

André Brink's Sense of Anticlimax Over the New Dispensation in Modern-Day South Africa: An Examination of *the Rights of Desire*

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Abstract

*This paper sets out to analyze, through André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*, white South Africans' resentment over the new dispensation in South Africa. Even though the race-based ideology of apartheid was devised and implemented by people of Afrikaner extraction, there were many amongst white South Africans who were relentless in their scathing condemnation of the immorality of institutionalized racism. André Philipus Brink, Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee and Breyten Breyten Bach, to name but a few, were white liberals who were conspicuous by their antiapartheid stance. They used, indeed, the vehicle of literature to bring to light the multifaceted horrors of racial oppression in South Africa and, accordingly, went a long way towards raising international awareness about the need to bring it to an end. White liberals' rejection of the sanctimoniousness of apartheid was driven by their steadfast espousal of the universality of human dignity and freedom. Understandably, with the demise of apartheid, those voices of conscience cum other like-minded people felt that South Africa was set fair to become a democratic society in which racial determinism would no longer be a key feature in government policies. Rather, the rescission of institutionalized racism and its attendant heralding of democracy have left many a white South African with an overwhelming anticlimactic sense, which shines through the woes of Brink's lead character in *The Rights of Desire*, Ruben Olivier.*

Keywords: anticlimax, dispensation, revenge, librarianship, corruption, justice

André Phillipus Brink (1935-2015) was a leading South African novelist, playwright, literary critic and academic all rolled into one. A prolific author of Afrikaner stock, the late Brink had been the recipient of a good many national and international awards, inter alia the Commonwealth Writers regional award for Best Book (which he won two years in a row) and the Sunday Times Fiction Prize. The inception of his literary career stretches back to 1978 when his first novel, *Looking on Darkness*, came out. During the whole length of time of institutionalized racism in South Africa, the late Brink continually ran through the gauntlet of the strictures of apartheid, with many of his books having been banned under the Publications Act. If anything, Brink was a kind of conscience objector who couldn't bring himself to toe the line of the Nationalist Party, white though he was. Rather, he successfully endeavored in his apartheid-era writing to bring to light the physical and psychological toll exacted by racial oppression in his country. Arguably, André Brink was a prolific writer who went down in history as one of the greatest South African men of letters in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who were instrumental in no small measure in dismantling the apartheid juggernaut.

A white South African writer whose moral compass was anchored in deep-dyed liberal values, André Brink had antagonized the National Party by electing to take up the cudgels on behalf of the oppressed. His unflinching stance against racial oppression stemmed, to be sure, from the recognition that '*apartheid is a denial of everything that is basic to human dignity and to the concept of love*' (72). In the same breath, he made no bones about his keen dedication to '*the ideal of changing it*' (72). Brink's well-meaning choice to plough his furrow in exposing the multifaceted ravages of political apartheid for the sake of calling the world's attention to its crass negation of the dignity of human being unavoidably put him on a collision course with the proponents of racist ideology in then South Africa. Little wonder that he was looked on as, amongst nationalist circles, as a quisling to the cause of Afrikanerdom. His animus against the moral sanctimoniousness of the ideology of institutionalized racism and sexuality across the color bar as well as the wantonness of colonial violence shines through the length and breadth of his apartheid-era opus.

By taking it upon himself to forego the perks and trappings of racial supremacy associated with Afrikanerdom to chart his route towards dissidence, André Brink displayed the scope of his humanity. His conception of art framed as follows: “*All significant art is offensive*” (118). Actually, any writer worth his salt cannot help but be labelled subversive if he is in earnest about his calling to be on the side of the downtrodden. One cost-effective way to fight oppression is the recourse to art as well as taking a leaf out of role models’ book. In an essay entitled ‘Relevance and Commitment’ in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* Nadine Gordimer (a high-profile white South African writer now deceased) contends: “*Opposition to an existing society implies a hunger to create and identify with another and better one. The abjuration of a set of values implies an intention to create and relate to another set*” (136). The worthwhile cause that the artist champions is anathema to oppressors who, rather than being positive about the artist’s criticism, are prone to take a jaundiced view of it. However, in Brink’s estimation, provocativeness is the yardstick by which the potency of art can be measured:

‘Offend’, ‘offensive’ is used here in the original sense suggested by the etymology of the word as it is given in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, namely ‘OF. Offender (sic) to strike against...’ The element of resistance, of some form of obstacle is essential to the notion of offence...[T] he aesthetic object does not communicate to its public in a purely passive state but only by dint of encountering, or arousing, and eventually overcoming an initial resistance (119).

André Brink ran through the gauntlet of the Establishment’s wrath in the form of censorship as he sought to debunk the ideological bedrock of apartheid. In an essay entitled ‘The Freedom to Publish’ in *Mapmakers*, André regards censorship as “*the most spectacular threat to the freedom to publish*” and links its unconscionable rationale to “*the urge of power to protect itself, to perpetuate itself, to prevail*” (213). Censorship has the potential to deal a psychological blow to the writer through privacy invasion:

Even the privacy of this process can be invaded or threatened- as happened to me when Security Police searched my house, perused all my notes for a novel, even confiscated my typewriters; as happened to many of my black colleagues in South Africa when, sometimes simply on the strength of having written one poem or one play, they are detained for an indeterminate period, or intimidated in a variety of ways in order to dissuade them from embarking on their search for truth (209-210).

André Brink is part of the tiny number of white South African writers who, in the face of overwhelming odds, dared to strike a blow for the advent of a multiracial society shorn of the trope of racial determinism. Yet the realities of post-liberation South Africa left him dismayed. If anything, his unhappiness, nay his feeling of anticlimax over the dismal way in which the marginalized of yesteryear rule present-day South Africa is, indeed, writ large in his post-apartheid era opus. Nowhere is his disenchantment more excruciatingly salient than in *The Rights of Desire*.

A novel of riveting gravitas, *The Rights of Desire* is a post-apartheid novel of André Brink’s which came out in 2001. It recounts the life of Ruben Olivier, a one-time librarian who is pensioned off owing to ‘rationalization’ and the new political realities in South Africa; his job is then, to his great astonishment, given to a young black wet behind the ears. To cap it all, his wife has passed away, leaving him to lead a secluded life with his retainer, the seventy-year-old Magrieta Daniels. His two sons –Louis and Johann, the former living in Johannesburg, the latter in Australia- wish him to join either of them not only out of fear for his health but also for the sake of making sure that he spends his “*last years in comfort and ease and peace of mind*” (*The Rights of Desire* 4). But he adamantly refuses to shake the dust of his country off his feet, arguing that he “*can look after [him] self*” and, to boot, his housekeeper “*enjoys looking after [him]*” (*The Rights of Desire* 4). An erstwhile slave woman who goes by the name of The Antji of Bengal haunts the old family home. Meanwhile, Ruben’s life takes a new twist with the arrival in the house of a twenty-year-old woman, Tessa Butler, whom he takes as a lodger in a bid to sort of alleviate the drabness of his life. Ruben soon develops a crush on her. Interestingly, she resurrects love to his life but sometimes drives him nuts.

Arguably, *The Rights of Desire* is a hard-hitting indictment of the new political and social dispensation in post-racial South Africa. To be sure, it is a window on the travails that have been plaguing the rainbow nation since the demise of institutionalized racism. One of the lead characters, Ruben Olivier, is in no small measure, an illustration of the predicament of white South Africans under the rule of the African National Congress. The first inkling in the novel of betrayal, and disappointment with the new realities in South Africa occurs at the outset of chapter 2, with Ruben imparting the scam through which he has been made to lose his position as a seasoned librarian:

About a year after the last elections – that famous moment when were supposed to become a democracy and our lives changes utterly for at least three months – a young man was brought to my office and I was asked to train him. ‘Teach all you know’ (9).

The election that is referred to in the foregoing is the 1994 vote that officially called time on decades of white rule. It was supposed to have ushered in a democratic era in which the values of equality and otherness would kind of take the upper hand over the seeds of division along ethnic along or racial lines. Yet the ideal society that Nelson Mandela and other likeminded people - who went through fire and water to reverse institutionalized racism - dreamt about remains, from Brink’s vantage point, a pipedream. In his inaugural address as President, the spearhead of the struggle against white domination said:

We have triumphed in the effort to implant hope in the breasts of the millions of our people. We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the nation (Inaugural Address).

The portrayal of both Ruben Olivier and Magrietais, lo and behold, a testament to the humanness that shines through Mandela’s words. Actually, *The Rights of Desire* seems to posit that powers that be in post-racial South Africa seem to pay lip service to the lofty task of nation-building and equality in any shape or form rather than urge forgiveness in the name of reconciliation. The subservience of nation building and forgetting to revenge is hidden under the veneer of righting a wrong in present-day South Africa. The anger and bafflement of Brink’s lead character is not so much over the appositeness of the policy of affirmative action (which is commendable in itself) but the unconscionable way in which it is carried out:

He [the young black man, Sipiwo Mdamane] was bright, and he was black... We got along quite well, except he had the exasperating habit of wandering in at about ten in the morning, taking an hour off for lunch and leaving at four. Been in the Struggle, spent eighteen months in detention, wrote some poetry, missed out on university (First Liberation then Education)¹, but he wanted to get on well with his life. Commendable. But whether that life should embrace librarianship, neither Sipiwo nor I was very sure (9).

Ruben is uncharitable about Sipiwo Mdamane. He has a chip on his shoulder because of the gruffness with which he was made redundant when he was two years away from official retirement. More importantly, the manner in which his replacement has been hired, rankles with him no end. If anything, André Brink flags up the issue of Affirmative action the theoretical rationale of which is, according to Johan Rabe, to redress “*the imbalance between the racial groups whereby people of colour may be provided with specific advantages so that they will enjoy more equality of opportunity*” (341). Johan Rabe goes on to write:

The aim of affirmative action must thus be to create the situation whereby every person regardless of race has the same opportunities in life. The caveat has to be added that this must be achieved within the framework of achieving (sic) prosperity for society as a whole (71).

Come to think of it, the brand of affirmative action implemented in democratic-era South Africa smacks of revenge, nay racism. Actually, Ruben’s strictures on the government’s all-out drive to give young black South Africans a leg up in their search for job are an encapsulation of his gut feeling that competence and merit should not be subservient to favoritism; or else it will pave the way for laziness and mediocrity. Witness Ruben speaking feelingly about the unfairness that has attended his dismissal:

Three months to the day after his arrival I was called in by a deputy-something in the Department of Culture to report on the new recruit. I told them that he’d need about a year to find his feet. Two days later I was offered a package, with a very firm indication that I’d better take it or else. And Sipiwo Mdamane was given my job (9).

This raw deal underscores for sure the need for a thorough reflection on whether or not affirmative action can bring about a just society. In the light of John Rawls’ exegesis on what a just society means, the likes of Ruben have, indeed, every reason to feel hard-done by. In Rawls’ estimation, a just society implies that:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice, or as some say, natural right, which even the welfare of everyone else cannot override. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by many(3).

¹Italicized in the novel; so, it is we who underline.

The philosophy of affirmative action is to redress historical wrongs. Much as its beneficiaries are supposed to be those who have suffered trials and tribulations at the hands of others, the fact remains that affirmative action flies, in some measure, in the face of justice. Rather than levelling the playing field, it is heavily weighted in favour of one group to the detriment of another. Two wrongs do not make a right. The policy of affirmative action comes in for a lot of flak owing to the fact that its moral and philanthropic underpinnings are not properly explained to those who regard it as a ploy to dispossess and settle scores with them. Even though powers that be in post-racial South Africa are in debt to black South African youth who went through fire and water for the demise of racial oppression, the fact remains that affirmative action ought not to be a veneer for gravy train. More importantly, affirmative action, as it is implemented in post-liberation South Africa, is a zero sum game: whites are dispossessed in favour of blacks, therein lies the rub. The achievement of a public conception of justice² is crucial to the success of such policies as affirmative action:

In the absence of a certain measure of agreement on what is just and unjust, it is clearly more difficult for individuals to coordinate their plans efficiently, in order to insure that mutually beneficial arrangements are maintained. (Rawls 6)

This is all the more significant because ‘*distrust and resentment corrode the ties of civility, and suspicion and hostility tend to act in ways they would otherwise avoid*’ (Rawls 6). A groundswell of white South Africans can’t find it in their hearts to buy into the government’s much touted rhetoric about the need for reconciliation and equality as they feel that it acts out of hatred for their community. Arguably, the weight of history is an albatross around South Africa’s effort to utterly heal the psychological and physical wounds spawned by apartheid. Decades of living under the yoke of racial oppression, doubtless still rankles with South African blacks despite protestations to the contrary; whereas whites are hard pressed to champion any move (by powers that be) designed to bring about national reconciliation good and proper. Their chariness lies in their propensity to look over their shoulder. Another case in point is Professor David Lurie, one of the lead characters in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. When he is privy to the horrendous gang rape that his daughter, Lucy Lurie, has fallen prey to at the hands of three young blacks, he makes no bones about claiming that history is coming home to roost: “*It was history speaking through them...A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors*” (Coetzee 156). The desire for revenge coupled with the propensity for victimization hampers the advent of a society free from the crippling praxis of racial determinism.

Harking back to *The Rights of Desire*, the way in which the young black has been fast-tracked to librarianship bespeaks a gross ignorance or disdain of the philosophical significance of the occupation of a librarian. J. H. Shera defines a librarian as being

a sorcerer-priest with its papyrus role... The modern librarian, in whatever branch of librarianship he elects to serve, must be well-educated, professionally competent, and highly qualified to play an important part in the communication process of today’s world. (The Foundations of Education for Librarianship 108)

J. G. Meijer dwells on the holistic dimension of librarianship:

Librarianship is a form of cultural enterprise whose main characteristic is the stimulation of the optimum use of Mankind’s cultural heritage, insofar as it consists of coded thoughts recorded in documents that are and must be held in readiness for use with the ultimate objective of making possible cultural progress (also in the fields of religion and science) in its particular sphere. (24)

²Rawls’s public conception of justice rests on two tiers: full acceptance by all members of a society of the same principles of justice, and the general knowledge that the basic social institutions satisfy these principles. John Rawls defines a society as “*a more or less association of self-sufficient persons who in their relations to one another recognize certain rules of conduct as binding and who for the most part act in accordance with them.*” Rawls is at pains to point out that a conflict of interests and an identity of interests colour any society. The ineluctability of a conflict of interests lies in the fact that “*persons are not indifferent as to how the greater benefits produced by their collaboration are distributed*”; whereas an identity of interests stems from the fact that “*social cooperation makes possible a better life for all than any would have if any were to live solely by his own efforts.*” Therefore, a set of principles is required in order to prevent problems arising from two antagonistic poles. These principles are called principles of social justice. John Rawls elaborate on the significance of the aforementioned principles: “*they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation*” (4).

Librarianship is not a cinch by any stretch of the imagination. Politics or pathos for that matter ought not to come into play when it comes to that professional activity. The librarian is vested with the task of disseminating knowledge and facilitating access to it. By so doing, he ‘*maximizes the social utility of graphic records for the benefit of mankind.*’ (Shera Knowing Books and Men 265). In another of his meaty and enduring studies about librarianship, J. H. Shera further elaborates on its central purpose, and contends that the end-user of the library is society: “*Though the library serves mainly the individual, the ultimate objective is the betterment of society*”. As a result, “*the librarian must not only know the cognitive system of the individual, but also the communication network of society*” (Toward a Theory of Librarianship 89). In light of the foregoing, it is not hard to figure out Ruben’s bafflement as to the uncalled-for way in which his “*library decided to make [him] redundant*” (101-102). Ruben is all the more dismayed as there is no genuine cause that justifies him being put him out to grass (9). Instead, he puts a racist spin on his dismissal:

...I’d have been happy to stay on at the library for a pittance. And if they’d fired me because I’d done a bad job I’d have accepted it too. But I know it had nothing to do with competence. I got booted out just because I’m white and male. (103)

Disappointment and perplexity are writ large in Ruben’s voice. The seasoned librarian’s deep-seated resentment at being ‘*so treacherously dumped by the library*’ while he considers it as his ‘*sanctuary from the upheavals from outside*’ (32), is a measure of white South Africans’ sense of despondency about the new dispensation in post-apartheid South Africa. Actually, the novel seems to posit that the yawning gulf of distrust and hatred between blacks and whites is beyond recall. Little wonder that there is a trend amongst whites in the new South Africa towards shaking the dust of their country off their feet. In the world of *The Rights of Desire*, Johann and Louis (Ruben’s two sons) go to great lengths to get their father to leave South Africa, thereby enjoying his ‘*last years in comfort and ease and peace of mind*’ (6). Although he knows only too well that his ‘*country is going to pieces and no one lifts a finger to stop the crime*’ (6), the sixty-five-year-old stops shy of caving in. Ruben’s adamant refusal to go down the path of exile mirrors that of Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace*. In reaction to her father’s entreaties to “*close down the kennels*” and “*take a break for six months or a year until things have improved in this country*” as it will allow her, upon coming back, to “*take stock, make a fresh start*”, Lucy contends in no uncertain terms:

If I leave now, David, I won’t come back. Thank you for the offer, but it won’t work. There is nothing you can suggest that I haven’t been through a hundred times myself.

...whatever I decide I want to decide by myself, without being pushed. There are things you just don’t understand. (157)

Things have gone awry in post-liberation South Africa. Moreover, whites are not pleased with it. Anything but. Much as they overtly do not voice regrets about the end of apartheid, they are, nonetheless, very scathing about the way they are treated in the so-called rainbow nation, and, to boot, the new judicial dispensation. To be sure, the picture of postliberation South Africa depicted in *The Rights of Desire* makes a mockery of what the ANC fought tooth and nail for during the apartheid years: justice. Corruption, graft, bribery, wanton murder, insecurity, rape are rife. Instances are, indeed, thick on the ground of thugs getting away with nefarious crimes due to the fact that the whole administrative system is corrupt to the core. To give us a sense of how far whites suffer in the new South Africa, Ruben describes the circumstances attendant upon the razing to the ground of houses in District Six, including Magrieta’s:

I’ll never forget the day of the bulldozers... We were with Magrieta and Barney in their small sitting room when the police came to turn us out with teargas and dogs. We held for as long as we could, but it was useless. In the end we had to run for our lives and the bulldozers flattened the house with everything in it.

(‘Bloody white kaffirs!’ a pimply youth in uniform had yelled at Riana and me.) (89).

To succor his long-standing charlady, Ruben takes it upon himself to “*set in motion the complicated process of finding Magrieta a house*” (21). The moment he realizes that his “*preferred mode of contact*” turns out to be a dead-end, Ruben falls back on the telephone. In his quest of the right department in charge of housing, Ruben is given the runaround. He finds it disgusting that people to whom he talks “*at the other end [of the line] had difficulty writing down the simplest information*” (212). These scraps of his exchange with one official of the housing department are telling: ‘*How do you spell Daniels?*’ ‘*What’s the address again, Mr Oliver?*’ – *Not Oliver, Olivier, with an i-e-r.*’ (212). From Ruben’s vantage point, this bespeaks a gross lack of education besides being a measure of how far the gravy train phenomenon has eaten into the administrative fabric of democratic-era South Africa.

When people land plum jobs undeservedly or get promoted by the backdoor, it goes without saying that they lack the gumption to fully appreciate the real worth of their positions. As a result, they are prone to show a proclivity for dereliction of duty and bribery. When Ruben meets for the second time the man vested with the housing section, gone by the name of Mr Jacobs, he is baffled why the latter seems to have clean forgotten what he came to see him about a few weeks back, and has to do “*some extensive explanation to refresh his memory*” (232). In the course of their discussion, Ruben has a hunch that Mr Jacobs drags his feet; so, he makes no bones about his intentions: “*Mr Jacobs, this is very urgent. Mrs. Daniels has gone through deep waters. I can personally vouch for her. And between you and me I can assure you that money won’t be a problem*” (233). Upon hearing this opening gambit, Mr Jacobs comes clean:

Look, he said without much of a preamble, there was a new state-subsidised housing scheme at Delft. There had been a hash with the waiting lists and there might be an opening for Magrieta. The only thing was that it could take a long time, unless some money could be produced up front to untangle some of the red tape which might come up. ‘And since you said money was not a problem....’(233)

Mr Jacobs’s use of the helping verb ‘might’ is but a smokescreen. He seeks to up the ante. He knows only too well that there is no shadow of a doubt that the aforementioned housing scheme is beneficial to whoever is prepared to give kickbacks. Even though he explains to Ruben that the “*problem did not lie with him but ‘further along the line’*”, there is no denying that Mr Jacobs has a vested interest. In answer to Ruben’s question as to how much he asks in order to oil the wheels, he says unabashedly, “*Five grand for starters*” (234). This is a crass vindication of the pervasiveness of malfeasance in post-racial South Africa. Incidentally, the phrase ‘*for starters*’ means that Ruben will have to pay more money down the road if he wants to get his own way good and proper. Meanwhile, two weeks went by without Mr Jacobs bringing Ruben up to speed on the matter. The latter’s call of enquiry earns him this warning: “*Don’t call us, we’ll call you*” (234). Two days later, Mr Jacobs gives a bell to Ruben, only to set a date for another meeting on the occasion of which “*money changed hands*” again, and a deal is finally clinched: “*Look, it’s December now, things are moving a bit slowly, but I think we can sign the papers just after the holidays, early January*” (235). Ruben wraps up getting his money’s worth. It galls him, nonetheless, to have to pay good money to fix Magrieta up with a place in the state-subsidized housing scheme.

When you think about it, corruption is a wrongful act that debases human dignity. Corruptor and corrupted alike unconsciously subsume their being in this nefarious conspiratorial act. Actually, they are well aware of the moral outrage that their misdeed epitomizes. That is why it is a low-key affair. Those who are party to a corruption business own up to their diffidence about themselves; they forfeit their freedom at the altar of worldliness. The corruptor gives his money grudgingly, as a last desperate resort. He knows about the immorality of the practice but he makes it subservient to the gratification of his immediate needs. By the same token, the corrupted rides roughshod over morality. He is robbed of self-regard as his unabashed acceptance of the corruptor’s gift betrays his craze for easy money. He is a man who lives by his wits; so, he disdains work as a source of personal fulfillment. At any rate, both corruptor and corrupted are driven by the Kantian hypothetical imperative that “*refers to the choice of means to one’s own happiness.*” In other words, their action “*is commanded not absolutely but as a means to another aim*” (Kant 33). Arguably, the maxim in accordance which they act, flies in the face of the categorical imperative, also known as imperative of morality which is stated as follows: “*Act in accordance of that maxim through which you can at the same time that it become a universal law*” (37). Corruption cannot by any stretch of the imagination qualify as “*universal law*” in the sense that it is a moral outrage. What’s more, it is scornful of the principle of utility about which its leading exponent, to wit eighteenth-century British thinker Jeremy Bentham, writes by way of a definition:

By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency it appears to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question: or, what is the same thing in other words to promote or to oppose that happiness. I say of every action whatsoever, and therefore not only of every action of a private individual but of every measure of a government.(Bentham 15)

Little wonder that Ruben Olivier grudges the bribe that he has given to Mr Jacobs:

A slight of feeling of nausea crept up from my stomach, but I swallowed it back. It was not the kind of money I was used to throwing about; and certainly not in this manner. But if this was what it took – I tried to visualize how Magrieta would react to the news of the house (all information about the means of securing it carefully suppressed) – maybe I should take it on the chin like a man (235).

Here the use of the idiomatic expression ‘*take it on the chin*’ indicates that Ruben toed Mr Jacobs’s line under duress. He does not impugn the immorality of corruption. He has somewhat ridden roughshod over his moral compass out of the compelling desire to help Magrieta in her hour of need.

In the world of *The Rights of Desire* the adverse effects of corruption percolate through every layer of society. Owing to its pervasiveness people who fall prey to such unconscionable wrongdoing as crime or rape are left to their own devices. Worst of all, murder cases are not prosecuted. Witness Beulah’s disgusting killing. A seventeen-year-old girl, Beulah is a student at UWC. On her way to the delicatessen where her mother works, she was waylaid by a party of thugs who abducted her, “*dragged her into the ruin of an old shop and gang-raped her*”. To cap it all, the five-man gang went on to slit her throat (213). Clues provided by the members of the community as to the perpetrators of this sickening killing have not been followed-up. Nonetheless, “*a member of the Good Livings gang in Manenberg*” wraps up being arrested thanks to the dogged work of the family’s lawyer. Disappointingly, this relief is short-lived as “*the youngster’s parents, God-fearing people and respected in church circles, put in an impassioned plea for their son, who was granted bail*” (232). But there is a rub which lies in the fact that “*the amount was so high that it seemed unlikely his family and friends could afford it*” (232). Feeling slighted by the misbegotten decision to let the accused off the hook, Stanley, Beulah’s father, takes it upon himself to avenge her daughter’s murder in a rather queer horrible way. He gets, indeed, his neighbors to club together to the tune of R 5000 to win the youngster’s freedom. Then:

Accompanied by a crowd of neighbours and acquaintances he set off for the magistrate’s court where the boy had made his appearance. The bail was paid and the accused released into the hands of his supposed benefactor. Who promptly dragged him off and gave him the beating of his life, after which they castrated him and then hacked him to pieces (232).

Stanley and his number have carried out is what nineteenth-century German thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche, calls *revenge of restoration*.³ The judicial outcome to this grisly killing is a reproach to the justice system in post-apartheid South Africa. The mastermind and some of his sidekicks have been arrested for a while before being freed. The shortness of their spell in detention indicates skullduggery:

A few days earlier our lawyer had finally secured bail for Stanley after the police had been forced to admit that still had had evidence against any of the individuals involved in the lynching of the rapist, the whole community of Bonteheuwel having clammed up in an impressive show of solidarity (235).

The advent of democracy in the aftermath of decades of ghastly institutionalized racism, rather than bringing about a multiracial society in which the marginalized and oppressors of yesteryear enjoy equal opportunity, has turned South Africa into a hellhole for whites. It looks as though the shoe were on the other foot. Witness how Ruben Olivier describes the scope of his anticlimactic feeling over modern-day South Africa:

From their [his two sons, Luis and Johann] excessive euphoria not quite five years ago they now find enough words to fulminate against everything that has gone wrong (but the experience of Janet’s friend, hijacked and raped, cannot of course be made light of); whereas my feelings range from occasional outrage, as when I was summarily retrenched, to annoyance and vague irritability...

³In *Genealogy of Morals*, the celebrated German thinker distinguishes between two types of revenge: revenge of *self-preservation* and revenge of *restoration*. The former is driven by fear while the latter is characterized by absence of fear. If anything, when one performs revenge in self-preservation, “*one does not wish to do any harm in return, merely to get away with life and limb*”. The counterblow blow is delivered “*against lifeless objects that have harmed us (such as moving machines)*”, and its endgame “*is to stop the harm by bringing the machine to a halt*”. The philosopher emphasizes that “*the strength of the counterblow must be so strong to succeed in this that it smashes the machine*”. Conversely, the act of revenge of the second type serves to restore but it “*does not protect us from further harms*” unlike self-preservation revenge. It is possible that “*we have lost through our opponent possessions, rank, friends, children*”. In Nietzsche’s estimation, losses of this kind “*are not brought back by revenge*”; so, “*the restoration concerns solely a loss incidental to all these losses*”. When our opponent harms us wittingly, he demonstrates that he does not fear us. Thus, “*By revenge, we demonstrate that we do not fear him either: this constitutes the equalization, the restoration*”. It is worthwhile to underline that, in a revenge of restoration, “*the intent of showing one’s utter lack of fear goes so far in some persons that the danger their revenge involves for them –loss of health or life or other damage – is for them an indispensable condition of all revenge*” (Nietzsche 180-1). Harking back to *The Rights of Desire*, the magistrate’s decision to grant the accused bail was such a blow to Stanley’s pride that this one could not help restoring his honor. The desire to display his lack of fear vis-à-vis the judge was so strong in Stanley that he was blind to the judicial implications of his horrendous “public revenge”.

My main regret, I told them, was that after having been against so much for so long –all the evidence and lies of the previous regime, from Malan and Verwoerd all the way down to clerk –one would have hoped that in the new dispensation there would at last be the possibility of being for something(261-2).

This quotation may be long. But it speaks volumes about white South Africans' bitterness about democratic-era South Africa. In Ruben's estimation, the raw deal that they are given under black administration is all the more unwarranted since they brought steadfast commitment and drive to the party of the resistance to racial oppression. He has a point for sure. At the time of institutionalized racism many a white South African dubbed as liberals, owing to their "*resentment of Afrikaner political domination and identification with black African misery*" (Moodie XI), either paid the ultimate price or ran the gauntlet of jibes and accusations of sellout to Afrikanerdom from their own community. The roots of South African liberals' contribution to the struggle against apartheid stretch back to the sixties when a clutter of white writers of Afrikaner extraction, known as the 'Sestigers', awakened to the realization that "*given the society [they] worked in, literature could only be vital by exploring openly the issues involved within that society*" (Brink 27). Even though Etienne Leroux, Chris Barnard, Jan Rabie, Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink drew the line at wallowing in "*the notion of facile and superficial forms of social realism, agitprop or propaganda*" they, all the same, "*broadened the base of contestation in Afrikaans literature*" (Brink 26-27). Unsurprisingly, their "*interest in human relationship*" against a backdrop of Afrikaner domination caused them to "*experience cultural schizophrenia*" (Brink 28). But this goes with the territory of being a dissident writer.

The likes of Ruben Olivier would expect to enjoy respect and freedom as well as equal opportunity with blacks in present-day South Africa in view of the sacrifices that they made to the demise of racial oppression. Worryingly, the lead character in *The Rights of Desire* strikes a downbeat note as to the future of whites in South Africa:

This is no easy country. It is merciless, it is hard, hard...Whoever elects to stay here cannot expect to remain unscathed. It cannot care less, it wipes its backside on us and leaves its trail of blood on us. There is certainly nothing romantic about it...(263).

This angst prognosis may be beyond repair. Still, it does not give Ruben grounds for quitting the country: "*Maybe it is true, as Louis argued, that things have gone too far, that in this broken existence there is no hope of repair. But it is an existence still. And perhaps the only way of attempting to repair it is by being part of it*" (263). Interestingly, Ruben rules out exile as a way out of his woes. Arguably, Ruben's unwillingness to go down the path of exile as a way of registering his discontent over the new dispensation is reminiscent of Lucie Lurie in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Upon learning about the rape that his daughter has gone through at the hands of three young blacks, David Lurie advises her to go to Holland. The idea of emigrating to Holland was not amenable to Lucie and, not surprisingly, she spurned it. These white characters' rejection of exile as a way out of their predicament mirrors a strong sense of belonging to the South African nation. The choice of exile as a solution to persecution or any other predicament for that matter is always a second best alternative. On the other hand, its rejection bespeaks a dogged determination to stay put and fight the rot from within.

In the final analysis, *The Rights of Desire* is arguably a reproach to democratic era South Africa in no small measure. The demise of the gruesome system of apartheid was thought to usher in a society free from racial bias, and where South Africans from all walks of life would enjoy the same opportunities and equality before the law. But André Brink's portrayal of postliberation South Africa through *The Rights of Desire* sort of casts aspersions on those lofty political pronouncements about the driving need for reconciliation. Ruben is an embodiment of the sense of anticlimax that white South Africans feel about the new dispensation. His woes about what he looks on as unfair retrenchment; the pervasiveness of crime; the lopsided administration of justice; the condoning of the gravy train: all this is an eloquent testimony to the Brinkian theory that the ruling class in democratic South Africa has come full circle in terms of its commitment to democracy and racial equality. The divisions left over from decades of ideology-based oppression have yet to heal. Notwithstanding, André Brink does not write off South Africa as a rainbow nation. His optimism is encapsulated in Ruben's outright refusal to act on his kids' stubborn advice to leave the country.

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