AFE BABALOLA UNIVERSITY, Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State.

COURSE CODE- ELS 122

COURSE TITLE- INTRODUCTION TO NIGERIAN LITERATURE 2

COURSE LECTURER- Dr. Solomon Adedokun Edebor

GROUP- GROUP 3

QUESTION- ATTEMPT AN INCISIVE LITERARY APPRECIATION OF DENNIS BRUTUS’S LETTER TO MARTHA 17, FOCUSING ON, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THE POET’S BACKGROUND/BACKGROUND TO THE POEM, THEMES OF THE POEM, THE POET’S USE OF LANGUAGE AND STYLE, OTHER POETIC DEVICES EMPLOYED BY THE POET, ETC.

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DENNIS BRUTUS: “LETTER TO MARTHA 17”

 In prison

 The clouds assume importance

 and the birds

 with a small space of sky

 5 cut off by walls

 of bleak hostility

 and pressed upon by hostile authority

 the mind turns upwards

 when it can –

 - there can be no hope

 of seeing the stars

 the arcs and fluorescence

 have blotted them out –

 The complex aeronautics

 15 and the birds

 and their exuberant acrobatics

 become matters for intrigued speculation

 and wonderment

 cliches about the freedom of the birds

 20 and their absolute freedom from care

 become meaningful

 and the graceful unimpeded emotion of the clouds

 a kind of music, poetic, dance –

 Sends delicate rhythms tremoring through the flesh

 25 and fantasies course easily through the mind

 Where are they going

 Where will they dissolve

 Will they be seen by those at home?

 And whom will they delight.

POET’S BACKGROUND

Born in 1924 in Rhodesia, Dennis Brutus spent his childhood days in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Very early in his life, his mother treated him to English poetry, and he grew up to love and write poems. He had his Bachelor of Arts degree from Fort Hare University, and he taught English and Afrikaans in South African high schools for over a decade before he was summarily dismissed in 1962 because of his stand for socio-political justices. In 1963, Dennis Brutus was arrested, detained and imprisoned at the penal colony, Robben Island. His offence was his agitation against racial discrimination and the obnoxious apartheid policy in South Africa.

In 1962, he was awarded the Mbari prize for poetry, and his first collection of poems, Sirens, Knuckles, Boots, was published in 1963. He was released in 1965 with a total ban on his writings or publications. In 1966, he published Letters to Martha, which contains poems of his prison-experiences written as letters to his sister-in-law, Martha. He died in the year 2009

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

Because, even on his release from Robben Island in 1965, Dennis Brutus was banned from publishing, he left South Africa for Europe in 1966 on exile. In 1968, he published Letters to Martha, a collection of poems which describe his harrowing experiences as a prisoner but presented in form of letters to his sister-in-law, Martha.

In the main, the poem makes a subtle comparison between liberty and bondage, between confinement within walls of black hostility and freedom unlimited; and it appreciates the freedom of uncaged birds, and the clouds.

SUBJECT MATTER

The subject matter of this poem is, lack of freedom or imprisonment. In a tone that is sober and reflective, the poem tries to show that no right or privileged can be more than being free. Among the themes in the poem are;

THEMES

1. Tragedy of Prison Life

An action that led anyone to prison should be considered a tragic fall and any individual in a state as such suffers extreme regrets, worries or sorrows. In the poem titled "Letter To Martha 17" the poet suffered the tragic implications of prison; confined in in a room with no one to talk with, terrible ventilation system, inadequate space for movement. All that were taken for granted (the freedom of speech, the freedom of movement, the freedom of association, etc) when he used to a free man. Brutus made it understood that prison changes you of everything, even your state of mind as he began to realize and fantasize about his surroundings. Looking at the bird he realized how free they were which reminded him of how he used to be free “freedom of the birds and their absolute freedom from care became meaningful” and he then moved on to fantasize about the clouds “where are they going, where will the dissolve, will they be seen by those at home, whom will they delight?”

2.. Freedom and Revolution

 This is the major theme that the poem is built upon. All other themes take recourse from this theme. From the background to the poem, we can see that the poet, at a point in his life, was a revolutionary, which leads him to prison. The two words, freedom and revolution, go hand in glove as one of them is the reason for the other i.e lack of freedom is the reason for revolution or revolution is the reason for lack of freedom (imprisonment)

3. The Importance of Freedom

It is often said that "freedom is often not appreciated until one loses it." This popular maxim lends credence to one of the thematic points of this poem. The persona believes that in prison, "there can be no hope" and all other things enjoyed by freemen, "become matters of intrigued speculation and wonderment." The poem shows the reader the importance of freedom as it relates to everyone.

4. The effects of imprisonment

Often times, imprisonment is nota pleasant experience to write about. The poet, speaking from the perspective of a convict, explains to the reader, the effects of imprisonment. One effect of imprisonment is loneliness. When I'm prison, the clouds, which had hitherto been unimportant, begin to "assume importance." Another thing a prisoner faces is torture. The persona in "Letter to Martha 17'" refers to those that inflict the torture as "hostile authority." The average prisoner is also hopeless because he doesn't know what could happen to him 8n the next minute. This is what he means when he says that "there can be mo hope." The above-explained and many others are the effects of imprisonment in convicts as shown in "Letter to Martha 17' "

FORM AND STRUCTURE

The poem is divided into six stanzas of unequal lines. The first and the last stanzas have three lines each. The lines too are not of the same length because it is supposed to be a letter; the poem begins by ‘In prison’ which is suggestive of the address of the writer. The poem does not have a rhyme scheme; and, unlike the other poems in this selection, it makes an unusual but prominent use of dashes. It concludes on a rhetorical note with questions packed into the last stanza. The first stanza is actually the cornerstone upon which the rest of the poem lies. The two key words contained in the stanza – the clouds and the birds – are further elaborated upon in the rest of the poem, as against the detestable loss of liberty of a man imprisoned.

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

The language of this poem is not indeed difficult, but it is beyond the literal sense. It discusses a serious matter which is reflected appropriately in the tone of the language. It uses appropriate figurative language as well as imagery. Among the figures of speech used are The images prominently used in the poem are: those of birds and clouds. The poet cleverly uses the absolute freedom of the uncaged birds, and the graceful unimpeded motion of the clouds to celebrate liberty which the black South Africans are denied by the racist government. Prison is also used as an image to represent bondage and brutality. This position is clearly explained between lines 5 and 7.

On a note of conclusion, Brutus employs economy of language and vivid image tos to reflect upon the significance of freedom in the of every man. He subtly makes a contrast, through comparison, between the psychological trauma and physical torture that a man imprisoned suffers and the emotional tranquility and grace enjoyed by a freedom.

STYLE

Dennis Brutus “letter to Martha 17” is a six stanza poem with a total of twenty-nine lines. Dennis Brutus structured this poem in free verse with the use of run-on-line maybe to please his urgency for freedom.

POETIC DEVICES

Alliteration: lines 4, 11, 21, and 24

 Metaphor: lines 24 and 25

 Personification: lines 5 and 6

 Rhetorical question: lines 26 – 28

 Metonymy: lines 7 – ‘hostile authority’ meaning

The agents of the racist and oppressive South African government.

Line 27 – ‘those at home’ meaning those who are not imprisoned; the luck man who enjoy their freedom in the comfort of their homes.

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SETTING

Spatial setting: The spatial setting of the poem is colonial South Africa.

Temporal setting: The temporal setting of the poem is a prison.