

The Architecture of Dejection: Trauma of Imprisonment and the Degeneration of Humanity in Dennis Brutus's *Letters to Martha*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the depiction of trauma, brutalisation and the systematic erosion of human dignity in Dennis Brutus's poetry collection, *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968). A reading avowing that shows imprisonment with its horrors as calculated machinery exploited by the apartheid regime to humiliate the black political detainees, its objectives include an examination of two poems ('Letters to Martha 5 and 18') selected from the said poetry collection to probe into how the poet utilises an epistolary format and a friendly and unceremonious idiom to articulate an architecture of dejection, underscoring mental agony and hopelessness of detainees. It verifies violence and inhumanity of warders in addition to the apprehensions generated by the inhabitable prison cells and its debasing surroundings, echoed through expressions "walls of bleak hostility" and "arcs and fluorescence". Again, it verifies how Brutus underlines the humiliation of human race by the deployment of scenes of sexual distortion, mental breakdown as well as the reduction of human bodies to inorganic entities, thereby depicting the "debased state of mind" generate by acute repression. Findings confirm that *Letters to Martha* remains a forceful, imaginative protest directed against the debasing machinery of apartheid. Lastly, the study of these poems underscores the perception that poetry or literature can give evidence to political horror and systemic brutality, thereby defending human identity, dignity and existence in the confrontation of man's inhumanity against man.

Keywords: Apartheid, imprisonment, architecture of dejection, *Letters to Martha*, human dignity

1.1 Introduction

During the era of the apartheid regime in South Africa, traumatic imprisonment was commonly employed as a mechanism for the total suppression and degradation of blacks and coloured populace. The regime did not simply try to achieve their segregation. It made comprehensive efforts at shattering their spirit of personal and mutual resistance. This was done systematically with every available opportunity and machinery. Conversely, these beleaguered and oppressed

peoples with their sympathisers from different parts of the world did not rest on their havens. They equally employed diverse channels and devices against the ‘do or die’ oppressive landscape of South African apartheid state. Literature was one of these numerous channels and devices of survival, as it provided the opportunity for exposing, recording and condemning the massive injustice and inhumanity of the apartheid policy.

Consequently, Dennis Brutus’s *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968) remains a fundamental contribution in this trend of applying literary works in the fight against human condescension and discrimination. It is a poetic collection composed during his confinement on Robben Island by the horrendous apartheid regime. It turns political imprisonment into a means of awareness and empowerment towards resistance and renaissance. Various anti-apartheid narratives centre on the question of gallant resistance; however, the uniqueness of *Letters to Martha* resides in its personal, mild but resolute scrutiny of prisoner’s inner emotional and physical wreckage generated by the brutal captivity.

In the poems, Brutus relates the delicate traumatic effects of the isolation. He equally stresses the cruelty of warders in addition to their unhurried, subtle erosion of humanity among the detainees. The poet details how the victims are forced to observe or partake in their own humiliation. The poet addresses the “letters” to his sister-in-law, Martha, as a way of lamenting private traumatic situation. This underscores his regret on the reduction of life to a fight for mere existence. Bursting under the weight of the trauma, the poet releases his emotional pains, drawing much of the addressee’s attention to his enforced shift from a human being with agency to a lost and degenerated fellow, caged in some unfortunate “walls of black hostility” as revealed in ‘Letter 17’ (Brutus 65).

The epistolary method in the articulation of this poetic collection is fundamental. The paper hence avows that this delicate, epistolary technique aids the poet in deploying his emotional range to the exhibition of the “degeneration of humanity”. Thus, the procedures used in the apartheid systematic degeneration of the moral essence and dignity of individuals by the prison apparatus are laid bare through the epistolary design. The study maintains that Brutus’s subtle method showcases such concerns as emotional torture, intense physical pain, unbearable isolation, loss of individual identity and degeneration human dignity. The scrutiny will focus on exposing how Brutus employs poetry as a means of articulating the debasing impact of apartheid’s immoral and malevolent machinery on black and coloured populace. It will also throw more light on how he depicts the assertive resilience of the said populace. By and large, his poetry especially *Letters to Martha* comes as a fundamental and traumatic evidence to what has been termed the “aesthetics of pain” (Malpas and Lickiss 21). Brutus often employs poetry in turning the conversion of private distress into a collective protest directed towards the silencing of political dissidents. Among other things, he has rightly been called “poet-activist”.

1.2 Purpose of the Study:

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i) examine the impact of poetic techniques and epistolary form in generating intimate, traumatic experiences into a public protest against South African injustice;
- ii) assess the emotional and physical trauma, especially lack of privacy, sensory deprivation and isolation, exacted by the prison environment on the persona in the poem;
- iii) examine the role of sexual violence, abuse, arbitrary cruelty by warders and other apartheid security system to heighten the degeneration of human dignity within the prison system;
- iv) explore Brutus's use of imagery of nature (birds, clouds) as a thematic counterpoint towards the constrained, man-made horrors of the prison underscores the loss of liberty and the desire for normal life.

1.3 Theoretical Framework:

The study is executed on the premise that in *Letters to Martha* the trauma is not purely a medical state but a post-colonial political instrument designed to enforce a deprivation of humanity. Brutus maintains his dignity and identity by means of poetic expression employed in transforming his traumatic state into a testimony. This research adopts a three-fold composite framework involving post-colonial codes of confrontation, literary anguish investigations, and emotional notions of degradation.

In the research, post-colonial political instrument is examined using Roger Kurtz model (421-35). From the perspective of his "Literature, Trauma and the African Moral Imagination", trauma cannot just be taken as a mere individual experience. It is a part of a shared political event orchestrated towards the degradation by systems like the South African Apartheid regime (1948–1994). Thus, engaging trauma and memory in African literature underscores such ideas as "remembering" the broken lives along with the application of literary art to defy the "subhuman conditions" imposed by the apartheid structure. This is applicable in the poems by looking at how Brutus exploits "subtle comparison" as in liberty versus bondage to defy his oppressors, and hence transforming his incarceration into a site of struggle rather than docile suffering. Literary anguish or "the poetics of pain" is scrutinised through the Caruth 1966 prototype in *Unclaimed Experience*, where trauma of captivity is viewed as an "unclaimed experience", disintegration of moment/time and consciousness (4), and a "wound that cries out", the "double wound" (3-4). This frame is basically ties the scrutiny of literature in Tasso's *Tancred*, and the double wound. It is crucial for discussing how Brutus transmits the traumatic experience of prison by exploiting persistent imagery, fragmented memories. Along with Caruth's prototype, Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the*

Literatures of Trauma (1966) also discusses literary trauma, defining literary trauma from the perspective of survivor-authored texts that function as political, restorative apparatus (15–21). The core notions in this definition are treating trauma as an enduring, transformative condition (119), seeing witness-bearing as a function of antagonism (7), and evaluating the public “unspeakability” of rape (155). This is applicable to Brutus’s poems by seeing them as written letters and not linear poems, underscoring their role as healing devices for trauma, showing a “grey”, rhythmic/repetitive and disjointed survival/life.

The emotional notion of degradation is examined by means of the Haslam/Sykes model (2025). Their work, *Developing Recovery Pathways for Mental Health Disorders through Creative Coproduction: A Case Study of Anorexia Nervosa*, does not focus on distinctive post-traumatic literary concepts. It simply integrates many distinct psychosomatic and socio-critical frames linked to healing. However, the work’s main trauma-centred and critical notions include creative co-production, a major theoretical frame that redefines healing from psychological disorders by promoting teamwork among health experts, sufferers, healthier patients, and scientists to break down traditional medical obstacles; “expert by experience” stresses the authors’ procedure of validating the lived experiences, narratives along with localised information of people who have experienced long-term psychological health issues; neuroscience of creativity applies the creative brain as means to categorise and connect creative features so as to alter stiff, clinical healing pathways into meaningful, remedial acts; and Foucault’s concept of “unreason” or the use of Michel Foucault’s theories of madness and *unreason* to confront and deconstruct the stigma faced by individuals with severe mental health conditions. It is rooted in Nick Haslam’s dehumanisation format along with Gresham Sykes’ the “Pains of Imprisonment”.

This study applies it as a blended procedure to assist in the examination of the poet’s emotional condition in addition to the systemic humiliation projected by the prison scheme. It stresses ways in which the prison mechanism is designed to deny prisoners their identity and dignity, hence, turning them into mere “beasts” or objects. There is need to explore concept of loss of autonomy, loss of dignity, mechanistic versus animalistic degradation in the poems. Brutus also hints at “grey” prison life, the lack of human connection in addition to the “pains of imprisonment” manifested through loneliness and acts of sexual perversion, which are deliberate procedure aimed at breaking the political captives. Sykes (63-83) in *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* explains the concept of the “pains of imprisonment”, outlining them under his five basic deprivations that characterise the prisoner’s ordeals as the lack of liberty or captivity and rejection by society, deprivation of autonomy or loss of control over daily decisions, withdrawal of heterosexual relationships, denial of goods and services or loss of normal material comforts, and denial of protection or constant contact to danger from other inmates.

2.0 Review of Relevant Literature

Diverse concerns of socio-economic degradation, political domination, loss of cultural identity in addition to personal trauma are the fundamental apprehensions surrounding South African protest literary tradition. As a chief representative work in this tradition, *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968) by Dennis Brutus articulates the entire experience of confinement under the apartheid regime, highlighting it as the architecture of dejection. Much critical attention has been given to Brutus's anti-apartheid activism. Among these critics are Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (182-198) who represents a typical critique of Brutus's humanism; and Ukam (1997) who presents a critique of Brutus's prison poetry versus concept of degradation. However, a shift of concentration of scholarship is now on *Letters to Martha* and emphatic on how its epistolary progression centres on the mental nightmare of detention in addition to the methodical degradation of human value and dignity.

These scholars concur that *Letters to Martha* goes further than simply recording political protests. They avow that it is a testimony of the intimate, day-to-day deprivation of inmates. According to Damilink (7-8), Brutus employs the epistolary narrative format to portray the "afterlife" of an incarcerated black. For him, the prison life symbolises human beings passing through real life as mere 'existences'. For critics like Damilola (1-7), the trauma of captivity in *Letters to Martha* is beyond physical captivity. He opines that it is extremely psychosomatic, although not merely medical; it is ingrained on an imposed isolation, insufficient ventilation in addition to a denial of emotional motivation. Most studies underlining the "debased state of mind" of detainees exhibit this erosion of human dignity. Hence, they avow that Brutus's accounts of fellow prisoners pleading for sexual abuse reflect the destruction of the human ego, especially the absolute annihilation of self-worth through the cruelty of the warders. This is also the case with studies of prison literature that describes the "mortification of self". Here, the identity and dignity of the prisoner are destroyed. The painful conditions obtainable in South African prisons make the trauma real and practical.

In the long run, the detainees contrive their own schemes of survival in the "hostile space" as revealed in the poems. The poet discusses the strategies used by the inmates in their effort to escape in apartheid "hostile space". The prisoners often undermine their pains through a "sober and reflective" tendency. Brutus applies nature images. Birds, sky, clouds and trees becomes symbols and images of freedom which totally denied to the inmates. Brutus and his fellow detainees find some comfort through private self-control and endurance along with building new contacts. Thus, against the backdrop of prison system's original purpose to reduce them to "animals", they are able to move on. The poet emphasizes that the act of writing poetry turns into a device to "reclaim the human personality" and uphold a "fragment" of identity. The epistolary format the epistolary form and the "aesthetics of pain" are of enormous advantage to the poet, Brutus. Through the epistolary format, reality is exclusively "fragmented". The poet deploys it in relating the deepest

circumference of intimacy and openness. It is a technique that copiously transforms his personal despair and humiliation into a collective testimony of the oppressed. Here, the critic can testify to the poetry of an “adorable bitterness” (Damilink 7-8), characterised by sufficient evidence to the resilience of the human spirit along with in-depth parody of the brutal system.

3. Analysis of Trauma of Imprisonment and Degeneration of Humanity in Brutus’s *Letters to Martha*

This issue of societal inflicted racial dilemma in the selected texts would be discussed under two sub-headings, namely the ordeals of imprisonment and nightmares of the erosion of human dignity.

a) The ordeals of imprisonment

Although there are numerous other poems in Dennis Brutus’s *Letter to Martha* that treat the ordeals of imprisonment, only ‘Letter to Martha 5’ is selected for analysis and illustrations. Other poems left out include ‘Letter 1’ that uses a cool and near detached tone to launch the insidious menace of systemic prison brutality amid an intense exposition of the rough, concealed arsenals of detainees’ survival; ‘Letter 7’ which portrays traumatic nature of concerns with touching sorrow instead of denunciation, highlighting the darkest realities of the incarceration and exploring its bodily pains along with moral depravity that compel some detainees to beg for sexual assault; and ‘Letter 9’ that exposes the painful psychological torment of loved ones outside the prison walls who only imagine the gravity of suffering and torture undergone by the relatives in the disconnecting eternal void of prison.

The selected poems represent Brutus’s portrayal of ordeals of imprisonment as sinister threat of systemic prison brutalities of the Apartheid dispensation. ‘Letter to Martha 5’ is an emotional testimony to his gruesome captivity on Robben Island as an anti-apartheid crusader. It exposes the ordeals of imprisonment detailing the bodily aspects of his incarceration amid its ruthless mental and moral pains. The poem simply exposes the overwhelming loss of dignity and the horrible realities of a heartless society, signifying the inhumanity of man against man. In the same vein, ‘Letter to Martha 17’ also excels in the portraiture of the ordeals of imprisonment. Here, detention under the Apartheid dispensation becomes an intense corporal, sensory, spiritual and mental deprivation. The speaker exploits his isolated condition in demonstrating the overwhelming yoke of systemic subjugation. His pain is heightened as he feels the loss of the natural world and its unrestricted liberty.

Brutus’s ‘Letter to Martha 5’ and the ordeals of imprisonment

The poet explores the violence of enforced sexual abuse in this poem. The abnormal absence of the female folk and natural relationships promotes homosexual acts. Since the setting is meant to diminish human civility and dignity of black and coloured peoples, men are lured into the abandonment of good moral standards. The apartheid system objectives include the development

and spread of rabid and repulsive tendencies. Imprisonment is a vital apparatus of breaking the human psyche into the most animalistic position. Hence, constant desecration of the human body becomes the order of the day. Textual evidence from the poem include expressions like the “gibbering” folks in the restive prison environment and the “gibbering society” with its atmosphere of fear, tension and captivity enforce sexual bullying, predation and perversity among themselves. There are also indications of excessive perversions like “coprophilism, necrophilism”, showing the absolute loss of dignity and deprivation inside the prison world. In other words, these expressions expose the imposed plunge into a the lowest instinctual subsistence amid intense psychological cruelty inflicted upon the detainees.

Therefore, in the poem, one observes portraits of inmates who secluded from society and starved of normal human feelings plunge into a “labyrinth of self” to wallow in perversion, morbidity and total loss of regard for life and death. Another relevant phrase is “whispers of horrors / that people the labyrinth of self”. These lines more clearly show the mental rot and morbidity resulting from forced loneliness and its associated dispossession. There are other illustrations of this narrative of debasement of human beings in Brutus’s ‘Letter to Martha 5’. It is about sexual deprivation as it involves the loss of mental capacity. Several poems in the entire collection focus on the issue of mental degradation. The plunge into madness or “flee into insanity” is what the prison conditions in Apartheid dispensation are contrived for. The normal human mind is ill-equipped to survive the ruthless brutality of the racist designs. The disconnection of man’s psychological and physical bulwarks only pushes him to attempt an escape from anguish through madness. It is not surprising that the persona observes or hears of fellow detainees yield to unimaginable mental decay to consume and enjoy feases (coprophilism).

This loss of one’s mind comes in diverse shades. The poet describes how the air thickens amid “whispers of horrors among many cases”, showing the pensive atmosphere of fear, pain, loss, despair, vulnerability and imminent death, that surround communication in this prison. Hence, the poet further talks about the “greyness of isolated time”. This flashes into the grossly unstable minds of inmates as shown by phrases like “shafts down into the echoing mind”. The prisoners’ physical seclusion gives rise to continuous psychological echoes of their own fears, wounded heart, its lingering memories, in addition to the whispered terrors of others. The poem describes how fear and mental imbalance turn men into ghostly figures or “wraiths”, who hallucinate frequently as their minds are troubled by unforgettable apparitions of abused, broken and often dead fellow inmates and mangled bodies of men hacked out the prison walls by dreadful warders and their cohorts. The prison is like a nest of disaster and an engine of ruthless torture used by Apartheid hostile and despotic authority to denigrate inmates whose emotional resilience is ever threatened by unbearable tension, danger and palpable fear.

The acute acts of self-mutilation and self-harm remain the brutal signs of the loss of one’s mind amid the ruthless torture of the Apartheid hostile system. These are demonstrated in the poem

through pitiful accounts of “penis-amputation”, underscoring the take-over of the detainee’s mind by excessive dejection. This corporal self-annihilation, a frantic outlet for pent-up agony, also exposes the prisoner’s loss of the ability to contain the mental and physical dismay of the hostile enclave. As the poem demonstrates, the trend of self-annihilation soared into the ambits of suicide and other outlets of self-damnation among prisoners. Through suicide, the poet successfully portrays an absolute desolation, misery and existential defeat designed by the oppressive Apartheid system.

b) The nightmares of an erosion of human dignity

Although there are numerous other poems in Dennis Brutus’s *Letter to Martha* that treat the nightmares of an erosion of human dignity, only ‘Letter to Martha 18’ is selected for analysis and illustrations. Other poems left out include ‘Letter 17’ that exposes the claustrophobia and deprivation within the prison cell. The poem examines how detainees are isolated from the natural world by the hostile authority and their agents, thereby dehumanising them. This is illustrated by disconnecting them from natural freedom, as prisoners are forbidden from having a glimpse at clouds, stars, trees, birds, et cetera. ‘Letter 23’ explores the psychosomatic deprivation of waiting and idleness of the inmates, designed to break their spirit, rotten their minds and crush their soul through repetitive system of solitude.

Brutus’s ‘Letter to Martha 18’ and the nightmares of an erosion of human dignity

Brutus’s ‘Letter to Martha 18’ embodies the nightmares of an erosion of human dignity. It presents a defiant moment when a prisoner tries the forbidden look out a window to catch a glance at the stars, while the ever-furtive warder with a deadly machine gun barks at him like an animal. It simply captures the heartrending nightmare of being reduced to an object of suspicion for merely seeking beauty of nature. In denouncing the obnoxious Apartheid system, Brutus applies this poem, ‘Letter to Martha 18’, to depict vulnerability of human dignity through scary primitive imagery. To fully picture this unbearable helplessness of nude flesh and the survival nightmares of oppression, the poet looks at how systemic violence changes intricate men into wrecked bodies devoid of souls. However, the poet points at the disparity between the “disciplined” nature of the tormenters with the reality of “how soft and vulnerable is naked flesh”, weighing the racist physical terror against the victims’ misery along with their loss of material security and physical liberty.

Brutus exemplifies the centrality of the nightmare of erosion of dignity in different ways: First, prisoners rely on such defense techniques as sliding into “dementedness” or “fainting”, a sign of an inability to contain the reality of degradation. The poet shows this “sick relief” as a survival scheme since torture is deferred by a depraved mentality that appropriates peace to be the absence of pain instead of the presence of liberty. The speaker exposes how fellow prisoners are induced with tobacco or forced into sexual assault and other humiliating activities to secure essential needs, hence exposing the commodification of the human body, as the height of transactional nightmare

of erosion of dignity. This dilemma of erosion of dignity shows a total inversion of human craving engendered by intense hostility and seclusion. This is evident in prisoners who in reality “beg for sexual assault”. The poet sees this humanity’s existential menace as man gradually moves to the level of insensitive objects or callous animals.

Thus, with the expression “knowledge of those who endure much more”, the poet marks a world in which continued existence is pegged on fortitude in facing complex degrading schemes. This chilling reality is justified in the realisation that agents of repression often turn “nails and screws” and inanimate objects of creation or manufacture into instruments of torture and intimidation. The poet exposes how these malevolent transform the purpose of these instruments to inflict terror, fear, destruction and death. Moreover, the persona observes himself along with others being “chilled, appalled” at the violence they observe or experience, validating their fear, numbness and surprise that witnessing brutalities has become the order of the day. It is also a fact that both the victim and the observer of the oppressors’ violence are equally affected by the dreadful spectacle and the horrible acts that degrade human dignity. Such expressions as “sizeable bits of metal” indicate how the prisoners measure their survival by means of the rough, apathetic tools used by their oppressors.

4. Conclusion

This study has dwelt on the trauma of imprisonment and degeneration of humanity in Brutus’s *Letters to Martha*. The detailed examination of ‘Letter to Martha 5’ and ‘Letter to Martha 18’ reveals that the tribulations of imprisonment portrayed in *Letters to Martha* is a weighty investigation of human degradation engendered by an extremely domineering system. It is not a mere catalogue of affliction. The poet shows how the obnoxious Apartheid state tries to break the spirit of resilience among the black and coloured peoples by through a removal of autonomy and exposure to harsh brutalities. The poem, thus, is a testimony to the defiance instead of the peoples’ conquest by the apartheid apparatus. It justifies the belief that gentle humanity is able survive in a world of violent anguish. On the whole, through the study of the poet’s application of imagery and his focus on the “fragments” of experience proves that Brutus recognised the apartheid machinery as an effort to strip political detainees of their humanity, but equally finds the means to preserve it through love, memory along with creative expression.

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