



Brutus' Strong agitations against Colonial Injustices: A Glimpse of the poem 'At a funeral'

Moirangthem Dolly

M.A. English, UGC-NET, B.Ed.

Research Scholar, Department of English

College of Social Sciences & Humanities

Srinivas University, Mangalore, Karnataka, India.

Under the guidance of

Dr. Bhuvana Ramachandran

Research Professor, Department of English

College of Social Sciences & Humanities

Srinivas University, Mangalore, Karnataka, India.

Abstract:

During his lifetime, Brutus experienced injustices, inhumanity and many other harsh realities of 'apartheid' which existed in Africa during the colonial period. He stood firm against these injustices and reciprocated through his poetry. Deprivations and destitutions in socio-economic-political aspects were parts and parcels of the lives of native people in those days. The pathetic state of these native people got worsened when people began losing hopes from themselves due to inferiority complexes. The poet, through this poem, called for a never-dying spirit and contemplated to reach out to his people with a strong message that endurance and self-confidence will permanently relieve them from any form of tyrannical bondages.

Keywords:

Injustices, inhumanity, apartheid, colonial period, poetry, inferiority complexes, tyrannical bondages.

Introduction:

Dennis Vincent Brutus was born in Harara, Zimbabwe. He was a fearless campaigner of justice, a great humanist, a prolific writer, a teacher, a socialist and political activist. He had campaigned for anti-CAD (Colonial Affairs Department), without self-pity and mental anguish. He was imprisoned for struggle against oppression and racism. During his imprisonment, his first volume of poetry, 'Sirens Knuckles, Book (1963)' was published. In 1965, Brutus was released and allowed to leave South Africa on the condition that he would never return. He emigrated to England in 1966 and then to the United States in 1970. He is regarded as one of the most distinguished contemporary South African poets. Some of his works include 'Thoughts abroad', 'Letters to Martha', 'Airs and Tribute', just to name a few.

Brutus wrote about his prison experiences and the inhumanity of apartheid. Endurance and hope are the dominant themes in this volume, as Brutus extended his concern with the oppressive conditions of his homeland to a universal scale and assumed the role of spokesperson for all suffering people.

‘At a funeral’ is a poem of two stanzas consisting of twelve loosely rhymed lines. The poem is about a woman called Valencia Majombozi, an African woman who managed to qualify as a doctor after enormous hardship and sacrifice by her parents. She was brought up by her mother who took in washing and ironing, did the cleansing of apartment buildings and put her through University. She got her medical degree and then, by an unpredictable irony, just after Valencia had completed her internship, she died. We are told that Brutus had gone to Mojombozi’s funeral. The poem is about the years of sacrifice that end in nothing. The poem is an expression of frustrated and aborted hopes, and the ‘voice of the voiceless’.

However, Valencia Majombozi has become a symbol of the predicament of the Blacks as a whole in South Africa. Eighty percent of the people are voiceless, voteless, generally deprived of education. Their lives are controlled not so much by the police and the army, though those are there all the time, but the lives of Blacks in South Africa are controlled more by a “convention” - something which people agree on. This is a curious thing called a “Pass Book”, which every Black must carry from the age of 16, which controls their movement, and even determines where they will be buried when they die. Their life is segregated all the way through. All things that belonged to their caste have been subverted.

It is a poem in which Brutus tries to put forward a whole series of things all at the same time. He is trying to pack things from all corners as much as he can. Brutus had written this poem at a time when he was reading a lot of two of his favourite poets, Gerald Manley Hopkins and John Donne. There is a concealed political statement as well as the overt comments on a particular woman’s funeral in this poem.

The poem operates on a political level. The resistance movement in South Africa has its own flag, as opposed to the State flag; the resistance movement’s flag is black, green and gold –

“Black, green and gold at sunset: peasantry?”

The choice of these colours at the beginning of the poem is not an accident but Brutus had deliberately chosen to use them so. The colleagues of this doctor had attended her funeral wearing their university robes’ these were ‘black caps’ and gowns, but often with a gold hood indicating an art degree, green indicating a science degree; there is also a combination of black, green and gold. So, literally, there is an academic level of symbolism.

There were nurses from the hospital. In South Africa, the nurses wore cloaks which are lined with bright red – the “red-wine”. Some were white, which echo the nuns in their habits –

“In bride’s white, nun’s white veils”

And away back behind the hill in the cemetery on the edge of the ghetto there is a Boy Scout with a trumpet, blowing the last post, “the bugled dinging”.

In the later part of the poem, Brutus talks of “carrion books of birth” saying that the life of the Black begins as a kind of death. From the movement of birth, the people in South Africa are given this ‘Pass Book’ so that they cease to be a human being from the point of birth. They are devoured. They become carrion, dead-flesh. And this of course lies in with the notion of abortion. It is helpful to know that symbol of “death’s head tyranny”. The Nazis are regarded as great heroes by the South African regime, and people imitate them, the Nazis are the model for how one should behave of one is a white in South Africa.

The poet further says that it is not the physical event of ‘Death’ which destroys the Blacks; their destruction does not come from physical Death, which the poet capitalizes but from a tyranny which is associated with the ‘death’s head’. The poet says that it is the Nazi system in South Africa which destroys people; they are destroyed even before they die.

Brutus gives his readers a liberty of how his readers could look at the poem simply as a description or an elegy of a particular person, or see it operating at another level; as a poem which makes a political statement.

In the last concluding lines of the poem, the poet is anticipating prison, he anticipates the “narrow cells”, assumes that in resistance to the system it is necessary to go to prison. Then he finally concludes by saying –

“Better that we should die, than that we should lie down”

The apartheid system in South Africa made the Blacks' kids to learn three things: one, that God made them black, two, their blackness and consequent inferiority must be accepted as God's will, and three, they have to be happy in their acceptance of their natural inferiority. Perhaps, that is the most dangerous of them all; that they should only know that they are black and inferior, and that God made them that way and they should like it. This was the fate of the people surviving there.

There is a self-criticism made to the poem by Brutus. He says that,

“South Africa is a landscape in which the people cannot escape the politics. Wordsworth could not escape writing about Grassmore Royal Mount; Eliot could not escape writing about the urban images of the cities. It seems to me that I too have to deal with my landscape and that is my kind of landscape.”

‘A Simple Lust’ sums up what this poetry is about. He used to be baffled in South Africa when he saw people in the resistance movement who endured much more than he did. Brutus further says that it must be absolutely basic for a human being to be free; it is part of our psyche, our nature. It is as elemental as the need to breathe or to eat or to sleep, to excrete, or to make love. Freedom is an appetite, a lust which we have.

Conclusion:

Many critics have agreed his view and had supported his view. As Colin Gardner opined that “Brutus’ poetry has found forms and foundation which dramatize an important part of the agony of South Africa and contemporary humanity” while others like Frank M Chipasula has accused him of having lacked “power and craftsmanship” in his poetry, which is because of the pressure of political activity Brutus has borne to his mind. Ojaide Tanure has described Brutus’s characteristic personality as, “a troubadour who fights for the loved one against injustice and infidelity in his society.” Though Brutus has been accused by many critics, he still remains as one of the greatest writers of the 21st century New Literature

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