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## POLITICAL INKLINGS OF SOUTH AFRICAN UNREST IN ANDRÉ BRINK'S *THE AMBASSADOR*

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### ABSTRACT:

*Apartheid is South Africa's harsh racial segregation which was established during 1948 to 1990. This period was one of the most barbaric and cruel regimes in human history. South African society underwent many socio-political transformations. Announcement of state of emergency led to racial conflicts and peacelessness in the country. It did not bring stability despite using force in governance. André Brink started writing during apartheid period. His first novel Die Ambassadeur (1963) which was written in Afrikaans and was translated as The Ambassador in English in 1967. A later version was brought out by Brink in 1986. Brink, in The Ambassador, fashioned an imagined tale of suicide by a junior secretary in the South African embassy. The protagonist, the second narrator in this novel, a South African Ambassador in Paris, finds himself in the midst of secret arms dealing in embassy, who has reported furtively to Pretoria to the Paris embassy. This paper studies the political inklings of South African unrest reflected in The Ambassador.*



**KEYWORDS:** apartheid, Politics, dissent, defiance, secrecy, Sestigers.

### INTRODUCTION

Apartheid- it brings about fear, degradation, disgust, anger, untold states of emotions upheaval and a deep sense of alienation. National Party created apartheid state, although, of course, which is rooted in racial segregation. From the year (1948) the National Party came to power until the early 1970s, it propagated apartheid or separate development and achieved racial segregation. James Wilmot states that by the 1980s, however, the National

Party was split, control of policy became weak, and ideology and practice of apartheid approached in coherence. A unified Afrikaner community, the traditional support base of the National Party, no longer existed. (*The State* 5) Throughout the apartheid years, most of the writers were got into the culture of resistance and felt the urge to report a cause aright which was a prime mover in their work was. In the first instance, black writers initiated to articulate their oppression with a goal to promote the solidarity of internal resistance. Many of these writers were not

interested in targeting an international audience: their focus was the local struggle. This state of affairs compounded the irony that during the darkest apartheid years, while the work of a few white writers was avidly read in most Western countries, most of the black writers in South Africa remained unknown abroad. There was certainly a phase in the apartheid years when eyewitness accounts were based on more or less 'realistic' and literature stirred a sense of unity among the oppressed while also consoling those who were passive in the struggle. But within

the changing sociopolitical and cultural context, both inside South Africa and abroad, there are now different expectations of literature. Readers and writers alike have had a surfeit of whatever passed for 'fact'.

André Brink himself has labeled three responses in South African literature to the situation there, divided until recently, he writes, into three "distinct literatures." He classifies these as black indigenous writing which opposed the authorities' imposition of Afrikaans on the black, then second response of White English writing originating from a long custom of colonialism and Afrikaans writing, done mostly by whites but with a cumulative contribution by black writers and coloured. Nkosi opines that critics claim to expect more from South African writers than a mere rendering of 'the surface meaning of the scene', but the nature of this expectation is itself controlled by what is perceived to be the proper relationship between literature and commitment, between truth and art (*Tasks and Masks* 76).

Through the 80s the fronts hardened: economic and political stability was not achieved. Unemployment, inflation and poverty rose as did black influx to the cities. Powerful trade unions were at the forefront of political struggle, and anti-apartheid guerilla activity increased. The state answered with escalating violent repression: a nationwide state of emergency was declared in 1986, and the army and police force had practically unlimited powers. At the same time, heavy restriction were placed on the mass-media to prevent the national and international public from knowing what was going on. "The Government has resorted to legalized tyranny" and South Africa was practically in a state of civil war. Thus is the situation when the demand for literature to act as a tool in the struggle against apartheid is most avidly expressed and Coetzee laments that

"In times of intense ideological pressure like the present, when the in which novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementary or rivalry!" ("Novel" 5)

André Brink was in Paris between 1959 and 1961 studying at Sorbonne that opened his mind to French existentialists and injustices of apartheid in South Africa. This was also the time that he claims to have born – the second time – to have emerged from the trappings of colour consciousness to see his country in a new perspective. Brink returned to South Africa after a short sojourn in France and wrote conservative novels in Afrikaans which evoked little interest. The initial stirrings of his interrogation are evident in this novel and formed part of the first wave of fiction produced by the 'Sestigers' ('Writers of the Sixties') in South Africa. While he was a student in Paris, in March 1960, Brink receives the news of the butchery at Sharpeville, where 69 blacks were shot by police. Brink says, "It was my political Damascus." From that moment on, "I hated the very notion of South Africa." Brink has wide readership in France and South Africa. (*A Lifetime of Story Telling*, Sunday Times 5 June 2005.)

Sue Kossew states that His status as a post-colonial writer is more problematic than that of Coetzee (who clearly addresses post-colonial issues), tied up as it is with the question of Afrikaner colonialism. From his first novel translated into English, *The Ambassador*, Brink broke with the romantic-colonist tradition of Afrikaans literature in order to express a new voice, that of the dissident Afrikaans writer, as part of a new group of Afrikaans writers calling themselves the "Sestigers: (196-ers). (*Pen* 5).

Isidore Diala feels that for apartheid to be sanctioned as the definitive characteristic of Afrikaner Establishment, it had to reach far beyond the domain of politics: it was not simply a political policy 'adopted' as a response to the racial situation in the country but had to be all the territories of social experience, economics, philosophy, morality and above all religion. ("Biblical Mythology" 81). He says in his another article that for Brink if apartheid offered a boon to the artist, it was perhaps in the sense that the dramatic immediacy with which it foregrounded the fundamental condition of human imprisonment, isolation and even death offered the artist ample opportunity for the interrogation of being, its conditions and its values. This Brink recurrently exploited apartheid as an image of the human condition. The point though is that Brink's allegiance to the universalist's claims of European humanism vitiated his significance for the local, peculiar, urgent battle against apartheid. (Daila, "André Brink: An Aesthetic Response" 22)

Brink's oeuvre is conscious effort of political struggle of emancipation of the Afrikaner people from both Dutch and English oppressors. (Sue, *Pen* 6). Clearly, many aspects of Brink's work are realist in nature, depicting credible characters, situations and contexts. (Dixon 5) De Jong states that André Brink's earlier works "political and sexual subversion are more or less inseparable" ("The Morality" 250).

This book was originally published in Afrikaans in 1963 (*Die Ambassadeur*, Human & Rousseau, Cape Town). The present edition is an entirely new translation which is also the result of extensive revision of the text itself. The original version had been preceded by several early drafts; and in preparing this new edition he has in several cases restored earlier passages and scenes where these now appeared to him more satisfactory than their subsequent published versions. In the process he was tempted to undertake a complete rewriting, but he decided deliberately to preserve the essence of the novel in its original context.

There was an official inquiry in the Department of Foreign Affairs to establish how and where suspected leaks had occurred; arms negotiations between France and South Africa, which I had used as a fiction because it suited the plot, turned out to have been taking place in reality; a South African ambassador in Europe, as it transpired, had actually been involved in the kind of relationship depicted in the book. Today, more than forty years later, that turbulence has subsided and *The Ambassador* can be read, quite simply, for what it set out to be; a novel by a young man battling to find or to redefine some values in the wake of the shipwreck of his familiar world. (*The Ambassador*, 10)

*The Ambassador* was the result of André Brink's first prolonged exposure to Paris as a student (1959-61) and formed part of the first wave of fiction produced by the 'Sestigers' ('Writers of the Sixties') in South Africa. Most of these works, by young writers who had spent some time abroad, were attempts to emancipate Afrikaans fiction of the time from its colonial constraints by introducing trends of thought and technique then in vogue in Europe and by breaking down taboos in the field of religion, ethics, sex and even narrative technique then prevalent in Afrikaans literature. Although there was little overt involvement with politics, the movement had surprising political side effects, as the questioning of Afrikaner morality and religion contributed towards the breakdown in the stranglehold of the authorities on the minds of the younger generation. As such, it paved the way for a later wave of fiction which was to involve itself more explicitly with the socio-political scene in the country and of which his later novels from *Looking on Darkness* onwards formed a part. (*The Ambassador* 9)

The fact that Brink's sojourn coincided with the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa also presented a disturbing discovery of what was really going on in his own country. In Author's note of his book, Brink says that everything he had taken for granted had to be reexamined: tribal customs and taboos, religion, relationships with groups and individuals and with the country itself, ideas, a view of history and plans for the future. "For me *The Ambassador* was the first expression of a search and an exploration which is still continuing." (*The Ambassador* 9-10) There was even an official inquiry in the Department of Foreign Affairs to establish how and where suspected leaks had occurred; arms negotiations between France and South Africa, which I had used as a fiction because it suited the plot, turned out to have been taking place in reality; a South African ambassador in Europe, as it transpired, had actually been involved in the kind of relationship depicted in the book. Today, more than forty years later, that turbulence has subsided and *The Ambassador* can be read, quite simply, for what it set out to be' (*The Ambassador* 10).

"This is a solemn, tortuous, predictable tale about the infatuation of the South African ambassador to France for Nicolette, a flirtatious night-club dancer with religious proclivities. Most of the characters undergo a cultural crisis and exhibit inconsistency of privileges given at South African Embassy in France. It is told first from the point of view of Third Secretary Stephen Keyter, then from the Ambassador's and finally from that of the woman herself, none of whom are able to make the reader care much about the Ambassador's predicament. However hedonistic she appears, Nicolette's effect is grave: Stephen, in love with her, informs on the ambassador and eventually kills himself; the ambassador is forced to leave his post; his wife, Erika, a lonely drinker, returns alone to South Africa; their daughter Annette repudiates not only her parents but young men eager to protect her. And

Nicolette, the tragic cause of so many shattered lives, confesses her now aborted love for Stephen, who had thought her indifferent to him. On the whole, the pompous banality of the writing, pretentious pseudo-philosophy, stick figures and silly dialogue overwhelm faint stirrings of perception and honest feeling" (Publisher Weekly).

On New Year's Eve party in Douglas Masters' apartment, Keyter dances with Jill, a model and spends that night with her. There is a horrendous vase representing a man with an open skull from which monstrous birds were pecking the brains; on one side was a screaming cross-eyed devil half hidden by fig leaves. A few hours later it is discovered that the vase has inexplicably been broken which represents the brokenness of his life and his country.

Keyter feels unsecured due to shipwreckedness in the bustling city with the Embassy the only island where one could still enjoy the sense of security created by the presence of compatriots. Whereas, Joubert Koos, the Second Secretary is an archetypal Boer and a fanatical supporter of Government policy. He is critical of the people who work for the government with contempt for it. He says, "I'm an Afrikaner, man. If ever my Government goes, I go too. In the meantime I'm a Boer diplomat: if anybody gets in my way, I just step on him" (47). But Keyter diplomatically replies that he serves each government with equal fidelity and equal contempt. He believes in the principle of survival of the fittest. He works for the government but he does not support all its policies.

### POLITICAL UNREST IN SOUTH AFRICA

Nicolette vehemently comments by looking at African beadwork in Keyter's room, "Why must you people carry South Africa with you wherever you go? ...You scared you may lose it somewhere along the way?" (37)

Keyter mentions, "Even though there were far many people in my cramped little apartment the evening was a success. I suppose we were all in a mood for extravagant eating, drinking, and making merry, not knowing what the morrow would bring. Because it was a bad time for South Africa the unexpected turn the strike in Johannesburg had taken the previous day. The strike itself had been threatening for a long time, starting, as usual, with something quite trivial that got blown up out of all proportion. But it was different from similar incidents in the past in that, this time, it was not confined to threats and counter threats; very soon dangerous tensions were building up between the strikers in their township and the police cordon draw around it." (67)

The Ambassador represented South Africa at UN in New York as nothing is happening in his country. Keyter writes a letter to the Minister's secretary in Pretoria in connection with certain negotiations with the Banque de France. But it was not forwarded by the Ambassador.

Keyter tensed and feels, "I was too tired to wait any longer. For although the tension in South Africa had eased after talks between the strike leaders and the Government, we were still flooded with work caused by the episode interviews with the media and with industrialists who'd invested in South Africa; negotiations with the Quai d'Orsay for support on the Security Council against efforts by the Afro-Asians to impose sanctions, etc(69). A young secretary from Indian Embassy sarcastically said "Of course, this is the beginning of the end for the South Africans." (84)

The reality is stated in these lines: A slight change of scenery, no more. Instructions. Negotiations. Reports. Receptions. Conversations. Official functions. Letters and telegrams from a remote, invisible Government. ...riots and strikes reported in newspapers, in Hellsreiber summaries, in top secret communications. Laws, regulations, emergency measures: nothing of all this had any immediacy. (155-6). All those delicate negotiations to win French support in the Security Council, to clinch secret arms deals: what did they really amount to? A feather in his cap, proof that he was indispensable – to what? A system abhorred by the whole world? That really was beside the point, beyond his framework of reference. Why *should* he care, if it had never assumed a shape apart from that of words? The system itself operated and existed only to the extent in which it was *remote*, invisible. (156)

A party takes place for Embassy members in Paris after Erika and Annette's departure to Italy. All are in a mood for extravagant eating, drinking and making merry, not knowing what the morrow

would bring. But a contradictory situation prevails in South Africa as a strike takes place in Johannesburg which itself lasts for long; threatening that it is different from the incidents in the past. There are threats and counter-threats, dangerous tensions that are building up between the strikers and the police cordon and at some point there is a clash. In addition, there are rumours that the inhabitants of neighbouring townships would go on strike in solidarity with the original group. The most trifling incident - an arrest for contravening the pass laws; picking up a noisy drunk - have devastating consequences. Keyter says,

And when the threatening situation had nearly reached its climax some of the leaders of the resistance movement had dispatched telegrams to the representatives of various Afro-Asian countries at the UN asking for their intervention. The whole affair had suddenly become a dangerous international dispute (67).

The situation in South Africa has come to ease after the talks between the strike leaders and the Government. But the Embassy is still flooded with work caused by the episode - interviews with the media and with industrialists who have invested in South Africa. Thus, Brink depicts the Afrikaner complicity and guilt by raising questions. A continual process of guilt and confession are dominant and central which are recurrent in the novel as Erika considers "This terrible, primitive need to confess!" (223). He finds it difficult to escape from an increasing sense of unreality. Working for the people or his Government is like working for monstrous machine, something invisible and something which even doesn't exist. For Mr. Ambassador, South Africa means something different and can judge it not like newspapers with confused posts but as glimpse of contemporary history which is finished, complete, undeniable, and lacks the urgency of something still in the process of happening. A glimpse of contemporary history of South Africa for Mr. Ambassador is:

Rape. Murder. Contraventions of the Immorality Act. Sabotage and attempted sabotage. Ministerial comments. Political statements. Demonstrations. Mrs. A. enjoying a few days' holiday in Cape Town. Mr. B. breaking the record for keeping awake. The Rev. C. accused of heresy. Strong southeaster in the Peninsula. Drought in the Free State. Large banana surplus. Readers' letters: 'Keep Our Cities White.' 'Farmers need more subsidies.' 'Nothing wrong with modern youth.' 'Ban Sunday sport.' 'Make adultery punishable by law.' Photos of VIPS; Grape Queens; Springboks; Ministers' wives at a garden party—" (206).

He wonders at the people whose lives have long ago stopped touching one's own and they escape to coast and live among strangers. It looks paradoxical to Mr. Ambassador that he has to support the policies which no longer exist in his personal life and the affairs which means nothing to him. He is not concerned with what happens in South Africa and it is nothing to him and has no sympathy with it. He is not familiar with the people there and does not understand their motives. The compatriots and delegation from South Africa come to Paris and live in pretense which is reality and inevitable for them as part of their social milieu. They do justification to their world because they exist. But Mr. Ambassador's world is no longer ever there. He is desperate to find a place for him in this world, "But God, God, is there a place for me at all in this world? I am fifty-six years old: I can no longer set out in search of a new place to call my own." (207) He expresses political dissatisfaction and eventual dissidence in his argument "The system itself operated and existed only ... invisible. It was present only in its absence - like God," (156). Brink was unprepared at this time to openly criticize/challenge the political policies of his nation.

On the contrary, Keyter's journey seems unreal, a macabre journey across the waters of death and "sickness-of-a-thousand-names lay aching inside" (80) him. He sees a shattered vision of his life and is so scared of it and desires to be with Nicolette even by blackmailing her. Keyter being pestered with questions responds explosively to the Ambassador: "I know you'll think I'm being idiotic or conceited, but my career is the only thing that really matters to me. And tonight Masters said - he was furious - that my whole future may be - he said he would personally see to that - Mr. Ambassador!" (245) Mr. Ambassador thinks that Keyter has become the victim of his own intrigues.

### 1960 – The Situation in South Africa

There is an unexpected turn in the Johannesburg strike. The Hellschreiber's reports are sometimes cryptic.

The evening papers splashed it on their front pages, exactly like the previous occasion in 1960, illustrated with sensational photographs of the strike leaders and the police cordon round the township. The situation was said to be 'under control', but as far as the Press was concerned, it was still only the beginning. There was much talk of 'imminent clash', 'blood bath', 'racism', 'second Sharpeville.' (89)

The political environment in which the novel is set is subservient to the exploration of human relationships, providing merely a backdrop to the interactions of the characters. This background, however, provides a continuous undertone of political awareness and tension. Rumours of unrest in South Africa, in conjunction with the misconduct of the two diplomats.

For Ambassador South Africa is death but Paris is life. In the following week Mr. Ambassador is exceptionally busy due to a series of negotiations in connection with the South African arms deal. He has several interviews with French Foreign Minister because of recent troubles in South Africa and seeks new arms if there would be new clashes in South Africa. In fact, there are prominent negotiations of black South Africans with a group of influential French politicians who want to visit the Republic through a Communist Congress in Paris. After sometime, Mr. Ambassador receives a letter from the Republic of South Africa about his affair stating an important phrase, *Miss Nicolette Alfred, a South African girl of questionable morality* (emphasis original 148). He has been undergoing agony after agony beginning with Gillian – his self-exile for eighteen months, his child, and everyone in his life. She succeeds in making him feel guilty about his attitude. But she has revived his memory of Gillian. His recollection of memory of Gillian which lasted for two months seems a tumour, malignant or benign – is difficult to tell.

### Comprehension of Reality

Mr. Ambassador is impatient in his office as he receives a telegram and calls for Keyter. It is about the order that Keyter must return to Pretoria immediately. But Mr. Ambassador assures him not to worry or upset about it and he would write to Pretoria to allow him to stay back as his service is required and says he would write back to retain him for some time. Ambassador considers it an honourable thing to do. They realize that they tried to fool each other. Keyter says it is nothing but a bit of jealousy and bit of ambition. Then they talk about Erika's divorce mentioned in her letter and about her operation. Keyter tries to share about his relation with Erika but Ambassador avoids it saying that anyone is not supposed to force to confess like a sort of religious act to get rid of one's burden.

### Hallucination of Parisian life

My main disadvantage was that after the time in Pretoria, where I'd become used to a predictable secure way of life, I felt completely stranded in this bustling city with the Embassy the only island where one could still enjoy the sense of security created by the presence of compatriots. (46) 'There's city, the whole city throbbing with life. Five million people, behind there light and dark windows, all caught up in the act of living. Does it matter whether they do it gracefully or sordidly?

And here we are – look at us – shut in by our four walls protected from the strange spectacle, life, of which we've heard, but which we hardly know at all (57). For the Ambassador, South Africa is death and he is "delegated from death into this foreign country, life..." (157) But he realizes he has been living among ghosts and illusions for years: nothing has been real. *Remote, invisible*. (164) and Government, for him is a monstrous machine.

Mr. Ambassador regrets for his sincere service to his country, "And this is the country I have to represent. I must solicit support for a policy in which I cannot believe, because it no longer exists in my personal life. I must handle its affairs, although they mean nothing to me. I must buy arms for it, although apart from the personal prestige involved, I don't care whether I succeed or fail" (206).

When a delegation arrives and has to stay for a few days, we profess nostalgia for 'real South African food', for 'good old Afrikaners', for 'the splendid Cape'. I doubt whether they believe it any more than I do: but at least they are involved in it; it is their milieu; it is – perhaps – the justification of their existence, their world? (207)

Sometimes Ambassador treats Nicolette like a child. In bewilderment by looking at the crowd in Paris he says, "It becomes hallucinating, terrifying: this million motion without direction, movement without reason; heresy against sense and coherence; a meaningless rebellion under a heaven without stars, against the large closed doors of the morose church" (176 - 177). Her character resembles the lives of inhabitants of South Africa in 1960s. Through her life Mr. Ambassador goes to past and calls up the unfulfilled and explores all his relations with those around him. When he thinks of her, she looks like a myth and a fairytale. At the end of his life what remains is Nicolette - "known, unknown and unknowable" (170). Mr. Ambassador wonders,

"How can I give a chronological account of her if she has no chronology? She is a continuous present tense, a book one starts reading in the middle and which has no cover, title page, beginning or end. What I have of her is a jumble of loose impressions: shreds of conversation, incoherent dream images, fantasies, superstitions, desires, delightful pagan innocence, lies, small gestures, passions, long pauses, unreasonable fears and questions, an attitude of the head, a curling of the lip, a laugh, an obscene word. Memories of her are never thoughts but sensuous experiences." (169)

Nicolette's predicament exemplifies the paradox of communion, reflecting on the mutual desire for acknowledgement in another, concomitant with the fear of loss of selfhood, or selfhood undermined. This paradox is reflective of all encounters or engagements with the other, in both sexual and colonial terms and thus resonates in the text as a thematic concern particularly relevant in the post-colonial context of South Africa.

There is a public protest as arms negotiations suddenly leaked in a French newspaper. Minister of Defence is forced to visit Paris immediately. There are meetings organized with French Government for discussions. All the members in the Embassy are troubled with one or the other issues. Keyter has been an enigma always and meets and greets Mr. Ambassador formally and expressionless when he wants to explain something regarding visa applications.

And Nicolette wonders "Why does it happen like that? Why do I want to get in when I'm outside; and if I'm locked in I get scared? Why can I never find rest?" (220). Here Brink questions the system which locked South Africa under its heavy policies. This exclusionary nature of regimes of apartheid denotes the exile experience. Embassy or Ambassadorship has changed the social order and it is a kind of exile from homeland, South Africa. Creating meaning, perhaps the meaninglessness through his narrative/ oeuvre is the central concern for Brink. Nicolette embodies the mutability of identities, denying the fixity demanded by authoritarianism.

The minor characters, apathetic creatures, wander aimlessly due to the authoritarian institutions. Mr. Ambassador interrogates:

Could it all be reduced to this? –all the organizations people had devised to bolster their security: state and church, commerce and politics and education, and everything: the more laws there were, the more refutations, the more securely one's pattern of existence was predetermined, the easier one could continue without the need to think. And all this to maintain an illusion – the illusion that there *did* exist cosmic, basic pattern of order, that the universe was functioning according to set laws, and that, consequently, society and the individual should also be governed by laws. For this was the only way one could contain the terror of the freedom that lay at the root of all things: this passionate life which without aim or pattern or direction, this essential chaos (190).

His interrogation articulates the essence of the novel: the author's questioning of the "organization" imposed on the life by humanity, especially on the conditioned identity of the masses. Critically the existentialist refusal of cosmic or universal 'law' and 'order' is linked to a political challenge to the state's order and authority.

This novel, is evidence, in terms of both content and theme, of Brink's own exploration of the human condition, a theme which recurs in varying forms throughout his oeuvre. In this text, Brink

begins to question the reigning authority of church and state in which sex, morality and religion are strictly policed, and circumscribed, and to take a moralistic stand against such presupposition. A few depictions of political climate of the era give clues to the need for Brink to take political stance in his next novels. This implicit undermining of authority is central to his later more overt political engagements, representing a crucial precursor to the remainder of his oeuvre.

*The Ambassador*, Brink claims is not a new book but that it marks a point of departure; without it, I would not have been able to write *Looking on Darkness*, or *An Instant in the Wind*, *I or Rumours of Rain*, or *A Dry White Season*, or *A Chain of Voices*, or *The Wall of Plague*. It was another kind of writer who produced *The Ambassador*. (10)

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