CHAPTER IV

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION:

DEBBIE GO HOME
Paton's position as the principal of a reformatory for delinquent African boys gives him a chance to have an insight into the criminal world of Johannesburg. In his collection of short stories, Debbie Go Home he explores this world and its inhabitants in a realistic fashion.

In the process of unravelling the stories of the South African juvenile delinquents Paton throws light on various racist Acts, rules, and regulations that speak of the biased, inhuman nature of the racist regime.

South African's problems are there in the streets, in the tens of thousands of Africans going about their city work but not recognized as citizens, in the theatres, hotels and libraries in which the white people may enter but the black people may not in the innumerable laws, prejudices, fears that regulate every move and glance where white and black move together through the city. The problems are alive in the streets and it is there they are debated. The African political movements have always been in open spaces in the townships, and progressive movements in
general have used the City Hall Steps in Johannesburg as their platform.

White and black workers are not supposed to belong to the same union. Mixed unions are forbidden by the law called 'The Industrial Conciliation Act.'

Africans were not allowed to be out in the public streets to enjoy fresh air or to visit their friends after ten O'clock at night without written permission from their employers stipulating how late they permitted them to be out.

The Urban Areas Act forbids Africans in the urban areas from making or brewing beer to their own natural tastes, to drink it or possess it in their homes without the permission of the Municipality under which they live. 'Apartheid' to the black man means that he is a helpless stranger in his own land. He cannot sell his labour at a fair market price he cannot develop skills, above a certain level, he is given no real share in the civilization he sees around him. He is being persecuted for his convictions, he is made to believe that might is right since the white man is
able to exert so much might, he is right. "What kindness he receives is the kindness shown to animals. So when he is allowed to attend the white man's international Rugby matches he cheers the visiting team".

The stories collected in this book are interesting portraits of South African characters which are quite unforgettable and haunting too. In all the stories we find how the South African blacks are victimized by the enforcement of one or the other of the above mentioned acts or rules and also is seen the dehumanizing effect of the racist regime that renders the South African blacks fall below the human level and forget as to how they are supposed to conduct themselves as human beings.

In the title story, Debbie Go Home Janie, a docile child obeying her father in almost every matter is seen to be in panic when she sees her father Jim de Villiers walking up the front path, an hour before his time. Jim sees his daughter being fitted by her mother into a dress of some stuff all shining and silver. She is going to be received by the Administrator and his wife organised by 'The Parkside Mother's Club.' After a noisy argument among the family members she is permitted to attend the function. The story depicts the double game that the whites play with the lives
of the blacks. It focuses on racial conflict and also on 'Industrial Conciliation Act.' It throws light on the treatment given to the blacks by the whites by depicting that the Administrator who talks a lot of nonsense about the brotherhood of men and the sisterhood of women at a public meeting is ready to receive a black girl only through the back door when she comes to his house. The black man is downgraded to such an extent that he begins to associate himself with the have-nots. He does not question why he is regarded as a 'heathen,' why the edifice of white civilization is built on the ruins of fourteen million black lives. Jim, the father loses his job because of the implementation of a new law, "The Industrial Conciliation Act" which says that the Minister can reserve any occupation rendering a number of blacks jobless and thus penniless.

The story, Ha' Penny is an intense study of the psyche of a black orphan boy who dies yearning for affection and love from one's own people.

Ha'penny is a boy about twelve. He is very talkative. He creates an imaginary family picture which says that he had worked in a white person's house and that he had two brothers and sisters. Their names are Richard and Dickie
and Anna and Mina respectively. He is naughty and uncontrollable, moving from one home to another. He starts writing letters to a Mrs. Betty Maarman, of 48 Vlak Street, Bloemfontein. But she never replies to him. The boy is ashamed of being without a family and hence invents all this so that no one may discover that he is fatherless or motherless. When he falls sick, Mrs. Maarman, a decent woman, though she is moved, is too helpless to take the responsibility for the boy. He withdraws himself from the world. The psychology of the children is depicted in the story quite movingly. Being parentless the child feels his life gloomy. Racism is responsible for Mrs. Maarman's hesitation and initial refusal to accept and adopt Ha-Penny for the racist regime poses several problems to those who adopt blacks. The way in which Paton depicts Ha-Penny's slow passage from life to death through anguish and suffering is quite moving and thought provoking.

Another story The Divided House is the story of a boy who keeps returning to the reformatory several times after being released on petty crimes. The title is suggestive of the split self of the boy Jacky. While oneself yearns for reformation and proper and ideal way of living the otherself tempts and drags him into the wrong path. With the racist regime and rules offering him no help or moral support
in achieving or arriving at a true and complete reformation. The boy again and again falls prey to the temptations of the evil ways of the other self, thus preventing him from becoming a holy man inspite of the fact that he very much aims at it.

The child's mentality is clearly described in the story. They are easily to be mended and at the same time they are easily prone to be tempted by evil ways. This story as the others, is an equally realistic, convincing and moving portrayal of a young South African black soul.

**Life for Life**, another short story is an account of the violent death of a whiteman, Flip. His death draws his kith and kin to see him together. They decide not to rest till justice has been done. Maarman, the head shepherd is killed and buried in order to avenge Flip's murder.

The title is suggestive of the motto of the blacks and whites in the racist society of South Africa, where people are condemned to have faith in such primitive and inhuman laws and equations. The inhuman nature, coldness, and the separatist tactics of the racist regime are very much responsible for this situation. Racism fails to cultivate a
spirit of brotherhood among people belonging to different races and colours because it is founded on the very principle of difference. The difference that difference makes prevents them from arriving at universal brotherhood.

Death of a Tsotsi brings forth another problem encountered in the South African society where criminality rules supreme. It is about a young man who once resorted to evil ways in life, but later succeeds in reforming himself and starts living a noble and honest life. But his past keeps haunting him in the form of his former associates, who do not leave him to himself but start interfering with him and try to drag him back to evil ways. When Abraham stands firm and refuses to return to the past life, he is killed.

The story reflects the sad fate of the mothers who have to take care of their children on their own in Johannesburg. In Johannesburg every home has a boy at the reformatory. A decent widow can manage to control the daughter, but not the son. The philosophical words uttered by the author at the sad demise of Abraham are very striking and valuable:

We were all of us, white and black, rich and poor, learned and untutored bowed down by a
knowledge that we lived in the shadow of a great danger and powerless against it. It was no place for a white person to pose in any mantle of power or authority, for this death gave the lie to both of them.

The short story The Worst Thing of His Life, reflects an unhappy incident in the life of Jonkers, the chief executive officer of a reformatory. He calls on the principal to convey the message that his son has been arrested. He is worried about the boy and his job. The principal extends his good offices to help him.

This is a story which depicts the other side of the racist regime with good and humane white people, who try to render genuine help and assistance to the blacks to come out of their misery. It also throws light on the evil side of life in Johannesburg.

The short story The Waste Land is the vision of a devitalized world - a world that is denied or that which has ignored the spiritual life. It presents an age without purpose haunted by fear. It is about a young man, who, coming in the evil company of certain other vagabonds of his
own age, plans in a cold blooded manner to rob his own father and kill if necessary—just for that sake of that month’s pay with which the father would be returning from his work place. The title refers not merely to the external, material wasteland where the action takes place but more appropriately to the internal, the spiritual wasteland that has set in the minds and lives of these blacks. The external impoverished and sterile state robs them of life’s essence and spiritual richness thus prompting them to act in a hopeless and shockingly devitalised manner leaving not even a glimmer of hope for the future.

It correlates with T.S.Eliot’s The Waste Land, which presents the allround crisis in modern society, which throws light into the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary society. Eliot presents an age without purpose, an age haunted by fear.

His story, A Drink in the Passage is an account of the warmth shown towards a blackman by a group of whites. In 1960 the Union of South Africa celebrated its Golden Jubilee. On that occasion a one-thousand pound prize was presented to Edward Simelane, a black man for his finest piece of sculpture, ‘African Mother and Child’ which wins the hearts of the whites too. One night he goes to the Alabaster
Bookshop in Von Brandis street where his sculpture is exhibited. A young white man who used to visit the place every night to have a glimpse of 'African Mother and Child' comes there. He invites Edward to his house without any knowledge regarding his identity. He is given a glass of redwine and biscuits. The white man's wife extends her cordial hospitality to him. Being a black stranger, Edward never expects such treatment.

This story also serves to drive home the fact that all whites are not cruel, biased, and blind to the virtues of the blacks. Even they are capable of being cordial and kind to the blacks.

Sponono is another story that throws light on the trifle crimes committed by the young African children. Sponono is a juvenile delinquent of about sixteen years age. He runs away from the Reformatory with a gold watch. He is captured and sent back to it, where he is allotted the duty of gardening. On one occasion, while the Christmas Day is being celebrated with all pomp and gaiety, Sponono hits Mr. Anderson, a neighbour, who is enjoying a good lunch on the eastern portion of the Reformatory with his wife.
This story puts forward the problems encountered by the principal of the Reformatory (the narrator, in this case) with the juvenile delinquents in general and with Sponono in particular. Though the narrator tries to be very patient with this boy and takes personal care to reform him, Sponono's mischievous and fickle nature never allows him to change his ways. He keeps on repeating trivial crimes and he is equally ready to admit his guilt. The story has an ambivalent ending with Sponono's future course of life left undecided. It is quite in line with the inexplicable and wayward nature of the boy.

The Elephant Shooter is the last story in the book which describes the behaviour of the elephant shooter in the Reformatory. Richard Coetzee who has a great knowledge of all kinds of wild animals comes to the Reformatory in search of a job. Though he is about twenty-five years old, his manners are those of a boy. He gives up elephant shooting because he gets sick of it. He takes to the work of the Reformatory as a duck takes to water. He tells the boys the stories of the wilds. But he has the reputation of being the most irresponsible person. He borrows things like shirts and tennis racquets and forgets about it completely. He gets a permanent job there. Each staff member is provided with a
boy as a domestic servant. As a result, many boys become absconders. The young Coetzee gives the principal an idea that the docile and obedient boys are to be trained, which of course is not a plausible probability.

The story is an interesting portrayal of a black. The elephant shooter exhibits boyish behaviour. He is always upto some kind of mischief such as catching snakes and putting them into his pocket. He is irresponsible and ignorant of his duties at the Reformatory. He takes meat from the mess and gives it to the dogs saying it is unfit for human consumption.

In all the book is a subtle, study of the psychological workings of a number of juvenile delinquents. Alan Paton's Debbie Go Home, first appeared with the title, Tales From a Troubled Land. The stories are ironic, passionate, map out the feel of a beautiful, riven land where white men rule and black men exist. Condemnation of race prejudice is everywhere passionate, even if unspoken. There is a humane understanding behind the way in which Paton tries to explore the psyche of these culprits who have landed up at the Reformatory more because of the defects in the system of apartheid rather than any inborn inclination for crime in
them. The system of apartheid has led to the process of dehumanization - thus denying the blacks any hope to lead their lives as human beings from dehumanization to brutal criminality, it is only a short step. The exactness and restraint of the writing confer strength and authority on Paton's attitude. These stories confirm Paton's reputation as a writer who never has to raise his voice in any effort to convince us of his creative power and his sincerity.
REFERENCES


