



# COULD YOU NOT WRITE OTHERWISE?" THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF ALAN PATON'S POETRY

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The article explores the political dimension of Alan Paton's poetry, a dimension of his literary work that has, thus far, received little critical attention. It analyses a number of poems that suggest that Paton's themes chose him, as is asserted in the ironic poem, "Could You Not Write Otherwise?" Paton's books celebrate the multicultural nature of his "Beloved Country" and reveal his breadth of understanding of the experiences, hopes and fears of the white, black, coloured and Indian communities. The author critiques the cultural chauvinism that was the bedrock of "separate development", exposes its dissonance with Christian principles and challenges its tendency to peddle racist stereotypes. Paton champions an alternative, liberal political philosophy, and is mindful of the importance of acknowledging the dignity of the despised "others". He is conscious of the likely descent into violent confrontation with the apartheid state, which runs counter to his pacifist stance.





Alan Paton is a very significant figure in the South African literary scene. His works draw on his background as a teacher, a penal reform activist and a politician. He was a leader of the Liberal Party for many years, before it disbanded in 1968 in protest against the government legislation barring mixed-race political parties. His fame as a writer rests principally on the tremendous success of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (Paton 1948) which was an international best seller. The novel is widely regarded as a classic example of South African liberalism, as it challenged the basis of white domination of the political and economic structures in South Africa. The date of publication coincided with the victory of the National Party which went on to consolidate white supremacist politics through the introduction of the notorious policy of apartheid, or 'separate development'. Paton began to write his novel whilst on a study tour of the penal system in Sweden, in 1946. His years as the Principal of Diepkloof Reformatory were pivotal to the development of his commitment to a non-racial future for his "Beloved Land", as he stated in his tribute to his late first wife, Dorrie: "It was at Diepkloof", said Paton, that "that we began to feel that the colour-bar that ruled South African life was unendurable. So far as we were able we threw it out of our lives" (Edward Callan, *Alan Paton*, 1982:18). *Cry, the Beloved Country* conveys, powerfully, the author's Christian, liberal humanist vision for South Africa. As Michael Chapman notes, it was "motivated by the tenuous hope that, in the spirit of post-war liberty, South Africa might move towards a more open society" (Chapman, 1996:231). The novel was derided by Marxist critics such as Stephen Watson as politically naïve (1982), but for many University students, its prophetic vision rings true, to this day, in its depiction of the tensions between the ruling elite, trade union leaders and radical politicians trumpeting the call for the nationalisation of land, mines and other sectors of industry. Andrew Foley's magisterial analysis of the novel demonstrates how:

*Cry, the Beloved Country*, far from being inaccurate or reductive in its social analysis, in fact provides a keen insight into the problems facing South African society at the time, an informed and subtle understanding of contemporaneous socio-political debates, and a sensitive appraisal of the possibilities for the country's restoration on a number of different levels (Foley 2009:42).

*Too Late the Phalarope* (1953) is also a profoundly moving novel which amplifies one of his central themes: a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. His powerful collection of short stories, *Debbie Go Home* (1961), foregrounds the plight of the coloured community in the wake of the so-called Industrial Conciliation Act and the systematic tightening of segregationist policies as the National Party government consolidated its grip on power. Five of the ten stories in the anthology are drawn from Paton's experience at Diepkloof Reformatory. *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (1981), written in his twilight years, pays tribute to the Indian contribution to the struggle for freedom. His poetry, however, is largely unknown and has received little critical attention, for example, the brief mention by Edward Callan in *Alan Paton* (1982:9-11) and the incisive commentary on individual poems by Peter Alexander in *Alan Paton: A Biography* (1994).

A handful of his poems were published in *Knocking on the Door* (ed. Gardner, 1975), but the definitive collection is *Songs of Africa: Collected poems of Alan Paton* (1995). This article focuses on some of the political themes he addressed. The poem "Could You Not Write Otherwise?" was composed on 11 August 1948 and suggests that he was driven to write about the racial tensions in South Africa by the political crises facing the country, rather than by personal choice. The question is posed by a woman who clearly disapproves of his thematic concerns and she chides him for not choosing more poetic subjects. The scornful note adopted by Paton is captured in the ironic resonances of the title, which links it with the local criticism of *Cry, the Beloved Country* as unpatriotic:

Could you not write otherwise, this woman said to me,  
 Could you not write of things really poetical?  
 Of many-coloured birds dipping their beaks  
 Into many-coloured flowers?  
 Of mine machinery standing up, you know,  
 Gaunt, full of meaning, against the sky. (73)

The abrupt transition from a celebration of nature, symbolised by the birds and flowers to the prosaic praise of "mine machinery standing up" reveals his impish sense of humour and calls to mind the damning indictment of soulless capitalism in his prophetic work, *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

The ironic tone flows into the second stanza, where the woman's objections revolve around race and highlight the fractured nature of South African society, which she wishes would go away and presumably stay away so as not to intrude on her "tender sensitivities":

Must you write always of black men and Indians,  
 Of half-castes and Jews, Englishmen and Afrikaners,  
 Of problems insoluble and secret fears  
 That are best forgotten?  
 You read the paper, you post your letters,  
 You buy at the store like a normal being.  
 Why then must you write such things? (73)

The indignation is palpable, but the passion is misplaced. The speaker's blinkered vision contrasts sharply with Paton's literary life, which was devoted to a celebration of the multicultural nature of South Africa, as also argued by Malaba (2005:273-284). Paton consciously explored aspects of the reality of the lives of blacks and whites, coloureds and Indians, in line with his own definition of liberalism:





By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance of authoritarianism and a love of freedom. (Paton 1988:294)

Thus it is not surprising that his poetry portrays the "many-coloured" people in his "Beloved Country". One of his most striking poems, "Trilemma", dates from his days as a student and was published in the *Natal University College Magazine*, in 1932. In a dream, Paton sees three students pass "A humble labourer in a field", the first "passed by with neither sight nor sign" of acknowledgement; the second "smelt the honest sweat,/ Screwed up his nose in cold disdain" and the third "leapt the roadside hedge/ And tilled the ground without a word/ Beside his mate...." Thus, even as a youth, Paton was feeling his way towards a compassionate understanding of his fellow men, and rejected the comfortable option of walking "wrapped in lofty thought" (Paton 1995:11), or the snooty dismissal of a perspiring worker, choosing instead to express solidarity in a concrete manner, thus reinforcing the dignity of labour. The fact that Paton identifies the "three" students as himself indicates the evolution of his consciousness during these formative years.

"The Discardment" presents the sobering reality of the unexpected outpouring of joy and praise from a servant for the 'gift' of "A trifle, a thing no longer to be worn...." The personae, presumably the Patons, are compelled to consider the disparity between their affluence and the deprivation of their "loyal" worker who is overjoyed by their kindness:

We gave her a discardment  
 A trifle, a thing no longer to be worn,  
 Its purpose served, its life done.  
 She put it on with exclamations  
 Her eyes shone, she called and cried,  
 Her great bulk pirouetted  
 She danced and mimed, sang snatches of a song.  
 She called out blessings in her native tongue  
 Called to her fellow servants  
 To strangers and to passers-by  
 To all the continent of Africa  
 To see this wonder, to participate  
 In this intolerable joy.

And so for nothing  
 Is purchased loyalty and trust  
 And the unquestioning obedience  
 Of the earth's most rare simplicity  
 So for nothing  
 The destruction of a world. (75)

As in "Trilemma", the importance of acknowledging the dignity of the other is pivotal for a new level of consciousness to arise. The categorical assertions with which the poem begins are overturned by the equivocation surrounding the word "nothing" in the concluding stanza.

"Indian Woman" stresses the need to avoid petty behaviour, it asserts that civility should be colour blind. Once again, the irony reinforces the message:

You, Indian woman in the rain,  
 Did you not see me coming?  
 Do you not see it is a white person coming  
 In his automobile?  
 What, will you not yield?  
 Neither will I then  
 And the brown-coloured mud  
 Rises in a fountain bespattering  
 Your stubborn garments.  
 My God, but your hair is as white as snow  
 I did not know you were so old, Indian woman  
 For had I known you were so old  
 I would have conceded something  
 I would have bespattered you  
 Not quite so venomously. (77)

Paradoxically, the victimiser becomes the victim of his own machinations. Paton satirizes the ritual humiliation of the despised other. The persona, or narrator, feels guilty because he has violated the promptings of his conscience, however grudgingly he concedes the point.





The racial aspect of the divisions in South African society to some extent masked the tension between the English and the “Afrikaners”. In Pietermaritzburg, the expansion of the railway hub was seen by many English-speaking South Africans as the pretext for diluting the tendency to elect members of parliament of a liberal persuasion and this is captured in “Anxiety Song of an Englishman”:

Down here where we talked of the Empire  
 From morning till night, and heard not a word  
 Of Afrikaans spoken, now come the great engines  
 And the Afrikaners stand on the footplates  
 And look confidently down through the hissing steam  
 As though they themselves had manufactured them  
 Yes they look down confidently at me  
 From a great height it seems, and turn a lever  
 And move off majestically and contemptuously  
 To the next station, to dwarf some other person. (81)

The urge to lord it over someone else reveals a deep-rooted sense of insecurity rather than strength.

The fractured nature of South African society is the root cause of the “problems insoluble” referred to by Paton’s accuser, in “Could You Not Write Otherwise?” “We Mean Nothing Evil towards you” is a stinging critique of the hypocrisy of apartheid. The hypocritical basis of “separate development” is laid bare with a stinging and vicious intensity in the opening stanza:

Black man, we are going to shut you off  
 We are going to set you apart, now and forever.  
 We mean nothing evil towards you  
 You shall have your own place, your own institutions.  
 Your tribal customs shall flourish unhindered  
 You shall lie all day in the sun if you wish it  
 All the things that civilisation has stolen  
 Shall be restored. You shall take wives  
 Unhindered by our alien prohibitions  
 Fat-bellied children shall play innocently  
 Under the wide-branching trees of the lush country

Where you yourselves were born.  
 Boys shall go playing in the reed lagoons  
 Of far off Ingwavuma, the old names  
 Shall recover old magic, milk and honey  
 Shall flow in the long-forsaken places  
 We mean nothing evil towards you. (71)

The cultural chauvinism that was the bedrock of “separate development” pervades this poem, as is evident here. The stereotype of lazy native men lying all day in the sun, and their equally indolent offspring whose principal occupation in life is playing reinforces the notion of a people unfit to manage their own affairs, hence the need to quarantine them as seen in the parallelism found in the opening lines:

Black man, we are going to shut you off  
 We are going to set you apart, now and for ever.

The cast iron determination is deliberately softened by the following line: “We mean nothing evil towards you.” The generosity of the white state is then asserted, through the string of “yours”:

You shall have your own place, your own institutions.  
 Your tribal customs shall flourish unhindered.  
 You shall lie in the sun all day if you wish it  
 All the things that civilisation has stolen

Shall be restored. You shall take wives  
 Unhindered by our alien prohibitions.... (my emphasis)

The repetition of “unhindered” is telling, as the whole purpose of the battery of legislation enacted after 1948 was, in fact, to place as many obstacles as possible before the “non-white” population. The biblical resonance of some words, like “evil... restored...milk and honey ...long-forsaken” draws attention to the religious fervour with which the governments’ policies were pursued. This is reflected in the concluding line of the poem: which reiterates the statement: “We mean no evil against you”. The National Party consolidated its stranglehold on power by co-opting churches, particularly the Dutch Reformed Church, to endorse apartheid, despite its violation of the central Christian tenet of the brotherhood of all mankind. This is of course an issue that has still not run its course in terms of “excavations” of guilt among members of especially the Dutch Reformed Church and the intensity of the debate on the Belhar Confession.

The second stanza suggests that, as a result of these governments’ benign policies, a miraculous transformation of





the native “territory” will occur:

The ravished land shall take on virginity  
The rocks and the shales of the desolate country  
Shall acquire the fertility of the fruitful earth. (71)

Ravished by who, one may ask? The picture presented here is a far cry from the desolate wasteland of Ndotsheni, in *Cry, the Beloved Country!* The stanza concludes, interestingly, with the acknowledgement:

This is our reparation, our repayment  
Of the incomputable debt.  
We mean nothing evil towards you. (71)

The religious façade slips in the closing stanzas, and the hollow pretensions are revealed for what they truly are:

Can you for whom we have made this reparation  
Not give us something also, not petition  
The gods of all the tribes we recreate  
To call you back in one migration  
North to the beating heart of Africa?  
Can you not make a magic that will silence conscience,  
Put peace behind the frowning vigilant eyes,  
That will regardless of Space and Time  
Wipe you from the face of the earth?  
But without pain...  
For we mean nothing evil towards you. (72)

One is struck by the inversion of values in this stanza. In a poem that dismisses all things African, it is amusing to find the appeal for deliverance by these very Africans! Furthermore, there is a willingness to resort to “black magic” to solve what is fundamentally a white problem!

The concluding stanza focuses attention on the determination of the ruling elite to banish blacks from their country:

Our resolve is immutable, our hands tremble  
Only with the greatness of our resolution.  
We are going to set you apart, now and forever,  
We mean nothing evil towards you. (72)

Written in 1948, this poem vehemently opposes this tragic experiment in societal engineering. It exposes the “secret fears” Paton’s critic in “Could You Not Write Otherwise?” wished would be left unstated. Peter Alexander points out, how: “Paton caught brilliantly, in this poem, the queer mixture of idealism, blindness, and cruelty that lay at the heart of the apartheid doctrines” (Alexander 1996:235).

Paton’s dilemma lay in his refusal to countenance a solution other than one that entailed divine intervention. Yet his faith, paradoxically, was nominally identical to that of the architects of apartheid! Paton’s pacifist inclinations led him to oppose the use of violence to effect regime change, to use the modern idiom (Alexander 1994:291). Hence, in “To a Black Man Who Lost a Child Thro’ Starvation” he can only proffer the idea of divine intervention:

Black man standing weeping before me  
I hide from you the words of my guilt  
Of the guilt of all white persons  
Of the idle and careless and thoughtless  
Of the champions of self-preservation  
Of the defenders of civilisation  
Of the preachers of brotherly love.  
Who else but the King of the Cross  
Could have taken their sins upon Him?  
Who else can make atonement and reparation  
And transmit to you words of compassion?  
Who else but the King of the Cross  
Dare speak spoken words of your loss. (Paton 1995:83)

The Christian foundation that underpins Paton’s literary works highlights the moral bankruptcy of the apartheid state’s desire to cloak its wolfish character in sheep’s clothing. However, the question still remains: can the death of Jesus be presented as a panacea? What if the man who lost the child is not a Christian? Will these words of consolation suffice to ease his pain, heal his wounds? A similar point can be made with reference to one of Paton’s most moving poems, “To a Small Boy Who Died at Diepkloof Reformatory”<sup>1</sup>, which ends thus:

1 Paton spent thirteen years at Diepkloof Reformatory, from 1 July 1935 until 30 June 1948. A prison for adults had been erected on the farm, in 1906 and between the First and Second World Wars, it had been transformed into a borstal for black boys below the age of eighteen. Alan Paton’s goal was to turn it into a school that would provide skills training





Here is the warrant of committal  
 For this offence, oh small and lonely one,  
 For this offence in whose commission  
 Millions of men are in complicity  
 You are committed. So do I commit you,  
 Your frail body to the waiting ground,  
 Your dust to the dust of the veld –  
 Fly home-bound soul to the great Judge-President  
 Who unencumbered by the pressing need  
 To give society protection, may pass on you  
 The sentence of the indeterminate compassion. (37)

Significantly, in both poems, the deaths seem to be the result of indigence and neglect, which reflect a systemic failure on the part of the state which, ideally, exists in order to safeguard the lives of the most vulnerable. None of the nine pillars of the state cited in the first stanza of “To a Small Boy...” intervened in time to save him:

Small offender, small innocent child  
 With no conception or comprehension  
 Of the vast machinery set in motion  
 By your trivial transgression,  
 Of the great forces of authority,  
 Of judges, magistrates, and lawyers,  
 Psychologists, psychiatrists, and doctors,  
 Principals, police, and sociologists,  
 Kept moving and alive by your delinquency,  
 This day, and under the shining sun  
 Do I commit your body to the earth  
 Oh child, oh lost and lonely one. (36)

The pathos emanates from the self-serving nature of the bureaucracy depicted here. And a similar roll call of potentates,

opportunities to promote the rehabilitation of offenders. For a detailed summary of the transformation that was achieved by Paton and his dedicated team, see Alexander, *Alan Paton*, 1994:129-142.

whose defining characteristic seems to be conspicuous consumption, did not do anything for the starving child. The legitimacy of these institutions and individuals is thus questioned.

In “I ask you, Indian people...” the uncharacteristically shrill tone reveals Paton’s desperation in relation to the question: to whom should one turn to safeguard one’s safety and security, if the state fails to provide it?

I ask you, Indian people, where do you turn to now?

Where do you find now safety and peace?

Where shall you hide now, Indian woman

And you, little child, what can your father do now?

What help have I for you now?

I have no guns and no ammunition,

What help have any of you now?

What voice is raised to speak to you?

My voice shall be raised to speak for you

I have no weapons but my words

But they are heard in many countries

I give you them now for your help.

I shall give you the best that I have

I shall make them sound like any noise of guns

I shall. (81)

The repetition of “shall” in the concluding lines seems to suggest a need to persuade himself that his intervention can change things, rather than a conviction that they will. Written in 1949, the poem foregrounds the advocacy role that liberals played and rightly so, as their contribution to trying to bring about a just and equitable society based on “the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance of authoritarianism and a love of freedom.”

But, in the final analysis, the oppressed people were driven to attempt to liberate themselves by resorting to guerrilla warfare, despite the obvious challenges posed by the sheer size and geographical location of South Africa. In “Caprivi Lament”, Paton questions the logic of the death of four black





South African policemen who were ambushed in the Caprivi Strip, trying to defend white supremacy! (92-93). The spectre of black on black violence is discussed in "I am the Law..." which dismisses the so-called homelands: "Hungry is the homeland/ The crust of independence/ Is unsatisfying bread...." (89) These fragmented entities exemplified the duplicity of the state. "Necklace of Fire" (95) highlights the brutality of the battles that occurred in the townships in the mid-eighties and reinforced Paton's abhorrence of violence.

Earlier on, I suggested that Paton's subject chose him, rather than the other way round. His mission was to take on the seemingly invincible state and argue the case for an alternative political dispensation. As in his novels, exile is generally not a preferred option, as seen in the cutting dismissal of the nameless individual in "To a Person Who Fleed to Rhodesia" (79-80). Alan Paton perceived his literary career as akin to a sacred calling:

Madam, really, since you ask the question,

Really, Madam, I do not like to mention it

But there is a voice that I cannot silence.

It seems I have lived for this, to obey it

To pour out the life-long accumulation

Of a thousand sorrowful songs.

I did not ask for this destination

I did not ask to write these same particular songs.

Simple I was, I wished to write but words,

And melodies that had no meanings but their music

And songs that had no meaning but their song.

But the deep notes and the undertones

Kept sounding themselves, kept insistently

Intruding themselves, like a prisoned tide

That under the shining and the sunlit sea

In caverns and corridors goes underground  
thundering. (73)

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