
to find oneself talking to God. (*BPP*, 107)

15

The speaker ponders the effect of injustice on the helpless in these two stanzas. Lines 12 and 13 indicate the desire of the oppressed to rely on supernatural power to punish their oppressors. However, this revenge does not occur; rather, a sense of absence and loneliness prevails in the prison: 'the grey silence of the empty afternoons.' Lines 15 and 16 show the speaker's own effort to keep this loneliness and its concomitant depression at bay. He appears somewhat surprised at 'find[ing]' himself at prayer in this way. Bernth Lindfors (2015:8) claims that "Letters to Martha' dealt with some of the horrors of prison life, but again there were moments of tranquillity, peace, and comfort

alternating with an acute awareness of deprivation that sometimes bordered on despair".

Lindfors's comment points out moments such as these in which the speaker quietly engages in conversation with God. The phrases 'grey silence', 'empty afternoons', and 'oneself talking' suggest deprivation but these are also sober moments for the prisoner to render his petition to God.

In Poem 12 of 'Letters to Martha', the speaker laments the lack of music that he strongly desires:

Nothing was sadder  
there was no more saddening want  
than the deadly lack  
of music.

Even in the cosy days  
of 'awaiting trial' status  
it was deprivation  
and the need  
that one felt most.

5

After sentence,  
in the rasping convict days

10

it grew to a hunger  
—the bans on singing, whistling  
and unappreciative ears  
made it worse.

15 (PPA, 111)

The speaker's progression from 'sadder' to 'saddening' suggests the relentless continuation of his sorrowful yearning for music. The absence of music in prison is not comparable to the actual pain that prisoners experience, but perhaps its availability is therapeutic. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker indicates that he has had some good moments

during his travails but laments the lack of opportunity for music on such memorable 'days of awaiting trial'. He equates his lack of music to an actual physical starvation when he says, 'it grew to a hunger'. The 'hunger' metaphor is extended in the following stanzas:

Then those who shared one's loves  
and hungers  
grew more dear on this account—  
Fiks and Jeff and Neville  
and the others

20

Strains of Eine kleine Nachtmusik  
the Royal Fireworks,  
the New World,  
the Emperor and Eroica,  
Jesu, joy of man's desiring.

25

Surreptitious wisps of melody  
down the damp gray concrete corridors

Joy. (BPP, 111)

In lines 16-25, the speaker recreates the writings of Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning* where he recounts the ways in which his rich inner life strengthened him in the concentration camps that it was not always the physically strong who survived, but those who were able to retreat into colourful mental worlds. Lines 26-27, suggest that those who could draw from music, such as 'the Royal

Fireworks / the New World / the Emperor and Eroica' were able to arm themselves against the relentless de-humanising conditions of prison life. Their chances of survival were often better than those who did not have these resources but may be physically stronger. After this, the speaker seems prepared to endure life in prison, as seen in Poem 13:

'At daybreak for the isle'  
and

Look your last on all things lovely,  
and  
'so, for a beginning, I know  
there is no beginning.' 5

So one cushions the mind  
with phrases  
aphorisms and quotations  
to blunt the impact 10  
of this crushing blow.

So one grits to the burden  
and resolves to doggedly endure  
the outrages of prison.

Nothing of him doth change 15  
but that doth suffer a seachange. (*BPP*, 111,112)

The speaker relies on some pithy quotations as sources of inspiration. In lines 1-3 are two quotations drawn from the works of South African writer, Lawrence G. Green, and the English poet, Walter de la Mare. The paradoxical comment/aphoristic 'so for a beginning, I know / there is no beginning' does not seem to be a real quotation but suggests the speaker refuses to anticipate what will happen during his imprisonment at the beginning. 'One cushions the mind / with phrases' implies that 'quotations' are sources of encouragement for prisoners. Lines 15 and

16 are quotations from the magical underwater transformation that Ariel envisages in his imaginary song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The episode draws a correspondence between the sailors who are saved in a shipwrecked on an island and that of the speaker in prison. The word 'seachange' also shows a notable transformation in the speaker's attitude from despair to optimism. In Poem 14, the speaker considers 'how fortunate' he and other freedom fighters are:

How fortunate we were  
not to have been exposed  
to rhetoric

—it would have falsified  
a simple experience; 5  
living grimly,  
grimly enduring

Oh there was occasional heroic posturing  
mainly from the immature  
—and a dash of demagogic bloodthirstiness 10

But generally  
we were simply prisoners  
of a system we had fought  
and still opposed. (*BPP*, 112)

The speaker is glad not to have been influenced by political pressure. Lines 1-3 suggest that the prisoners are protected from the influence of 'rhetoric' since they do not have access to political propaganda or news in prison. In lines 4 and 5, the speaker indicates that getting involved in rhetoric would have misrepresented facts about their situation. The use of chiasmus by the speaker in 'living grimly, / grimly enduring' is a rhetorical device he adopts to present the harsh prison conditions in a pleasant way.

The speaker suggests in 'a dash of demagogic bloodthirstiness' that the freedom fighters are 'fortunate' to avoid acts that could complicate their charges. In lines 12-14, he refers to the freedom fighters' consciousness of the reasons behind their imprisonment. The lines

In the grayness of isolated time  
which shafts down into the echoing mind,  
wraiths appear, and whispers of horrors  
that people the labyrinth of self.

Coprophilism; necrophilism; fellatio; 5  
Penis-amputation;  
and in this gibbering society  
hooting for recognition as one's other selves  
suicide, self-damnation, walks  
if not a companionable ghost 10  
then a familiar familiar,  
a doppelganger  
not to be shaken off. (*BPP*, 107)

The speaker presents an atmosphere of horror, partly by using the word 'horrors' and some of the trappings of Gothic literature such as, 'whisper', 'wraiths', 'echoing', 'gibbering'

adumbrate the fact that freedom was not attained on a platter of gold, but as a result of the collaborative efforts of the freedom fighters, in a fierce battle with the oppressors. The depiction of the prisoners' predicament in Brutus's poetry entails the treatment of loneliness and sexual desire among inmates. The poets, besides writing in defence of the prisoners, have also written against those in authority, since their actions have a direct impact on the inmates. The prisoners' way of life entails endurance, due to unpredictable prison conditions. In their effort to live above these challenges, they sometimes satisfy their sexual desires through intimacy with other prisoners. In Poem 5 of 'Letters to Martha', the speaker recounts the haunting imagery of the sexual predation that awaits him:

and 'hooting'. Lines 5 and 6 refer to practices that terrify the speaker because of nightmarish imaginings. The 'confused sounds' in the speaker's mind instil fear and confusion in

him. He uses the words ‘labyrinth of self’ as a metaphor to describe the gradual losing of the mind. Lines 8 and 9 imply that one of these ‘selves’ or ‘other selves’ may be suicidal, but another might be willing to risk ‘self-damnation’ by indulging in sexual acts that the ‘normal’ self would disapprove of. In lines 11-13, the speaker refers to nightmarish scenes with ghostly torments that he dreads.

A ‘doppelganger’ suggests a double, a second self—one of those ‘other selves’ that can contemplate the acts that the main self would damn. It is ‘a familiar’ in the way an animal or spirit is a witch’s ‘familiar’—a potentially evil, kindred being. Helize van Vuuren (2009:44) comments on the psychological complexity in Poem 5 thus:

‘Doppelganger’ and ‘other selves’ have strong psychoanalytical overtones. Depersonalisation, more commonly referred to as dissociation, may be defined as an emotional disorder in which there is loss of contact with one’s own personal reality, a derealization accompanied by feelings of strangeness and unreality of experience.

Van Vuuren’s commentary sums up the depiction of loss of the self, as well as the fears expressed, and other haunting imagery of dream and vision that fills the poem. The speaker finds himself in a dilemma, in which he is helpless against the illusion of the

haunting horrors of a ghost. What he is really horrified by is his own potential participation—he himself is the horror, as with Conrad’s Kurtz. In Poem 6 the speaker reveals two different responses to the fear of ‘sodomy’:

Two men I knew specifically among many cases: their reactions were enormously different but a tense thought lay at the bottom of each and for both there was danger and fear and pain— drama.	15
One simply gave up smoking knowing he could be bribed and hedged his mind with romantic fantasies of beautiful marriageable daughters;	20
the other sought escape in fainting fits and asthmas and finally fled into insanity:	25

so great the pressures to enforce sodomy. (*BPP*, 107)

The speaker recounts the reactions of two other prisoners whom he knew. Lines 18 and 19 indicate the expectation of ‘pain’. The first man realises that, if he is addicted to

cigarettes, he can be bribed with tobacco; but he is also, presumably, vulnerable to seduction, seeing that he works on filling his mind with heterosexual images. The speaker

implies that the second man tries to escape his reality by fainting. Lines 26 and 27 show that this man cannot resist the act, and in the long

run he escapes, after the event, into dementedness. The speaker exposes how prisoners solicit 'sexual assault' in Poem 7:

Perhaps most terrible are those who beg for it,  
who beg for sexual assault.

To what desperate limits are they driven  
and what fierce agonies they have endured  
that this, which they have resisted,  
should seem to them preferable,  
even desirable. (*BPP*, 108)

5

The line 'most terrible are those who beg for it' indicates that some prisoners are put through 'agonies' by other inmates who assault them. The phrase 'sexual assault' implies that some inmates take part in sexual acts that are definitely violent and not 'desired' by the passive parties. These acts may, however, benefit the vulnerable or passive ones in some ways. The benefit is presumably a reduction in the 'fierce agonies', which may include their own psychological resistance, that the passive ones gain protection from. 'Perhaps most terrible

are those who beg for it' shows this is not a 'sexual' experience that they 'desire' but a violent act of appropriation. These sets of prisoners are driven to a masochistic kind of self-humiliation. Sexual act is just something that brings a mitigation of certain parts of their suffering. Line 3 shows that the speaker is dumbfounded by this behaviour and this leads him to use questions rather than statements; wonder why they succumb to such wishes. In the next stanzas the speaker points out the docile attitude of these sexually passive prisoners:

It is regarded as the depths  
of absolute and ludicrous submission.  
And so perhaps it is.

10

But it has seemed to me  
one of the most terrible  
most rendingly pathetic  
of all a prisoner's predicaments. (*BPP*, 108)

The speaker reveals how pathetically some prisoners succumb to sexual abuse. The lines 9 and 10 suggest 'submission' that seemed ridiculous, so undignified as to be almost funny. Lines 11-14 show that he regards the prisoners with horror although he pities and

understands their debasement. In Poem 8, the speaker discusses the sexual exploits of one of the prisoners who has in a sense triumphed over sexual abuse by becoming 'the most popular 'girl' in the place'

'Blue champagne' they called him

- the most popular ‘girl’ in the place;  
 so exciting perhaps, or satisfying:  
 young certainly, with youthful curves  
 —this was most highly prized. 5  
 And so he would sleep with several  
 each night  
 and the song once popular on the hit-parade  
 became his nickname.
- By the time I saw him he was older 10  
 (George *saw* the evil in his face, he said)  
 and he had become that most perverse among  
 the perverted:  
 a ‘man’ in the homosexual embrace  
 who once had been the ‘woman’. 15 (BPP, 108)

In lines 3 and 4, the speaker wonders about the pleasure that other prisoners derive from their intimacy with ‘Blue Champagne’. Line 5 indicates that this ‘girl’ has managed to achieve actual value as a sexual commodity. The italicised emphasis in line 11, ‘saw’ in ‘George *saw* the evil in his face’ refers to an opinion; the word ‘evil’ does not imply that the boy is evil, but that those, like ‘George’, who fear and hate his activities, ‘see’ him that way. The speaker’s own disgust is aroused

only once ‘Blue Champagne’ has undergone a ‘sex-change’ and become ‘a “man” in the homosexual embrace / who once had been the “woman”’. This disgust suggests that the speaker is upset that this prisoner willingly indulges in the same act of sexual assault of which he must originally have been a victim. In Poem 15, the speaker expresses his thoughts concerning different views on sexual behaviours:

Extrapolation  
 is the essential secret of our nature  
 —or so one may call it:

the capacity  
 to ennoble 5  
 or pervert  
 what is otherwise  
 simply animal  
 amoral and instinctual

and it is this that argues for us 10  
 a more than animal destiny  
 and gives us the potential  
 for the diabolic  
 or divinity. (BPP, 112,113)

The speaker philosophises in general terms about mankind's potential for good or evil. In lines 11-14, he implies that both potentials are capable of lifting mankind above the level of animals. The speaker's use of contrast in the words 'diabolic' and 'divinity' indicates human 'capacity' to become either god or devil.

Brutus complains about the harassment, threat to life, and other depressing aspects of prison conditions in his 'Letters to Martha'. He discusses these issues more than Ifowodo,

whose account is sometimes sparse in information, although his treatment of the psychological agony of imprisonment presents a clear message about prison conditions to the public. It is hard for outsiders to know what is going on in a prison and this sometimes puts family members on edge, since they may be ignorant of the prisoners' predicaments. In Poem 9 of 'Letters to Martha', Brutus's speaker gives reasons for revealing stories about prison activities:

The not-knowing  
is perhaps the worst part of the agony  
for those outside;

not knowing what cruelties must be endured  
what indignities the sensitive spirit must face  
what wounds the mind can be made to inflict on itself;

5

and the hunger to be thought of  
to be remembered  
and to reach across space  
with filaments of tenderness  
and consolation. (*BPP*, 109)

10

The speaker assumes that his addressee may not be aware of the activities around him, so he talks about the condition of not-knowing. Lines 1-3 shows that the lack of information tortures friends and family members as they are unaware of what is happening to those in prison. The speaker deploys the 'what' clauses in 'not knowing what cruelties endured / what indignities the sensitive spirit must face / what wounds the mind can be

made to inflict on itself' to show how the torment experienced in prison reverberates onto those who are not in prison. In lines 7-9, he refers to the feelings of people outside the prison, yearning and hoping that their loved ones inside are remembering them. He uses the 'filaments' in line 10 as metaphor for inherent human attributes to show love and care. The speaker reveals the importance of 'knowledge' in the next stanzas:

And knowledge,  
even when it is knowledge of ugliness  
seems to be preferable,  
can be better endured.

15

And so,

for your consolation  
 I send these fragments,  
 random pebbles I pick up  
 from the landscape of own experience 20  
 traversing the same arid wastes  
 in a montage of glimpses  
 I allow myself  
 or stumble across. (*BPP*, 109)

Lines 13 and 14 show that any knowledge of the loved one in prison is ‘preferable’ to ignorance because it is some kind of continuity of their shared existence. The speaker’s choice of the words ‘fragments’, ‘random’, ‘stumble’ and ‘montage of glimpses’ suggests the snippet nature of information about prisons. It is sometimes unlawful and prohibited to give out information about the activities in prison to the public. He deploys a metaphor in the lines ‘random pebbles I pick up / from the

landscape of own experience’ in expressing his mental images of times spent in prison.

The speaker uses the image of small, discrete ‘pebbles’ as a metaphor for bits and pieces of information. The ‘pebbles’ suggest he is giving just a little of the ‘experience’ he gathered in prison. Lines 21 and 22 suggest images of the speaker’s unproductive years in prison as a huge desert from which only a sample of ‘glimpses’ can be offered. He, however, reveals some good aspects of prison in Poem 10:

It is not all terror  
 and deprivation,  
 you know;

one comes to welcome the closer contact  
 and understanding one achieves 5  
 with one’s fellow-men,  
 fellows, compeers;

and the discipline does much to force  
 a shape and pattern on one’s daily life  
 as well as on the days 10

and honest toil  
 offers some redeeming hours  
 for the wasted years;

so there are times  
 when the mind is bright and restful 15  
 though alive:  
 rather like the full calm morning sea. (*BPP*, 109, 110)

The speaker reveals that as bad as prison was, 'Is not all terror / and deprivation / you know' implying that there are 'some redeeming hours'. He goes further to note in line 4-6 that they develop closer relationship and encouragement among comrades. Being together in prison forges a deeper understanding and appreciation of others. Some sort of wisdom is attained from rapport with 'contact[s]' in prison. Lines 8 and 9 refer to a development of personal discipline due to

the routine forced on them. In a simile, the speaker compares the peace of mind he receives from 'some redeeming hours' to 'the full calm morning sea'. The speaker accepts that there are exceptional moments within the 'some redeeming hours' that are 'not all terror / and deprivation' and liken to 'the mind['s]' restfulness, just as the 'sea' is probably calm only in the morning. He expresses his concern over freedom and changes in the political system in Poem 11:

Events have a fresh dimension  
for all things can affect the pace  
of political development—

but our concern  
is how they hasten or delay  
a special freedom—  
that of those the prisons hold  
and who depend on change  
to give them liberty.

5

And so one comes to a callousness,  
a savage ruthlessness—  
voices shouting in the heart  
'Destroy! Destroy!'  
or  
'Let them die in thousands!'—

10

really it is impatience.

15 (*BPP*, 110)

The speaker discloses that a new approach is required to transform the prisoner's situation from detainees to free men. Lines 6 and 7 refer to the attitude of the oppressors here – how they feel they can determine when a prisoner may be free. And lines 10-12 show the speaker's desperation for freedom. He uses words such as 'callousness', 'savage', 'ruthlessness', and 'destroy' to express rage and anger against his oppressors. He, however, realises that the thought of 'let[ting] them die in thousands' is probably due to

'impatience'. So 'really it is impatience' shows patience in the individual prisoner can be only for a while. The speaker issues a warning that 'impatience' should probably serve as caution. The longer they leave the prisoners in jail and treat them badly, the more they will all get impatient.

Brutus relates the impact of nature and the environment to other issues affecting prisoners in their poetry. They sometimes juxtapose the prisoner's quest for the beauty

of nature, and the harsh prison conditions. In other instances, they attribute the tough nature of plants and objects in the environment to demonstrate resilience in their art. It is this resilient spirit and doggedness of most

prisoners and freedom fighters that propels them to withstand years of incarceration during the period of the liberation struggle. Brutus's speaker recognises and accepts his position as a prisoner in Poem 16:

Quite early one reaches a stage  
where one resolves to embrace  
the status of prisoner  
with all it entails,  
savouring to the full its bitterness  
and seeking to escape nothing: 5

'Mister,  
this is prison;  
just get used to the idea'

'You're a convict now'. 10

Later one changes,  
tries the dodges,  
seeks the easy outs.

But the acceptance  
once made  
deep down  
remains. (*BPP*, 113) 15

The speaker expresses his resolve to endure 'the status' and condition of a prisoner. In lines 5 and 6, it dawns on the speaker that he has to accept the situation in which he finds himself. Lines 7-9 imply that the warden wants the speaker to embrace the fact that he is a prisoner. Lines 14-17 suggest that the

speaker's commitment to the 'prisoner' condition is a kind of obligation to feel all of its pain. The deprivation of access to nature in prison affects the speaker's feeling of nostalgia in Brutus's 'Letters to Martha'. In Poem 17, the speaker relies on the beauty of nature to ease loneliness in prison:

In prison  
the clouds assume importance  
and the birds

With a small space of sky  
cut off by walls  
of bleak hostility  
and pressed upon by hostile authority 5

the mind turns upwards when it can—	
—there can be no hope of seeing the stars: the arcs and fluorescents have blotted them out—	10
the complex aeronautics of the birds and their exuberant acrobatics become matters for intrigued speculation and wonderment	15
clichés about the freedom of the birds and their absolute freedom from care become meaningful	20
and the graceful unimpeded motion of the clouds —a kind of music, poetry, dance— sends delicate rhythms trembling through the flesh and fantasies course easily through the mind: —where are they going where will they dissolve will they be seen by those at home and whom will they delight? (PPA, 113,114)	25

The speaker expresses his appreciation of nature and bemoans the fact that prison 'walls' cut off his view. Lines 2-4 imply that because of the high prison walls the speaker can see only a certain amount of 'sky'. Birds and clouds are visible sometimes – and the birds form the focus of the rest of the poem. Lines 12 and 13 depict obstruction to the view of the 'stars' due to the brightness of electric bulbs in prison. The prisoners would obviously like to view the stars too – their small amount of sky ought to provide that – but, there are no stars visible. In lines 14-16, the speaker refers to the prisoners' desire to watch birds and speculate about them. The speaker, therefore, extols the qualities of the birds in admiration, but this 'admiration' is

dependent on the constraint of the observer. In lines 20-28, he indicates that these birds do not just symbolise the freedom of movement that the prisoners lack, but that they also connect in their minds with the people outside who may be watching them.

The cliché of the freedom of the birds' shows that, beyond the speaker's admiration for the 'birds,' he also uses it as a metaphor for freedom. The speaker calls it a cliché, and yet is in fact seduced by the old symbolism. The speaker in this poem speaks generally on behalf of all those 'in prison' – the opening words. However, his wonderment is very intense and 'interior' – it has become quite singular and personal by the end of the poem. Lines 24 and 25 refer to the kinds of feelings

that an individual's 'mind' experiences in intense isolation from aesthetic experiences such as listening to music. In Poem 18, the speaker's quest for nature continues

I remember rising one night  
after midnight  
and moving  
through an impulse of loneliness  
to try and find the stars. 5

And through the haze  
the battens of fluorescents made  
I saw pinpricks of white  
I thought were stars.

Greatly daring 10  
I thrust my arm through the bars  
and easing the switch in the corridor  
plunged my cell in darkness  
I scampered to the window  
and saw the splashes of light 15  
where the stars flowered.

But through my delight  
thudded the anxious boots  
and a warning barked  
from the machine-gun post 20  
on the catwalk.

And it is the brusque inquiry  
and threat  
that I remembered of that night  
rather than the stars. 25 (BPP, 114, 115)

The speaker highlights the importance of his quest for nature by showing his desperation to switch off the light so that he can see the stars clearly. The metaphors in 'the splashes of light / where the stars flowered' equate the stars at night with the blossoming of flowers. These expressions recreate the images of stars in the sky like 'splashes' that are as beautiful as flowers. He compares the clusters of 'stars' in the sky at night to 'splashes' and the 'star flowered' aligns the beauty of the flowers to the stars. His 'delight' at seeing the stars is cut

short by the prison guards' reactions. Lines 22 and 23 imply that the speaker's memory / experience of stars is overlaid much more vividly with the 'brusque' and unsympathetic 'inquiry' of the guards. The speaker advocates on behalf of the prisoners with the intention of informing the public about the activities of prison. The title 'Letters to Martha' suggests a sense of safety he finds in being at home, represented by his sister-in-law to whom he writes. It is not only those in prison who can

be tortured, but family members at home can also be tormented.

The selected poems by the poet analysed in this article recreate some of the unpleasant conditions of life in prison and should consequently have a significant impact on prison reformation. The poet illustrates some of the social behaviours identifiable in the behaviour of convicts. For instance, the 'Blue Champagne' experience in 'Letters to Martha' reveals the forms of sexual relationship prisoners indulge in to survive the prison environment. The poetry of Brutus exposes more horrifying torture and dehumanisation than other writers prison literature. The treatment of these oppressive themes in their art is for the attention of the public and for those in authority, to urge them to rethink the prison system. For this reason, Bell Chevigny (2005:247) claims that:

The best prison writing continues to testify to hidden experiences, to critique, and to resist institutionalization, but it also helps writers to find themselves, make themselves whole, forge significant contact with others, and make reparations.

Chevigny's view reveals why the various themes in the poets' prison writings unveil aspects of prison that are unknown or shocking to the readers. Brutus's 'Letters to Martha', and 'Robben Island Sequence', for instance, express both moments of self-

realisation, and resistance to prison torments. These prison poems are remarkable as they recount prisoners' attitudes towards loneliness on the one hand, by demonstrating the inmates' ability to live with sexual depressions on the other. The poet presents how unnatural life in prison is. Brutus's poems disclose how prisoners live in a situation that encompasses violence, endurance, religion, and intimacy. Analysis of the various prison poems reveals that although imprisonment can represent tough times for prisoners, it is, however, not always a waste of time. Prison experiences tended to deepen the self-knowledge and sharpen the insight into political injustices in the consciousness of the writer. And this is manifest, one way or the other, in the writer's larger career as an activist who leads protest and resistance to oppressive power structures in his society.

In this way, the poems and narratives analysed above represent an extremely valuable contribution to the sub-genre of (South) African prison/protest literature. They also highlight the role of literary representations of protest and resistance to the growing cultural archives of hitherto hidden accounts of the struggle against colonialism in general and apartheid in particular. This archive is perhaps more important today than in the period of active colonialism since independence is not to bring an end to repressive rule in many parts of postcolonial Africa.

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