

Torture, violence and apartheid in André P. Brink's A Dry White Season

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Abstract

The preoccupation with skin color and other physical qualities of black men to legitimize colonialism and imperialism were of significance in South African history. The implementation of racism, discrimination, and exploitation in South Africa was unprecedented because apartheid was employed to the majority of blacks systematically and institutionally by the colonizer countries. Apartheid régime, as an official policy of the Afrikaner government between 1948 and 1990, created huge disparity and discriminations between the whites and non-whites. Published in 1979, A Dry White Season is André Brink's fifth novel and it presents the enigmatic events that happen to Ben Du Toit and other black characters. The novel is the account of subjugation, illegal detentions, and murders of black people under the custody of the security police during and after of the Soweto uprising in South Africa. Setting his novel within the backdrop of the Soweto riots, Brink chooses a nameless narrator to narrate the turbulent events which reflects the brutality of apartheid during the 1970s and 1980s. Contented with his wife and his three children, Ben is killed mysteriously in a hit and run accident. The mysterious death of the protagonist and the events are narrated by a nameless narrator who was Ben's former university roommate. By disregarding the intimidation and seizures, Ben assumes responsibility to research the illegal detentions and tortures individually. This study explores the issues of torture, state violence, and arbitrary arrests of black peoples during the apartheid years in South Africa.

Keywords: André P. Brink; A Dry White Season; Torture; Apartheid; South Africa

1. Introduction

André Philippus Brink is a prominent contemporary writer from South Africa. As one of the most important Afrikaner dissident writers, he wrote during the chaotic years of the apartheid régime in South Africa. He is the winner of South Africa's most prestigious prize, the CNA Award, three times, and his novels *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and *Rumours of Rain* (1978) have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize twice. Although his literary narrative forms have reflected diversity "from the nouveau roman in the 1950s to magic realism and diverse postmodern techniques in the 1990s (Ayling, 2000)," Brink has constantly engaged in social and political inequalities and chaotic conditions in South Africa, created by the apartheid ideology. Brink (1998) states that "in South Africa all novels, whether so intended by the author or not, are 'political' – because in that country, even as it moves out of the dark night of apartheid toward something new, every action, and utterance, and thought, every book and play and poem and song, carries a political load." (p. 187)

In this respect, by engaging in social and political matters in his works, Brink has not only to depict the cruelties of the apartheid ideology but also to offer solutions for a more liberated and democratic society. Brink is a talented and creative writer both in Afrikaans and in English. His body of works, written both in Afrikaans and in English, includes novels, translations, critical

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essays, and many philosophical works that have made him famous in South Africa and abroad. He had written in Afrikaans language until *Kennis van die aand* was banned. He is among the victims of the machine of censorship under the apartheid government. His *Kennis van die Aand* (1973), later translated as *Looking on Darkness* (1974), was the first banned novel written in Afrikaans. His decision to switch from writing in Afrikaans to English “came about largely as a result of the fact that his next novel, *Kennis van die Aand* (1973) *Looking on Darkness*, was banned in South Africa thereby cutting him off from his only readership, the Afrikaans-speakers with South Africa” (Kossew, 1996, p. 29). Following the banning of *Looking on Darkness*, Brink turned back to the literary scene with his novels, *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and *Rumours of Rain* (1978), which were both shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Brink's fifth novel *Droe wit seisoen* (*A Dry White Season*) was also banned “on September 14, 1979, by, branding its author a ‘malicious writer’” (Karolides, 2006, p. 162). However, the novel “was published secretly by the enterprising Taurus group in Johannesburg, founded after the ban on *Kennis van die aand* in 1978.” (Brink, 1980, p. 24). Brink (1980) expresses that:

this book [*A Dry White Season*] had been regarded as so dangerous, [...] that the head of the Security Police announced that steps against me personally were being considered; it was also regarded as so dangerous that I was not allowed to take copies of it out of the country to Britain where it was being published. (p. 25)

The aim of this study is to explore the issues of torture, violence and arbitrary arrests in André P. Brink's *A Dry White Season*. Considering the apartheid regime and its consequences on the black majority in South Africa, Brink's novel narrates the persistent endeavors of a white Afrikaner protagonist who questions the ethical and moral conceptions of apartheid in South Africa.

2. Torture, violence and apartheid in André P. Brink's *A Dry White Season*

Published in 1979, *A Dry White Season* is André P. Brink's fifth novel and it presents the mysterious events that happen to the white protagonist, Ben Du Toit, and the other black characters. For *A Dry White Season*, Brink “received both the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize in Great Britain and the Prix Médicis Étranger in France” (Ayling, 2000), and the novel was also adapted as a film in 1989. In the novel, the author directly depicts and denounces the matters of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment, and discrimination that were in those years peculiar to the social and political history of the country. In the novel, Ben is an Afrikaner school teacher, and he tries to solve the mysterious events that take place in the subjugation of black people during the State of Emergency in South Africa.

As a white dissident author, Brink has also been exposed to some seizures and informal intimidation but he never gave up denouncing and criticizing inequality, racial discrimination, and apartheid ideology in his novels. Jolly (1996) argues that, Brink “appears to believe that his role as a South African dissident requires him to express a particular kind of political commitment in his fiction [and it] is indicated more generally in the speech he gave on accepting the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize for *A Dry White Season*” (p. 18). In the acceptance speech on receiving the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize, Brink says that “in *A Dry White Season* I have tried to accept that responsibility one owes to one's society and one's time” (Brink, as cited in Kossew, 1996, p. 18).

The Soweto uprising, which was a protest against The Bantu Education Act and forceful implementation of Afrikaans and English as the media of instruction in schools, was influential in the writing of *A Dry White Season*. During the turbulent years of apartheid, many anti-apartheid groups, activists, and intellectuals attempted to denounce and protest the pass laws but were met with censorship, imprisonment, and exile. Steve Biko, the leader of Black Consciousness Movement, was among the victims during the Soweto uprising. He was killed mercilessly under the custody by the members of Security Police in in 1977. In relation to the impact of Steve Biko's murder, Brink states that "an interesting aspect of this novel is that it was begun almost a year before the death in detention of black consciousness leader Steve Biko in 1976. In fact the death came as such a shock to me that for a long time I couldn't go back to writing" (Brink, as cited in Diala, 2002, p. 445). Brink (2010) recounts that while he was writing the novel,

Steve Biko was murdered by the security police. He had been arrested in the small town of Grahamstown where I lived. They had arrested him perhaps a kilometer away from where I lived. It was so traumatic, I stopped writing that book [*A Dry White Season*]. I thought this was obscene [...]. I thought I could not go on writing, and it took several months and speaking to a variety of people before I was persuaded that for that very reason I could not be silent. However terrible and atrocious the experience was, I had to try to bear witness to it almost from the inside, because I felt so close to it. [...] It took quite a while until I accepted what friends had told me: "That is what writing is for. You've got to tell us the story!" (p. 5-6)

A Dry White Season is the narration of a white protagonist who investigates the mysterious death of his black janitor and his son under the custody. Ben Du Toit, the protagonist, questions the obscure events that the blacks are exposed to and his awareness is heightened as he gets gradually involved in the events. By ignoring the intimidation and seizures, Ben assumes responsibility to research the illegal detentions and tortures individually. Ben is a history teacher and he teaches the construction of the great history of Afrikaner nationalism. However, as the events are evolved, he begins to oppose the brutality of the autocratic system, but his individual opposition and quest resulted in his murder "by a member of South Africa's secret police, the Special Branch" (Jolly, 1996, p. 22).

The novel is narrated by a nameless white narrator who was Ben's former university roommate. The protagonist, Ben Du Toit, is "quiet, at peace with the world and himself; and [...] innocent" (Brink, 1979, p. 16). Contented with his wife and his three children, Ben, a fifty-three-year-old Afrikaner, teaches History and Geography classes at a college. The novel is preceded by a Foreword, through which the writer narrator introduces the identity of himself and how he is acquainted with Ben and his family. The novel is narrated by a homodiegetic narrator and the events are narrated through flashbacks since the inception of the events. Just before his tragic death, Ben calls his friend for a hurried meeting. They meet secretly in the back streets of Soweto. Since Ben is being threatened by the members of Security Police, he asks his friend whether he could keep the documents:

"All I want to know is whether I may send you some stuff to keep for me. [...] Look, I'd like to tell you everything that's happened these last months. But I really have no time. Will you help me. [...] Now I want to dump all my stuff on you. You may even turn it into a bloody novel if you choose. [...] I want you keep my notes and journals. And to use them if necessary."

"Of course, I'll keep your stuff for you." (Brink, 1979, pp. 13-4)

Following the secret meeting of Ben and his friend, Ben becomes a victim of a hit and run driver. Although the writer narrator chooses writing “fiction [...] than brute indecent truth” (Brink, 1979, p. 21), he, yet, narrates the story of his friend by gathering the pile of papers, newspaper clippings, and photographs which are sent to him by Ben days before his murder. On receiving the last letter sent by Ben, the narrator realizes his responsibility and necessity of immersing himself in accounting the mysterious events that have happened to Ben. Although he hesitates and has reservations for taking the risk, he is also conscious that he must complete the story of Ben. Near the end of the foreword, the writer-narrator explains that:

I have to immerse myself in it, the way he entered into it on that fatal day. Except that he did not know, and had no way of knowing, what was lying ahead; whereas I am held back by what I already know. What was unfinished to him is complete to me; what was life to him is a story to me; first hand becomes second hand. I must attempt to reconstruct intricate events looming behind cryptic notes; what is illegible or missing I must imagine. What he suggests I must expand: *He says – he thinks – he remembers – he supposes*. [...] This is the burden I must take up, the risk I must run, the challenge I must accept. (Brink, 1979, p. 33)

Gordon Ngubene is a “black cleaner in the school where Ben taught History and Geography to the senior classes” (Brink, 1979, p. 37). Jonathan Ngubene, Gordon’s 17-year-old son, is a student at Ben’s school. Although Jonathan shows good conduct in the first year, he begins to change in the course of the second year. His “attitudes became sullen and truculent and a couple times he was openly cheeky with Ben” (Brink, 1979, p. 39). The disobedience and apathy of Jonathan lead him to become involved in trouble. One day, he is mistakenly arrested in a commotion at a beer-hall. Then, the Soweto uprising erupts and Jonathan is arrested and detained by the police in the riots.

Gordon becomes anxious by the loss of his son and he asks Ben to help him to find his son, Jonathan Ngubene. By assuming responsibility toward his black janitor, Ben begins to search the events that include many conflicting reports and false witnesses in order to conceal Jonathan’s death. He hires a Jewish lawyer, Dan Levinson, and begins to investigate Jonathan’s case through the official channels; however, Ben and Gordon’s exhausting efforts to find the boy are a waste of time. Weeks later, Gordon is informed that Jonathan “has died of natural causes the night before” (Brink, 1979, p. 46).

Torture, violence, and ill-treatment of the detainees permeate throughout the novel. It also clearly narrates the dehumanizing nature of the torture inflicted upon the victims. According to the reports of the Special Branch, Jonathan has never been in detention at all. However, a nameless nurse reports that “ten days ago a black boy of seventeen or eighteen had been admitted to a private ward. His condition seemed to be serious. His head swathed in bandages. His belly bloated. Sometimes one could hear him moaning or screaming. But none of the ordinary staff had been allowed near him” (Brink, 1979, p. 44). Some eye-witnesses account that Jonathan has been detained by the Special Branch during the riots, the officials deny and report that Jonathan “was shot dead on the day of those riots and as nobody came to claim the corpse, he was buried over a month ago” (Brink, 1979, p. 47).

The frivolous reports of the officials do not convince Gordon Ngubene and he “sets out to discover what has really happened to his son and where he is buried” (Jolly, 1996, p. 22). He individually pursues his investigations to find out the mystery behind the death of his son and

comes to the conclusion that "Jonathan had not been killed on the day of riots" (Brink, 1979, p. 50) but had been brutally killed in detention during interrogation. The state-sanctioned violence and ill-treatment of the prisoners were inseparable realities in South Africa during the apartheid years.

In the novel, the depiction of brutal interrogations and torture of detainees recall the inhumane realities of the interrogations held by the Security Police in South Africa during the apartheid years. Jonathan's torture and exploitation under the custody is only the first of a series of brutality and cruelty that the Security Branch employs. Other victims such as Gordon Ngubene, Stanley Makhaya, Johnson Seroke, and Ben Du Toit are also harassed, tortured, and killed by the security police.

While he is acquiring information in relation to the murder of his son, Gordon is also detained by the militia of the Special Branch. They forcefully arrest him and tell his wife that "[you] better say good-bye him. You not going to see him again" (Brink, 1979, p. 53). On hearing the arbitrary arrest of Gordon, Ben believes that his detention is merely a mistake and he will be released soon. Ben visits John Vorster Square in order to persuade the officials that Gordon is not a criminal or a political activist but "an honest, decent man" (Brink, 1979, p. 59). During his visit to John Vorster Square, Ben meets Colonel Viljoen and Captain Stolz. Ben depicts Captain Stolz as follows: "strangely dark eyes for such a pale face. The thin white line of a scar on his cheek. And all of a sudden you know. You'd better memorize the name. Captain Stolz. His presence is not fortuitous. He has a role to play; and you will see him again. You know" (Brink, 1979, p. 60).

Colonel Viljoen and Captain Stolz are introduced as characters who are the advocators of the apartheid system. Like the Afrikaner government officials who generally introduced apartheid ideology as a positive, nondiscriminatory, and humane policy, Captain Stolz supports the system and he does not tolerate any questioning of the status quo and the policy that the Afrikaner National Party adopted in South Africa between 1948 and 1990. During the conversation Captain Stolz points out the positive policy that the government assumes and suggests that "that's what I failed to understand. Look everything the Government's doing for them [black people] and all they can think of in return is to burn down and destroy whatever that can lay their hands on [...]. No white child would behave like that" (Brink, 1979, p. 62).

Like Captain Stolz and Colonel Viljoen, Ben's father-in-law is a supporter of the National Party and the system. He disapproves Ben's efforts to clarify the obscure event that has happened to Gordon. The conversation between Ben's father-in-law and Ben evidently indicates the racist ideology of apartheid system and the perception of the blacks as the 'Other' in their own countries by the minority of whites:

"Are you blaming me for trying to help those people?"

"No, no, of course not. But no member of our family has ever been seen in public with a kaffir woman before, Ben."

"Does that mean you're prepared to sit back and allow an injustice to be done?"

"Injustice?" His face grew purple. "Where is the injustice? I don't see it."

"What happened to Jonathan Ngubene? And how did Gordon die? Why are they doing their best to hush it up?"

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“Ben, Ben, how can you side with the enemies of your people? It's you who started talking about injustice. You, a man who teaches history at school. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, man. Now that we have at last come to power in our own land.”
 “Now we're free to do others what they used to do us?”
 “What are you talking about, Ben?”
 “What would you do if you were a black man in this country today, father?”
 “Don't you realize what the government is doing for the blacks? One of these days the whole bloody of them will be free and independent in their own countries.”
 (Brink, 1979, pp. 210-12)

Like his son, Gordon is murdered at custody but the official reports deny his murder by preparing frivolous postmortem reports in order to ratify Gordon's murder as a natural death. Regarding Gordon's internment as a mistake, Ben hears Gordon's death on the radio: “a detainee in terms of the Terrorism Act, Gordon Ngubene, had been found dead in his cell. According to the spokesman of the Security Police, the man had apparently committed suicide by hanging himself with strips torn from his blanket” (Brink, 1979, p. 76). He desperately visits the funeral home in Soweto. While he is standing beside the coffin of Gordon, Ben decides to take responsibility to explore and investigate Gordon's case:

The coffin stood on the floor. [...] In it lay Gordon, incongruous, ludicrous in a black Sunday suit, hands crossed on his chest like the claws of a bird [...]. Now he had to believe it. Now he'd seen it with his own eyes. But it remained ungraspable. He had to force himself, even as he stood there looking down into the coffin, to accept that this was indeed Gordon. (Brink, 1979, p. 91)

Upon the death of Jonathan and Gordon, Ben pursues his investigations in order to relieve the situation of the oppressed people who are condemned to perpetual suffering by the implementations of the apartheid ideology. However, as Ben's awareness toward the injustices and crimes of the political system becomes more overt, he jeopardizes his status among his family, colleagues, and society. Kossew (1996) suggests that “Ben's contact with the Other increasingly isolates him from the familiar world to which he has belonged – the protected, privileged world of white colonial authority” (p. 101). As the novel progresses, Ben is considered to be a serious challenge and threat to the unity of apartheid policy. He is exposed to several intimidations and coercions by the militia of Security Police. His car's tires are slashed, his phone is tapped, he is blackmailed, and eventually he is killed under suspicious circumstances in a hit-and-run car accident, most probably organized by the men of the Special Branch. The events are exacerbated when his house is rummaged by Captain Stolz's militia. When he returns home, Ben finds a note on his desk that writes “it's like living in an aquarium [...] your every move scrutinized by eyes watching you through glasses and water, surveying even the motion of your gills as you breathe” (Brink, 1979, p. 222). Ben's lonely search for justice to create a politically conscious South African society is interrupted by his murder in a hit-and-run car accident.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Brink wrote his novels during the turbulent times of apartheid. As South African novelist, André Brink witnessed all the cruelty and abuses of the apartheid government, and he felt compelled to give voice to the traumatic history of oppressed people in their country. Ac-

According to Brink "the dissident writer's crucial responsibility is significantly not merely the political liberation of blacks but the redemption of the Afrikaner from the ideology of apartheid" (Brink, as cited in Diala, 2006, p. 92). As a dissident writer and critic, Brink (1996) consistently spoke about the menaces of apartheid and its malicious consequences:

Throughout the apartheid years, whole territories of silence were created by the nature of the power structures that ordered the country and defined the limits of its articulated experience. Some of these silences were deliberately *imposed*, whether by decree or by the operations of censorship and the security police; but in many cases the silences arose because the urgencies of the situation presented priorities among which certain experiences simply did not figure very highly. (p. 21)

Brink's novel clearly reflects the circumstances in the early 1970s during which the horrors of state tyranny were ubiquitous in South African society. Moreover, the depiction of torture and oppression of the blacks in the novel is a realistic picture of South Africa. As Felicity Woods (2007) puts it, "until the late 1980s, André Brink's fiction represented part of the liberal realist tradition in South African literature" (p. 112).

Brink clearly expresses that the social injustice and cruelty perpetuated by the state authority must be questioned and exposed. Brink presents the history decisively in order to clarify the political and social events in apartheid South Africa. By re-assessing the construction of Afrikaner nationalism which was identified with myth-making in the past, Ben Du Toit, as an agent of this history, examines the moral and ethical issues with the attention of an activist. The novel reflects Brink's dissatisfaction with matters in his own country as well as his own personal and philosophical stand against the circumstances. Brink's personal struggle to find his place in society and to offer alternative solutions to the problems of racial separation are materialized in the thoughts and attempts of his fictional protagonist, Ben. In this respect, by pointing out the crucial responsibility of a writer, Brink represents the fidelity of the author to truths in his society.

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