

Chapter - II

From **Protest** to **Prison**

This chapter tracks Brutus' protest in South Africa – where opposition of any kind was traitorous – and his collision with the apartheid system that led him directly to the South African prison. The chosen poems focus on Brutus' excruciating prison experiences at the old Fort prison, at Leeuwkop prison and finally at Robben Island. The selected poems underscore Brutus' physical and mental turmoil, the prison conditions, the sense of alienation, loneliness, the servile labour endured, the punishment doled out to the prison-inmates, the violence and hostility practised in the prison setting, along with the efforts exerted to cling on to a measure of dignity and respect. Brutus' poems also accentuate the hurricane of afflictions endured and conquered by his resilient spirit that saw him through the rigours of imprisonment. The bars of prison just steeled him into a stalwart of hope.

The roots of contemporary prison writing lie in the pre-colonial and colonial period. The earliest text dealing with conditions in South African prisons under apartheid is Henry Nxumalo's account in "Mr. Drum goes to Gaol". Prison writing stemming from this era appears in many genres. Ruth First's autobiography **117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety Day Detention Law** (1965) tells of her own detention without trial. Michael Dingake's "My Fight against Apartheid" (1982) describes his fifteen years as a political prisoner in Robben Island. Nelson Mandela's "Long

Walk to Freedom” (1994) expresses throughout a sense of communal striving towards the goal of political freedom. Mandela’s observation was that no one truly knows a nation without having been inside its jail. His comment that imprisoned African citizens were treated ‘like animals’ is a damning reflection of South Africa under apartheid. Nkosi describes imprisonment as the result of a loving relationship between a black man and a white woman in his “Mating Birds”.

In the turbulent South African society, imprisonment of political opponents has until recently been a characteristic punitive measure. It has led to the development of literature dealing with the experience of solitary confinement, torture, detention and long term imprisonment. Literary writings about prison life from 1960 to 1995 reveal the intense political polarization under apartheid. In this literature, Robben Island features as a central symbol of political oppression and incarceration and Robben island texts form a subgenre, in some ways comparable to Holocaust writings.

The Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the ensuing state of emergency goaded Brutus into active participation in resistance against the apartheid regime. Brutus briefly worked with Mandela on the National Convention, and then housed him at his Shell Street home in Port Elizabeth. The ANC after the Sharpeville disaster went from passive resistance to armed struggle with the formation of the Umkhonto we Sizwe , meaning "Spear of the Nation". The government arrested many major leaders of the ANC including Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and

Ahmed Kathrada. They were detained and indicted with sabotage and attempting to bring down the government. They were then sentenced to prison in Robben Island. Some ANC members, including Oliver Tambo, resisted capture and escaped South Africa to pursue the ANC's interests from beyond the country's boundaries.

Brutus confronted apartheid in Sports, education and housing. While at Fort Hare, Brutus observed that black athletes were kept off the South African Olympic team because of their colour. The Olympic Charter made it illegal for any participating country to discriminate on the grounds of race. Brutus realised that the facts of apartheid in South Africa were in contradiction with the Olympic governing rules and actively worked for its expulsion from the Olympic Games. Brutus challenged apartheid in education because there was black education, white education and brown education and each one was different. Brutus was banned from teaching as the government decided that he was a dangerous person and “unfit to teach young minds” (PP, 27).

The apartheid government passed a law that all cities belonged to the whites only. Non-whites living in cities were called “black spots” and their houses were bulldozed flat and the blacks were forced to leave the cities. Brutus was of the view that South Africa had inherited the blatant racism from Nazi Germany. Brutus protested against the prevailing injustices and determined to contribute towards the cause of social justice.

In the poem “Sharpeville”, Brutus tells his country man to remember the event at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960, as “bullet-in-the-back day”, as the unarmed protestors were shot in the back as they fled from the police encounter:

Remember Sharpeville

Remember bullet-in-the-back day . . . (SH, 89)

The white race’s dominance and “will to oppress” was a gory demonstration. It “epitomized oppression” that “apartheid declares with snarling guns”. Nevertheless, the Black’s clamour for freedom could not be silenced. “Sharpeville” ignited the living to remember the dead and continue in the pursuit of freedom. He insists:

And remember the unquenchable will for freedom

Remember the dead

and be glad (SH, 89)

Brutus was glad for the message that the obvious hatred of the incident tells the world, namely, the obstinate yearning for freedom from apartheid domination.

Along with the ANC, Brutus went underground. Regrettably, he got a letter from the Minister of Justice, ordering him to resign from all organizations – sports, politics and even church organizations. He was banned in October 1961, under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was forbidden to teach, write and publish in South Africa because of his protest activities. It was illegal for him to belong to any organization.

Brutus suggested to the South African Sports Association(SASA) to form the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC) as racism was part of the South African Olympic Team. Brutus was elected as SANROC's honorary president. His election served as a means of getting around the banning order so that under the garb of an honorary post, he could continue to link with sports activities. Brutus was first arrested by the secret police and charged with the crime of contravening a banning order. He had helped to arrange a meeting at the South African Olympic Committee offices, and was accused of being in the meeting. He was released on bail, on condition that he would sign the police station register daily and was disallowed to travel to Johannesburg.

The Indefinite Detention Act of the government jailed anyone for 180 days and then on release re-arrested and jailed him for another 180 days. Many members of the Communist party got out of the country fearing the law and the prevailing harsh conditions. Brutus was also strongly urged by friends to leave the country. Brutus decided to flee from South Africa. He signed at the police station on a Sunday morning and planned to get to a meeting of the International Olympic Committee at Baden-Baden and to present the SANROC case. He went to Mozambique, then a colony of Portugal and planned to fly from Lourenco Marques, now Maputo. He had a ticket ready to board a plane from there. Unfortunately, the Portuguese secret police arrested him. He was interrogated and sent back to Johannesburg.

In Swaziland, Brutus had read reports that people in Soweto were celebrating his escape. In order to let the people know that he was back in the country, he pretended to limp as if struggling to carry his suitcase. He took a crouching position and sprinted into the crowd and figured that the police shooting him in a crowd would be risky. He thought he'd shaken off the police and made the mistake of doubling back on his tracks to seek shelter in a little Indian restaurant, where he knew folks who would hide him, as they were part of the resistance. As he rounded the corner, he ran into the pursuing officer who instantly shot him. Brutus recalls the day of his capture in the poem, "September 17, 1963":

Dawn on the 17th, ice-blue, ice-clear:
 I gird for challenge, explore escape
 barbed wire enters my skin
 in unknown streets guns wait:
 such a day, such a journey
 such adventure, such resolve:
 I gird for challenge, fresh challenge. (LD, 42)

The challenge of flight from the police girded Brutus' determination and equipped him to encounter a series of fresh challenges that lay ahead. He ended up in hospital and then was kept in a single cell in the Fort. Brutus remembered the grim day he was sentenced – 8 January 1964 – when along with other convicted prisoners he was taken to the Fort prison, stripped and dressed in prison uniform and barefoot for the first time. His poetry registers his thoughts and feelings of

self-pity which accompanied him after he received the sentence:

After the sentence
mingled feelings:
sick relief,
the load of the approaching days
apprehension –
the hints of brutality
have a depth of personal meaning; . . . (LM, 2)

Fear of the hitherto unknown path had to be traversed with trepidation. Brutus partially knew what he would have to endure in prison. He drew sustenance from the fact that there were others “who endure much more / and endure . . .” (LM, 2) and was encouraged to view his period of incarceration as “exultation”, a “sense of challenge” and “vague heroism” (LM, 2) .

At the Fort Prison, Brutus recalls that he was kept in the cell in which Mahatma Gandhi had been kept. Brutus grew up among South African people of Indian ancestry and worked with Indians before leaving South Africa. Though bitter and angry against the restrictions imposed on him, his anger was not paramount as Brutus was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of Satyagraha and his faith in the ability to change the world by one’s own moral strength and conviction. His poem that bears the title, “A Special Cell” fondly remembers Gandhi. Brutus writes of the benign and hovering shadow of Mahatma Gandhi who was “urging always extra effort / extra willingness to endure.” (LD, 13)

The pain and discomfort felt as he walked to the section of convicted prisoners is touchingly narrated by Brutus. He was mortified as he was eyed by guards who contemptuously looked down upon him as a prisoner awaiting trial and then as a sentenced convict. Brutus assumed that as his sentence was of eighteen months duration, he would serve out his sentence at the Fort. He was shocked to hear that he was transferred to Leeuwkop. A prison-mate had told Brutus of the indignity to which prisoners were subjected to, in Leeuwkop. Political prisoners were classified as “D Group”. They were stripped naked, facing the wall with their palms stretched above and their legs apart. A warder inserted his fingers into their anus, allegedly in search of hidden money or tobacco or marijuana or weapons. As he was warned of the prison conditions, Brutus prepared himself for the humiliating experience.

At Leeuwkop prison, the prisoners were ordered to run in an aimless circular motion in the prison courtyard, while they were beaten by the white and black warders. Brutus was looked at with astonishment and disgust as he was already famed as “the notorious Brutus”, from the information garnered from the press reports. He underwent the degrading procedure of standing against the wall and felt someone rummage into his anus. Batons, straps of leather or fists were engaged time and again to beat up the prisoners for no cause or reason. Punishment for prisoners was arbitrary. When the prisoners spoke in low voices inside the cell, the guard would knock and shout “threemeals” which meant that they had to forego food the entire day.

Brutus describes himself as a miserable and disconsolate figure. He was a sight to be pitied as he sat against a wall, with skinny and cold shanks, cold feet, torn khaki shirt and pants, as he ate porridge with his fingers in the cold, pale blue dawn. He found that the cells at Leeuwkop were large and airy. He observed that there was intense surveillance by the guards that patrolled the catwalk that ran the entire length of the building. Brutus found immense relief from the monotony of the cell by counting the differently coloured bricks of varied subtle changes in colour – red, orange, ochre, and blue, green, black - on the wall. He used the bricks as images of the days, weeks and months of his sentence as he checked off each day in his mental calendar.

Unexpectedly, Brutus' imprisonment in Leeuwkop proved to be a curiously rewarding experience, as the prisoners took up different responsibilities which they called ministries. The ministry of health worked to keep the cell clean. The ministry of justice ruled on behaviour and discipline. Brutus functioned as a kind of minister of culture. At dusk, it was his role as part of the entertainment team to tell stories. When prisoners clustered together, they were usually suspected of plotting and escape or discussing political matters. Yet, they huddled together close to the wall, to ward off detection and Brutus narrated Shakespeare's Hamlet and Sophocles' Oedipus. He developed the notion of challenge to authority from the stories he narrated. He elaborated the implied Oedipus complex in Hamlet and its explicit articulation in Sophocles' play. Brutus took five days to narrate the story of Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, which he treated as an exciting

detective story to his fellow prisoners, thereby relieving the tedium of the prison environment.

Brutus' past role as a teacher and the present role of an entertaining fellow prisoner, kept the prisoners engrossed in imaginary worlds of different characters. There were some prisoners who had never seen the sea. Brutus had the humbling experience of finding how inadequate language was in describing the sea to those who had never seen it. He taught the prisoners to play draughts (checkers) with a homemade board drawn on the surface of the cell with a piece of tar, rubbing black lines, then taking little bits of tar and rolling them into balls to play. Looking back, Brutus wondered if he had dominated the cell too much.

It took some time for Brutus to learn that any sign of behaviour that showed normalcy with the outside world was strictly prohibited in prison. Everyday, the prisoners were ordered to run from their cells and were beaten en route to the food line. The prisoners had to be adept in catching the plates that were thrown at them by the guards. If a prisoner missed catching the plate, he was punished without food throughout the day. Sometimes, the meagre food fell off the plates as they ran at high speed both ways. When Brutus met political prisoners of the ANC group, he winked at one of them as a sign of commonality. Immediately, a guard stopped Brutus and deprived him of his porridge. He was roughly told that winking was not permitted at Leeuwkop.

It was a kind of camaraderie that Brutus tried to express when he smiled as a sign of greeting another prisoner but again he had to forego his food and was

forbidden to smile. Brutus' forced acceptance of prison life could not blot out his love for music. He acutely felt the absence of music in prison:

Nothing was sadder
there was no more saddening want
than the deadly lack
of music. . . (LM, 13)

Music was the deprivation and the need that he felt the most. The lack of music was almost a starvation that had to be appeased at all cost:

After sentence,
in the rasping convict days
it grew to a hunger
- the bans on singing, whistling
and unappreciative ears
made it worse. . . (LM, 13)

Brutus soon discovered that by whistling snatches of well-known classical tunes, he was able to attract a similar feeling and response from other detainees. This surreptitious means was compensation for the deprivation of music.

The prisoners were held incommunicado but this did not deter them from devising a means to rise above the barrier of communication. They contrived a method of communicating through the toilet basins as they were linked by pipes to the adjoining cells. By scooping out the water, they shouted down the hole in the base of the toilet basin and heard messages back as well. The pipes acted as reasonably good conductors of sound. Thus they were able to hear each other and also send messages of encouragement and even ideas of protest against the denial

of facilities to wash, the denial of clean clothes and of exercise. This served to build solidarity among the prisoners.

Brutus was not keen on exercise as he was not wholly recovered from the effects of his bullet injury. Nevertheless, when he was deputed by his fellow-prisoners and requested for exercise, the prison authorities retorted with vengeance. The guards made them run in circles and they were beaten until they dropped. Running turned out to be a test of endurance while the guards drove them past the point of endurance. Brutus suffered pain and discomfort from his bullet-injury but the guards paid no heed to him. He was compelled to run while being beaten and he literally dropped from exhaustion. Brutus demanded to see the prison doctor and explicated his predicament. The doctor examined him and cynically remarked that Brutus ought to be grateful for the exercise, as he had wanted blacks in the South African Olympic Team. Luckily, Brutus was not required to run thereafter, as the doctor had given some kind of instruction to the prison guards. Brutus highlights the efforts to overcome the obstacles that beset the path of the prisoner rather than becoming objects of pity. His stay at Leeuwkop prepared Brutus for the more violent and inhumane reality of Robben Island.

The prisoners were suddenly moved out of Leeuwkop prison to Robben Island. Early in the morning, the prisoners were ordered out of their cells and stripped. They were issued new uniforms, manacled in pairs and herded like animals into a prison truck. They were chained at the wrists and the ankles. When journeying from Leeuwkop prison, they were handcuffed together and lurched

against each other, elbows, knees bumping into each other. In spite of the physical discomfort, the prisoners listened intently as Brutus retold the story of Gone with the Wind.

Brutus remarks that he had no idea that his destination was to be Robben Island. It was supposed that as early as 1525, a Portuguese ship had left prisoners on the island. Robben Island became a place where impurities could be contained and punished. Not just perceived impurities with regards to race, but impurities to certain ideologies and beliefs. The culmination of the containment of unwanted elements was between 1961 and 1991, during which, over 3,000 black male activists were imprisoned on the island because of their resistance to the apartheid system. The history of Robben Island suggests that it largely represents the banishing of Black political leaders from South Africa. Those sent to the island were usually different from their oppressors – generally because they confronted their oppressors with values that were different to their own.

In 1964, Nelson Mandela began his eighteen year imprisonment on the island. Mandela's attitude towards prison, during his incarceration, was that it was a microcosm of the struggle as a whole. They decided to fight inside as they had fought outside except that it was on different terms. Prison authorities went to great lengths to ensure that political prisoners were confronted with a loss of personal control, disorientation and isolation, arbitrary punishments and discriminatory regulations. Although there were generational and political tensions, the Robben Islanders were able to form personal and political ties, both

among themselves and between their different political organizations. They turned the maximum-security prison into a university of the anti-apartheid struggle.

The images and thoughts of Robben Island terrified Brutus as it signified apartheid's concentration camp. He had the premonition that if he went there, he would never return alive. On his way to Robben Island, he was put in a cell at Colesberg, a small prison in the Northern Cape. Brutus remembers eating porridge under the stars of the Southern Cross sky which had a consoling influence on him. In desperate times, he looked up to the stars and if he could find them, somehow the stars' influence on him made him to endure the present inexplicable situation.

In the untitled poem, beginning with the line "Cold", Brutus works through the juxtaposition of a series of images: a "grizzled senior warder" who considered the prisoners "Things", that "they are worse than rats; / you can only shoot them;" the "large frosty glitter of the stars" compared to "the chains on our ankles / and wrists "that also "jingle / glitter ..." like the stars. (LM, 48-49) The stars "flowering low", glimmered hope and sustained him with the power of endurance.

At the Cape Town docks, the area was cordoned off and heavily guarded. Robben Island was surrounded by barbed wire, searchlights and guns. The prisoners' boat was tied up at the quay which was some distance from the landing. The prisoners were required to jump from the land to the boat. This jump was difficult as the boat was heaving and swaying on the tide. They were handcuffed and manacled together at the wrists and ankles and were expected to jump in pairs from the land to the boat tied at the quay. If they missed the jump or lost their

footing, they would fall into the sea between the land and the boat. Brutus remembers murmuring to the prisoner chained to him that he would count three, and that they would jump at three. Thus they made a safe landing and were herded on to the island.

On the quay, waiting for his turn to jump, Brutus looked around at what he could see of Cape Town and the docks. Crammed with a sick feeling, he quoted to himself lines from a poem, “Look your last on all things lovely,” murmuring lines half wryly from Lawrence G. Green’s “At Daybreak for the Isle”, which was a popular book about seafaring in the islands off the South African coast. These lines were subsequently woven into his untitled poem:

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

So one grits to the burden
and resolves to doggedly endure
the outrages of prison. . . . (LM, 14)

Brutus displayed a naïve and simple-minded courage as an indication of rejection of the animal-like behaviour demanded by the guards which he was not prepared to give. He marched with dignity though the guards threatened and shouted and cuffed him. He headed the line of prisoners and refused to run. As he

continued to walk, those prisoners lined behind him, even if they wished to run, could not run. So, they also walked behind him in line.

Nature's unique colours were a feast to Brutus' eyes on the dawn of his first day at the island. He watched with relish the morning sky turn orange and saffron, and brilliant vermillion, against pale green like green ripening apples. He was not aware then of the hard labour that would be forcefully extracted from him. The prisoners were issued clothes and were medically inspected and given new prison cards. Later, they were locked in by a guard who shouted an ominous threat that they were wrong to think that they had come to Robben Island, as they would find out that they had actually come to "Hell Island". The guard was proved right from the very start of their stay there.

On the first day, the prisoners were given an object lesson on what to expect on the island. They were locked in a cell and deliberately made to watch a disciplinary session. George Peake – a coloured prisoner – informed them that Andrew Masondo, a former lecturer in Mathematics at Fort Hare, was one of the ANC political prisoners. Masondo had been consistently ill-treated by the guards. When Masondo protested, the guards tied him to a stake and left him in the sun. He was not permitted to drink water or go to the toilet. As a result, the prisoners in Masondo's squad refused to continue their work. They were marched off to be disciplined, as any kind of solidarity among the prisoners was noted and duly punished.

Brutus witnessed the limitless brutality, the sadism and the malicious glee with which the guards rained blows on the prisoners. The guards were armed with batons and leather straps. “Carry on”, in the language of the guards was equivalent to the army order of “fire at will”, and reserved for jail breaks and riots. This meant that the guards were free to do anything to the prisoners. When the “Carry on” order was given, the prisoners were struck continuously over the head, across the arms, shoulders, and elbows. When Brutus came out of the cell, he saw splashes of bright red blood in contrast to the grey broken flint that formed the gravel of the ground. This bloodthirsty incident served as a warning against any form of rebellion.

Brutus and his fellow prisoners became victims of this gruesome occurrence when they had to carry large rocks from one area and run to dump it in a hole which they were required to fill up. As they ran, they were beaten and tripped and again beaten when they lay on the ground. Brutus saw many fall and get up with their noses bloody and their legs and feet bleeding. At first, Brutus worked energetically and encouraged others, so that their spirits were not broken. But this only attracted the guards’ attention and resulted in more violence and viciousness. When the guards thought that the prisoners did not work sufficiently hard, they were punished without food for a day. Hard work wearied their physical prowess and hunger gnawed their belly as the prisoners went to their stony beds with an empty stomach.

and keep the prisoner under water until he fought for air, as bubbles surfaced in pools where he was being forced to drown:

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
and the bubbles gurgled
and the air glinted dully on lethal gunbutts,
the day was brilliant with the threat of death . . . (SH, 59)

Nature vied with the physical agony and Brutus partook in the sight and sound of the sea, the smell of the brine and the sparkle of the spray in the air and the sight of the low, blue, luminous horizon. These comforting sights were to him the compensation for hard work. Brutus' second assignment was to push a wheelbarrow loaded heavily with rocks. The wheelbarrow wheel sunk into the sand almost to its axle and made it immovable. He had to turn the wheel himself and painfully haul it forward while the guards beat him persistently. Thus, physical torture and distress were a daily routine and Brutus had to exercise his indomitable will to surmount the evil of each day.

The rigours of prison life affected his physique. He was put to work in the prison yard and it was his job to drag some kind of mat back and forth across some area which was to be turned into a football field. He laboured painfully at his tasks. On a physically worn out day, a prisoner wearing boots, added to his woes, with a karate kick in his stomach which caused acute pain. In addition, from the

nape of his neck down to the heels, was a mass of bruises from the repeated blows from the guards. He paints a grim picture of the physically bruised prisoners standing in line at the hospital:

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
but what a bruised and broken motley lot we were! (SH, 60)

It was customary for the guards to strip Brutus so that they could see the bruises that formed a pattern, like a carpet on his body. Suffering and humiliation blended as he was made a spectacle like a tattooed lady in a circus:

For a while I was the tattooed lady of the prison
and warders would come to our section and get me to strip
and stare and whistle in mingled pleasure and horror
at the great purple bruise that ran from my neck down
my back,
from my neck to my thighs in a purple mass . . . (SH, 29)

The reference to Brutus – a male prisoner – as a “female” receives its stimulus out of the powerlessness, helpless, exploitive situations usually accorded to women. However, the “lady” is a “bruised” male prisoner subject to everyone’s stares and whistles. Interestingly, “the tattooed lady” is juxtaposed with “heroic endurer” / Christianly hero / submissive ass?” The speaker, then asks, “What was I then?” He answers by saying that “I . . . cannot now judge?” (SH, 29)

The austere prison conditions trickled out and a Red Cross representative visited Robben Island to investigate the state of affairs. When the Red Cross man questioned the prisoners in the presence of the guards, the prisoners were afraid to speak frankly, for fear that he was a member of the prison administration in plain clothes. Any statement from the prisoners was used against them and they were subsequently punished. When a journalist from a British paper made visits, the prisoners were given the job of mending torn police clothes with needles and thread. The prisoners were duly photographed engrossed in their occupation and the picture was widely printed. After the photograph was taken, they returned to breaking stones. Though the realistic conditions existing within the prison were smuggled out, visits from the outside world obliterated the truth and only gave a semblance of reality.

The cruelty that the poet witnessed and experienced in prison and the inhumane treatment meted out to the prisoners has chained Brutus with the common sufferings of the prisoners all over the world. Brutus remembers an unpleasant episode that involved the Kleinhans brothers who were reputedly among the most sadistic guards on the island. They instructed a prisoner to dig a hole in the land where the prisoner was planting some crops. They ordered him to dig a deep trench and to get down into the trench. Other prisoners were commanded to fill the trench until he was buried into the sand with only his head showing from it. He was told to open his mouth and the guards urinated in his face

and mouth. This gave the guards immense pleasure and amusement while Brutus was a helpless and powerless spectator.

Violent dealings in prison were stealthily and cleverly manipulated. At the prison hospital, Brutus had complained about a prisoner who had kicked him in the stomach. He was escorted from his cell in the hospital to the complaint section by the very prisoner who had assaulted him. He made it clear to Brutus that if he testified against him, then he would proceed to assault him afresh. Brutus was in a quandary and though he could testify to the assault, he was unable and unwilling to identify the guilty prisoner. The same prisoner ushered him back to his cell. Brutus was sent to solitary confinement so that he would not be able to contact other prisoners who could act as witness and confirm the assault.

The knife stabbers' camp housed prisoners who were guilty of assaults and murders in the island. Brutus was allocated to this section for a brief period. He witnessed the sordid brutality and the utter deprivation practised by the prison authorities and the bullying fellow-prisoners. The cruel prisoners and vicious guards delighted in being entertained by the knife-stabbers who clubbed each other with hammers and pick-axes until they were knocked down, literally senseless. Brutus often wondered why one oppressed South African should brutalize another South African. There were questions for which an answer evaded his comprehension:

why did this man stab this man for that man?

what was the nature of the emotion

and how did it grow? . . . (LM, 4)

He speculated whether brutality was a “desire for prestige or lust for power?” and “. . . from what human hunger was it born?” (LM, 4) These quizzical questions wracked his reflective moods. Inmates who had been incarcerated for criminal offences, scavenged for “nails and screws / and other sizable bits of metal”(LM, 3) to shape fatal tools as a means of seeking revenge or power.

The prisoners were constantly removed from one section of the island to another section. Sometimes they were sent to the maximum security section where they were not allowed to work or go out. When Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu along with the others protested, they were permitted to exercise once a day for half an hour. They walked in circles and were not allowed to talk. Once a week they had a shower and had to run through the water that sprouted from a kind of fire hose. At times, the water would be turned off abruptly while they were in the process of a shower. It was here, that for the first time, Brutus indulged in the pleasure of talking to Mandela, Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Mhlaba and the others of the group, at the risk of being caught and punished. The spirit of brotherhood was a joyful fraction of the dismal experience of prison life and Brutus plays down his own suffering and courage:

It is not all terror
and deprivation,
you know;

one comes to welcome the closer contact
 and understanding one achieves
 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. . . (LM.11)

This close contact resulted in refreshing times: “the mind is bright and restful” and “alive”, “rather like the full calm morning sea”. (LM, 11)

The period of breaking stones was in fact a period of immense psychological action rather than external action. Brutus was engaged in his mundane task of breaking stones while the other political prisoners – Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, and Neville Alexander and his group – were sent off each day to work in a limestone quarry where they dug lime out of the earth and returned about in the evening covered with dust. But his deft understatement, while presenting the harsh reality of prison life, makes the message all the more powerful:

And sometimes one mistook
 the weary tramp of feet
 as the men came shuffling from the quarry
 white-dust-filmed and shambling
 for the rain
 that came and drummed and marched away. (LM, 38)

Brutus took sustenance in the fact that none of the political prisoners had been “exposed to rhetoric”, thus making it possible for all of them to see themselves simply as “prisoners / of a system we had fought / and still opposed.” (LM, 15)

The solitary confinement and servility made the prisoners long for visits of ‘loved ones’. Brutus’ sister-in law, Martha, visited him at various times on the island. Once, his wife May came along with their son, Gregory who was a baby in her arms. This brief emotional meeting was marred by the prisoners communicating simultaneously from one side of the fence to their relatives on the other side of the fence. Hence, there was not much of a conversation but a kind of bedlam. Nevertheless, the prisoners longed for the next glimpse of their dear ones despite the lack of audible communication:

On Saturday afternoons we were embalmed in time
 like specimen moths pressed under glass;
 we were immobile in the sunlit afternoon
 waiting;
 Visiting time:
 until suddenly like a book snapped shut
 all possibilities vanished as zero hour passed
 and we knew another week would have to pass. (LM, 39)

“Saturday” was the designated visitor’s day, but often visitors would be permitted on any one Saturday of the month. This kept the prisoners hoping and guessing on the much awaited day.

The common sights of nature assumed an air of importance when a prisoner glimpsed Nature from the prison setting. The most intriguing thought for the prisoner was that perhaps the clouds would be seen by people at home, and they, too, may share with him the clouds' delight:

In prison
 the clouds assume importance
 and the birds

 clichés about the freedom of the birds
 and their absolute freedom from care
 become meaningful

and the graceful unimpeded motion of the clouds
 - a kind of music, poetry, dance –
 sends delicate rhythms tremoring 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? (LM, 18)

The free motion of the clouds across the sky delighted the prisoner and cast over him the veil of homesickness. In a limited day to day experience, the sight of the stars and the freedom of the sea- birds became meaningful:

the complex aeronautics
 of the birds
 and their exuberant acrobatics

become matters for intrigued speculation
and wonderment (LM, 18)

Brutus relates a poignant incident when he violated the prison rules by switching off the light in the corridor, in an attempt to “see the splashes of light / where the stars flowered.” But even as he enjoyed a brief moment of pleasure, he was interrupted:

thudded the anxious boots
and a warning barked
from the machine-gun post
on the catwalk.

And it is the brusque inquiry
and threat
that I remember of that night
rather than the stars. (LM, 19)

“A Letter to Basil” (LM, 23), reveals that Brutus knew the psychology of fear and his knowledge gave him spiritual strength amidst the vicissitudes of his prison life. The oppressors wanted most to instil fear and cowardice into their victims:

How deadly an enemy is fear!
How it seeks out the areas of our vulnerability
and savage us
until we are so rent and battered
and desperate
that we resort to what revolts us

and wallow in the foulest treachery.

To understand the unmanning powers of fear
and its corrosive action
makes it easier to forgive ... (LM, 23)

Brutus learned to forgive those who brutalized him and even pitied the offensive prisoner who could not help being perfidious to his kind out of fear of the authorities. In an ironic but humanistic mood he forgives them for their wrongdoings. It was in a spirit of understanding and forgiveness that Brutus wished to silence the ignorable actions of “the frightened ones / the old fighters / who now shrink from contact”. He felt sad and had no contempt even in the face of betrayal and shame:

But it is best to shutter the mind and heart
eyes, mouth and spirit;
say nothing, feeling nothing and do not let them know
that they have cause for shame. (SL, 75)

Deprived of basic necessities of life, like sex and music, and prevented from watching objects of nature like the stars and the carefree birds, some prisoners took recourse in psychosomatic illness or fantasizing. While at Leeuwkop, Brutus indulged in fantasies of escape, particularly of a helicopter landing in the prison courtyard and whisking them away. Many found peace from their cares in the very private world of the insane. Others moved towards “Coprophilism; necrophilism; fellatio; / penis-amputation ;”(LM, 6). Sodomy was rampant and was the most pathetic of prison’s wretchedness.

Brutus refers to “two men” whom he knew “among many cases”. One of them “gave up smoking” because through the bribe of cigarettes he was forced to commit “sodomy”. While the second one “sought escape / in fainting fits and asthmas” until he “finally fled into insanity: / so great the pressures to enforce sodomy”. (LM, 6) Brutus saw a young boy who was starved into submission, beaten to compel him to submit, beaten until he wept and cried, urinated and messed up his cell. He continued to be starved till the point where he himself begged for sexual assault:

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

.....

But it has seemed to me
one of the most terrible
most rendingly pathetic
of all a prisoner’s predicaments. (LM, 8)

“Blue Champagne”, is a distressing account of a prisoner whom they nicknamed “after the song once popular on the hit parade”. He began his prison life as a youthful, curvy inmate who soon became the “the most popular “girl” in the place;” when he aged in prison, he changed from “the woman” in the homosexual embrace to the “most perverted among / the perverted:” (LM, 9) Brutus believed firmly that one must defy all that is unnatural and evil, but to

survive the brutal prison experience it is essential that the condemned prisoner:

... resolves to embrace
 the status of prisoner
 with all its entails,
 savouring to the full its bitterness
 and seeking to escape nothing:

.....

But the acceptance
 once made
 deep down / remains.” (LM, 17)

Objectivity lends an air of truth and sincerity to Brutus’ narration as he explores the degeneration of the human mind in prison through observing various prisoners and their ways of coping with their terrible status. Brutus was never sexually assaulted but on numerous occasions prisoners expressed a sexual interest in him and threatened to deal with him at a future date. He was fortunate that nothing came out of these intimidations.

Brutus’ defiant nature asserted itself occasionally. Once, Brutus put up a bold front and he walked off from work to the toilet without permission from the guard. He was threatened with punishment for disobedience. Brutus engaged in an offensive discussion with the guard who reminded Brutus that he had brought down the hardships of prison life on himself. Brutus impertinently replied that if he were free, he would be working to imprison the South African Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd, whom he regarded as a criminal. The guard was outraged and reported Brutus for insubordination to the prison authorities.

The South African legal system inflicted corporal punishment and it was predicted that Brutus could be severely lashed for this offence, when tried in prison. The bamboo canes - used on a naked prisoner strapped to a metal triangle – would literally cut out a slice of flesh from the buttocks, leaving a red fleshy pulpy wound and scars for a lifetime. Brutus was faced with the prospect of lashes for having spoken disrespectfully about the prime minister. So, he demanded a lawyer to defend him. The prison administration silenced the incrimination rather than get involved in a lawful hassle which would expose Brutus' charge. This was an instance when Brutus gave vent to his anger and resentment seething within him but he had a narrow escape from the lashes that he feared.

Prison laid traps to ensnare Brutus. Once, a prisoner offered to smuggle letters from and to the prison. Brutus was tempted to somehow forge a link with the outside world. He could make appeals for money or anything else, provided the guard also got a slice of it. Brutus wrote to his friend John Harris and asked him to send some money. Brutus received a letter from John and was also given sweets and cans of beans. This was a very welcome relief from the sterile kind of existence and the unappetizing and almost indelible food in prison. Brutus also contemplated escape.

George Peake gave a timely warning about the deception practised in prison, and the intention to plant “a bomb” – in prison parlance – and that this seemingly helpful gesture by Brutus' fellow prisoner was actually an elaborate trap. Brutus was shocked when he was confronted in prison with a copy of **Sirens**

Knuckles Boots – it was the first time that he was seeing the book in print – and was interrogated whether he was the author. Brutus confirmed the suspicion and was told that he could be charged with the crime of publishing poetry. This was considered a criminal act and Brutus was liable to a sentence of a further three years. Brutus went through a period of agonizing guilt and agonizing attempts to be honest and truthful, no matter what the cost. But he could not, though he genuinely tried, remember the exact date when the manuscript of **Sirens Knuckles Boots** was transmitted. So the charge was eventually dropped. These unexpected events caused a state of tension and drove him to a new phase of near-insanity, hallucination and attempts at suicide. He considered escape but was dissuaded by a priest who visited him at his request. Brutus writes in his poem, “Endurance”:

twice I breathed death’s hot fetid breath
twice I leaned over the chasm, surrendering
till some tiny fibre at the base of my brain
protested in the name of sanity and dragged me
from the precipice of suicide that allured
with its own urgent logic . . . (SS, 12-13)

The mental oscillation between life and death was a wound inflicted and aggravated by the prisoner on himself. This too had to be endured along with the other abnormalities of prison life.

Brutus developed an inner resilience that belonged to the spiritually strong. He was adamant about his rights as a prisoner with relation to religion. Nurtured in a Catholic family, his imprisonment caused a religious deepening. Religion caused

many debates among the prisoners in the cell. Some prisoners were religious and sang hymns in the cell when permitted to do so. The religious sense often asserted itself in the lonely prison cell:

but in the grey silence of the empty afternoons
it is not uncommon
to find oneself talking to God. (LM, 5)

In the poem, “Dear God”, Brutus pleads that he may carry on his fight against the evils of injustice, if not in his homeland, then somewhere else to be ablaze for his righteous cause:

Dear God
get me out of here:
let me go somewhere else
where I can fight the evil
which surrounds me here
and which I am forbidden to fight
- but do not take from me my anger
my indignation at injustice
so that I may continue to burn
to right it or destroy ... (SH, 67)

Prison did not blind Brutus to the harsh realities faced by fellow prisoners. The maximum security section in prison, housed political prisoners. Occasionally, a criminal prisoner would be brought in for extra punishment. Some ran errands and brought food to the cell of the political prisoners. Brutus was surprised to find that the non-political prisoners were matter-of-fact and had a sound understanding

of the legal nature of the South African oppressive system. They were contemptuous of the political prisoners who thought of change by non-violent methods. They were amused at the folly of going to prison for an ideal rather than a bank robbery.

The non-political prisoners, Brutus realized, were victims of another form of injustice that destroyed their human dignity and freedom. The criminals were outlaws and proud of it. They frequently boasted of their exploits outside. They had every reason to be appalled at politicians who were also liable to punish them. Until then, Brutus had only thought of reforms, in terms of legislation which affects racism, equal opportunity, the right to vote and the right to form trade. After his encounter with the non-political prisoners, he thought it necessary to get to the heart of the South African legal system and to aid the transformation of the society, simply in terms of the economic relations, opportunity, the right to function in a society, and work within it, and live comfortably within it. He expected such a deal to elicit support from a large and significant section of society. Brutus was certain that the ANC would be responsive to this notion of his study on justice in South Africa. While enduring the atrocities of prison, Brutus' benevolent nature could still reflect on the plight of the less-fortunate brethren and frame ideas for their well-being.

Brutus' first collection of poetry, **Sirens Knuckles and Boots**, was published in Nigeria, while he was in prison. As his books were banned publication in South Africa, a female friend of Brutus, selected the poems and sent

it to publishers in Nigeria. The title was selected by the publisher. The knuckles and the boots bruised his body in prison and he wore the indelible scars for life. There is no allusion to the Sirens of Greek mythology; rather, the title underscores the wail of emergency vehicles and the attendant human suffering.

Brutus was banned by the South African government from publishing any form of creative writing. So Brutus disguised his poems as letters to his sister-in-law, Martha. Consequently, **Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison** was published after he left South Africa for England in 1966. It records his experiences of misery and loneliness as a political prisoner. It is a memoir providing insights on how Brutus and the other prisoners coped with the cruel apartheid jail conditions. There are eighteen actual letters and six postscripts. Brutus reiterates his reasons for writing the letters. He was:

picking the jagged bits embedded in my mind –
partly to wrench some ease for my own mind.
And partly that some world sometime may know. (LM, 20)

Letters to Martha is an admirable use of the epistle form to show that individual experience contains an element of the communal. The diction is deliberately conversational and devoid of poetic devices. Brutus is transformed from a poet of lingering hope and optimism to one who tempers his vision with the brutal reality of apartheid South Africa. He sends his thoughts and feelings as “fragments”, “random pebbles”, “from the landscape of my own experience”,

(LM, 10) to notify the outside world:

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; . . . (LM, 10)

Brutus' poetry is deeply political, for, he is uncompromisingly opposed to the apartheid regime of South Africa and committed to articulating the feelings of his oppressed countrymen. The sight of the "feathery delicate" seagulls in prison and their "raucous greed and bickering / over a superflux of offal -" was a reminder to Brutus of man's "predatory stupidity" and "ineradicable cruelty". (LM, 21) Brutus survived the numerous hardships which was the lot of the prisoner and matured through contact with so much of hideousness and suffering.

Brutus triumphs over the sadism of the South African government through his humanism, which pleads for imitation by the authorities. His rebellion against the dehumanization of prison was to embarrass the brutal regime through his act of writing and exposing to the world the evils of prison. Brutus' cosmopolitan truth and urbane tones condemn the apartheid regime which emerges by contrast as primitive in its violent suppression.

Brutus' early poems exhibit love for man always, anger when required but above all a suffusing compassion for humanity in all its sufferings. His powerful account of imprisonment in Robben Island details both the horrors of a sadistic

prison regime as well as the efforts by political prisoners to maintain a certain extent of self-esteem and deference.

Courage and humility are intermixed in his poems as he condemns apartheid and describes prison life with objectivity and lucidity. He ponders that as long as others are in jail or suffering, he is himself not free. In his poem “For Fellow Prisoners”, he identifies himself with those still in prison and invites them to send in poems too:

Let us speak together
Let us share our thoughts
remember our common humanity
and voice our resolution:
we will keep strong
we will keep our courage:
a strong flame will burn
deep inside each of us-
a flame of hope, a flame of will;
we will endure. (LD, 30)

Robben Island became internationally known during the apartheid years for its institutional brutality. The prison isolated opponents of apartheid and crushed their morale. Some freedom fighters spent more than a quarter of a century in prison for their beliefs. However, the prisoners on the Island succeeded on a psychological and political level in turning a prison 'hell-hole' into a symbol of freedom and personal liberation. Robben Island symbolizes not only for South

Africa and the African continent, but also for the entire world, the triumph of the human spirit over enormous hardship and adversity.

With democracy in 1994, came calls for closure of the prison. In 1996, the criminal prisoners were removed and the prison was closed. In December 1999, Robben Island became South Africa's first World Heritage Site. Situated a short distance away from the shores of Cape Town, Robben Island has now become one of the world's most powerful symbols of human freedom. Nonetheless, Brutus is haunted by the echoes of the lashes and physical agony endured that remain his lifelong companions as perceived in his poem, "Robben Island Holiday Resort":

Where the bikinied bathers pat
soothing cream into sun-scorched limbs
or scuff swishing through silken sands
some of us will hear the slap of batons
slashed across wincing vulnerable flesh
or the rasp of chains dragged in the dust
by stiff creaking ankles, weary and stubborn (LD, 12)

In the poem "Robben Island", Brutus reminiscences that though the dragged footprints of prisoners had been erased by the wind, there remained in his memory the permanently etched footprints of:

Makana's Mandela's Mbeki's
and a thousand others
who gave their lives
for our people to be free. (LD, 11)

In identifying himself with his people, Brutus is a spokesman, filled with gratitude to his fellow prisoners who had offered their lives on the altar of sacrifice to redeem a lost people.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi gives a critical commentary about Brutus, the prisoner-poet, in **Contemporary Literary Criticism**:

It is obvious from the **Letters to Martha**, that the occasion and experience of prison life that political imprisonment affords have given poetic inspiration to Brutus, as it has to other writers in other parts of the world. His turning his experience into a work of art is as certainly valid as a poet who turns to nature for inspiration. He deals with the nature of man in power, the artist as prisoner, and these are powerful modes of knowing man and his ways. Brutus' writing is artistic rather than overtly propagandistic. He writes to connect his inner life with the outside world and those who love him so that his mind and theirs can be, relatively, at rest. . . That need to connect with posterity, a reason for the enduring, is a genuine artistic feeling. By handling the subject of prison life, mulling over it, and seeing its corrosive effect on both the gaoler and the gaoled, Brutus grapples through it with the existential predicament that man finds himself in. His message, even if ultimately didactic, as most good literature is, is humanistically convincing and artistically enunciated. (94)

Literary activity is primarily aesthetic and to be indulged in leisure and delight. But the African writer, Brutus, finds aesthetic expression in a message of protest which is an outcome of an intense inner turmoil that his birth and

nationality has plunged him in. He has to say what he has to say for mere survival too and for a great cost. Dr. Romanus Egudu opines:

In situations as explosive as that of Africa today, there can be no creative literature that is not in some way political. Even the writer who opts out of the social struggles of his country and tries to create a private world is saying something controversial about the responsibility of the artist to society. (PP, 203)

The Soviet poet Irina Ratushinskaya's poetry collection **Grey is the Color of Hope** describes her seven year prison sentence for expressing 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.' She spent nearly four years in a labour camp south of Moscow together with her female political prisoners. Her book is a chronicle of courage and hope through the hardships of isolation cells, beatings, hunger strikes and the dreariness of prison life. Her story, like that of Brutus is one of hope which empowered her to survive in circumstances designed to strip people of their humanity and reduce them to pitiful peons on the chess board of dominant ideology.

Dennis Brutus' poems "are not images to cheer you," (LM, 20) but a record of hard-won salvage. They are courage-teaching words to get through "the challenge the bullying day thrusts down." (LM, 43) His images of prison remain engraved in memory and shadow him for life. In a recent poem with a date below,

Brutus still relives the days in prison and his obdurate will remains as strong as ever:

I thought I heard the thunder call my name
 but it was only the clash/clank/jar
 of steeldoor on metal frame
 as it shuddered into place,
 echoes of prisons, prison-days
 of exits entrances of prisons
 of gritted teeth, braced shoulders, tautness
 the grey spool unrolling of prison pain;
 well I would do it again - if need be
 do it without regret or grief;
 Indeed, may find the need - and will
 the will to do it again!

7.19.07 (<http://www.geocities.com/joopbersee/db58.html>)

Brutus' nightmarish details of prison life and settings can never be erased but only relived, fortified by a brute will that unflaggingly endures.

Brutus was released from prison in July 1965, after an eighteen-month sentence. When under house arrest, he sent up a prayer that his last energy should be used:

for that one swift inenarrable soar

 hurling myself swordbeaked to lunge
 for lodgement in my life's sun-targe –
 a land and people just and free. (SL, 94)

Brutus left South Africa in 1966, on an exit visa. His decision to leave South Africa was based on “the chance to renew the struggle under new circumstances”. The following chapter will unravel Brutus’ period of exile and his deepened love and longing that he cherished for a land that had disowned him and stigmatized him as an exile.