

## Racial Discrimination in Dennis Brutus's Poem Letters to Martha

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The present paper focuses on Racial Discrimination in Dennis Brutus's Poem Letters to Martha. Dennis Brutus is a South African poet. His poetry is the proof of the fact that the artist in him has always functioned in African society and as the voice of vision in his own times. Dennis Brutus was in exile. He was arrested, imprisoned and shot while trying to escape from South African police. He had an active political life. He was the president of the South African Non-Racial Olympic committee. He wrote about what he had seen around him. He wrote about racial discrimination, apartheid regime and white supremacy in South Africa. He fought for freedom, justice and peace in South Africa. His poetry is a direct response to a horrible socio-political situation. Every page of his poetry bristles with images of searing pain, spilling blood, contorting hearts or wracking nerves, His poetry shocks, stimulates, agitates, educates and activates us about the South African society and South African reality. His voice is the voice of the people. His poetry is a socio-political discourse of the South African situation.

Dennis Brutus's **A Simple Lust** was first published by Heineman Educational Books in 1973. It's Part I contains Sirens, Knuckles, Books and Other Early Poems. And part II consists of **Letters to Martha**. This second section includes early poems, poems about prison, poems written while arrest and into exile Dennis Brutus fights with fear of the coloured South Africans about the whites in his poetry. His understanding of 'the anonymous powers of fear and its corrosive action makes it easier for him to forgive treacherous and indifferent South African blacks. In **Letters to Martha**, there are eighteen letters along with **Early Poems**, 'Poems about prison' and 'Postscripts'. The first letter is about the fear of the inmates in prison. Even in prison the inmates are full of apprehensions that arise from

The load of approaching days

Apprehension-

The hints of brutality

After the sentence, there is a feeling of fear and the prisons are appalled to see the nails and screws of steel. They are filled with 'the steel-bright horror' to

see the knives in the morning air.

In the third letter to Martha was desire, Brutus wonders about the reason for a warder's unmotivated senseless brutality of stabbing 'this man for that man'. The poet raises a question whether it was 'desire for prestige or lust for power?' The reader is not surprised because there is little or no value placed on the lives of people especially black people.

Arrests and imprisonments are the most tragic aspects of South African reality. Men and women are arrested for flimsy reasons, given unjust trials under discriminatory laws and committed to prison. Here in prison, human beings undergo untold human degradation, deprivation and hardship. The whole of **Letters to Martha**, is a sequence in the poetry which is addressed to Brutus's sister-in-law and is devoted to life in prison. In prison one goes through mental agonies over unfulfilled hopes. Welfare of loved ones and fears of death. Dennis Brutus dwells on this in the third letter in which he writes that

Suddenly one is tangled  
in a mesh of possibilities  
nations cobweb around your head.

Perhaps one of those notions is the thought to adhere to religion and pietistic practices for who knows whether it 'can purchase favours' from the guards or at least become 'a way of suggesting reformation' which can procure promotion. Moreover, it is 'the resort of the week/to invoke divine revenge/against rampaging injustice. Letter four ends with

It is not uncommon  
to find oneself talking to God.

In the fifth letter to Martha, Brutus talks of wraiths and whispers of horrors of people and coprophilism, necrophilism, fellatio, pennies-amputation, suicide and self-damnation in the gibbering society of South Africa. In the sixth letter to Martha, the prison men are so driven by desire that great becomes 'the pressure to enforce sodomy.' There were two men in particular. For both there was danger, fear and pain in prison. One gave up smoking and hedged his mind with romantic fantasies of beautiful marriageable daughters. Meanwhile, the other suffered from fainting fits and asthmas and finally fled into insanity.

In the Seventh letter, perhaps most terrible are those who beg for sexual assault. To them it is 'preferable even desirable'. But it is a pathetic predicament for all prisoners. The poet gives a particular example of a youthful boy in letter number eight. He is called 'Blue champagne', the most popular 'girl', in the prison. He would sleep with several men each night. So the popular song on the hit-parade became his nickname. In old age, he had become the most perverse among the perverted. This 'man' in the homosexual embrace had once been the 'woman'. Other people find other ways of escape from the realities of prison life. Not knowing is the worst part of the agony for the outside people. The prisoners have to endure cruelties and indignities.

Dennis Brutus has randomly picked up these fragments from the landscape of his own personal experience. However, Brutus says that in spite of terror and deprivation in prison, there should be mutual understanding with fellow-men, fellows and compeers. All things affect the pace of political development. The warders should give the prisoners liberty and freedom. But they show callousness and a savage ruthlessness and shout.

“Destroy! Destroy!”

or

“Let them die in thousands!”

Equally noteworthy is the fact that while in prison, deprivation makes one find excitement in banalities. They gain prominence in the prisoner’s perception. In letter twelve, nothing was sadder than the deadly lack of music. In the cosy days of ‘awaiting trial’ the prisoner’s need for music is intensely felt. But the ban on singing and whistling is worst. Brutus says that they were simply prisoners of a system they had fought and still opposed. Extrapolation is the essential secret of their nature. Their capacity to ennoble or pervert is simply animal, amoral and instinctual. Their ‘animal destiny’ gives them the potential for the diabolic or divinity. One reaches a stage when one resolves to embrace the status of a prisoner with all its entails. He faces bitterness and does not want escape. His fate is

“Mister,

This is prison, just get used to the ideas”

“You’ve a convict now”

This is poignant acceptance once made and remain deep now. In letter seventeenth, Brutus regales in the movement of clouds and birds. In prison, clouds assume importance and the birds enjoy absolute freedom. The complex aeronautics become matters for intrigued speculation and wonderment. The graceful unimpeded motion of clouds- a kind of music, poetry, dance sends delicate rhythms terming through the flesh and fantasies course easily through the mind:

Where are they going

where will they dissolve

will be seen by those at home and whom will they delight?

In letter number eighteenth, the poet describes the prisoner’s attempt to watch the stars at midnight. One night due to an impulse of loneliness, the prisoner thrust his arm through the bars and came to the corridor and plunged his cell in darkness. He went near the window and saw the splashes of light where the stars flowered. He was delighted to see the glittering of the stars. Very soon the warder barked a warning from the machine gun post. He inquired and threatened the prisoner. The prisoner remembers that night rather than the stars.

To conclude, Pearson Education Limited, it must be accepted that the poetry in **Letters to Martha** is prosaic. Yet it reveals the mental and physical agony of the poet. It highlights a trend whereby form and content become the end results of mood and sensibility of the poet. . In **Letters to Martha** Brutus recounted his

prison experiences through a series of letters. These letters are addressed to his sister-in-law. These poems described deprivation and fear of prison life. These poems were praised for their objectivity and lucidity. Dennis Brutus has used simple idioms in them, so they are more accessible to the average reader.

**References**

1. Brutus, Dennis. Letters to Martha & Other Poems from a South African Prison, Heinemann, 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1969.
2. Brutus, Dennis. A Simple Lust, Pearson Education Limited, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1973.

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