

**From Oppression to Reflection: Prison Experience in  
Dennis Brutus'**

من القمع إلى التأمل: تجربة السجن لدينيس بروتوس رسائل إلى مارثا  
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**الكلمات المفتاحية:**

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**Keywords**

Dennis Brutus, Prison Literature, Postcolonialism, Apartheid,  
Psychological Resistance, Spatial Repression, Letters to Martha, Colonial  
Violence, The Prison Experience.

## Abstract

This research examines the prison experience in the collection *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* by South African poet Dennis Brutus under apartheid South Africa. The research focuses on how prison transforms from a physical space of punishment into a psychological and ideological structure that reshapes identity and consciousness under colonial oppression. The research is based on the postcolonial approach based on the perceptions of Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, to analyze a number of the collection's poems, particularly Letter 1 and Letter 17, in order to reveal the relationship between oppression, prison space, and psychological resistance. The research focuses on studying binary images, spatial metaphor, poetic voice, and linguistic resistance as artistic tools that reveal the transformation of the self from direct political resistance to internal contemplation within the prison space. The research argues that Brutus transforms prison into a symbolic space in which the self renegotiates fear, alienation, and psychological division, while at the same time preserving the possibility of resistance through memory, imagination, and poetic language. The research concludes that Brutus's prison poetry is not limited to documenting political suffering but rather reconstructs the prison experience as a central stage in the formation of postcolonial identity.

## المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث تجربة السجن في مجموعة رسائل إلى مارثا وقصائد أخرى من سجن جنوب أفريقيا للشاعر الجنوب أفريقي دينيس بروتوس في ظل نظام الفصل العنصري في جنوب أفريقيا. يركز البحث على كيفية تحول السجن من فضاء مادي للعقاب إلى بنية نفسية وأيديولوجية تعيد تشكيل الهوية والوعي في ظل القمع الاستعماري. يعتمد البحث على المنهج ما بعد الاستعماري المبني على تصورات فرانز فانون وهومي ك. بهابها وإدوارد سعيد ونغوي وا، واثيونغو لتحليل عدد من قصائد المجموعة، وخاصة الرسالة الأولى والرسالة السابعة عشرة، من أجل الكشف عن العلاقة بين القمع ومساحة السجن والمقاومة النفسية. يركز البحث على دراسة الصور الثنائية، والاستعارة المكانية، والصوت الشعري، والمقاومة اللغوية كأدوات فنية تكشف عن تحول الذات من المقاومة السياسية المباشرة إلى التأمل الداخلي داخل، فضاء ويرى البحث أن بروتوس يحول



السجن إلى فضاء رمزي تعيد فيه الذات التفاوض على الخوف والاعتراب والانقسام النفسي، مع الحفاظ في الوقت نفسه على إمكانية المقاومة من خلال الذاكرة والخيال واللغة الشعرية. ويخلص البحث إلى أن شعر بروتوس السجني لا يقتصر على توثيق المعاناة السياسية، بل يعيد بناء تجربة السجن كمرحلة مركزية في تشكيل الهوية ما بعد الاستعمارية.

## 1. Introduction

Prison literature is one of the most prominent literary forms associated with experiences of oppression, colonialism, and political violence. In many postcolonial experiences, prison has transformed into a space that reveals the relationship between power, identity, and freedom. Prison is no longer viewed solely as a place of corporal punishment but rather as a psychological and ideological structure that reshapes and subjugates the individual's consciousness within colonial systems of domination. This type of literature became clearly prominent in South Africa during the period of apartheid (Apartheid), where the colonial authority used prison as a tool to suppress dissenting voices and dismantle the individual and collective identity of blacks. In this context, the prison experience constituted an essential part of literary and political writing that sought to expose the violence of the racist regime and resist it.

Dennis Brutus is considered one of the most prominent poets whose poetic experience was linked to the struggle against the apartheid regime, as his political and personal suffering was directly reflected in his poetic works, especially in his collection *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison*, published in 1968. These poems were written during his detention following his anti-Apartheid political activism, where he was arrested, shot and then transferred to a number of prisons, including *Robben Island Prison*, which became a symbol of political repression in South Africa.



He was first taken to “Fort” Prison, where he was stripped of his clothes and dressed in prison uniform, and there he recalled the experience of Mahatma Gandhi, who was imprisoned in the same cell. He was then transferred to “Leocop” prison, which witnessed the most horrific types of humiliation, body searches, beatings, and deprivation of food. Even smiling or talking was considered a punishable violation, yet the prisoners tried to relieve themselves by telling stories and communicating secretly through cell tubes.

The prison experience represented an important turning point in his poetic experience, as his poetry moved from expressing direct collective resistance to internal contemplation and revealing the psychological effects of colonial violence within the prison space.(August 2020)

This study focuses on analyzing the prison experience in *Letters to Martha (1968)* as a psychological and spatial experience that reshapes identity within the colonial context. The poems not only present prison as a closed physical space, but also reveal its transformation into a structure that produces fear, alienation, and psychological division. Through this, the poems show how poetic language, imagination, and inner voice transform into means of resistance that preserve the humanity of the self within the space of oppression.

The study analyses the postcolonial approach by drawing on Frantz Fanon's perceptions of colonial violence and psychological division and Homi K's concept. Bhabha on divided identity and Third Space, as well as Edward Said's perceptions of the relationship of power to place and representation, as well as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's ideas about language as a tool of cultural resistance. Through these theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to reveal how Brutus's prison experience transformed from an experience of repression into a space for reflection and identity reshaping.



The study argues that Brutus presents prison not only as an experience of individual suffering but as a space that reproduces the colonial structure within both body and consciousness. The study also seeks to demonstrate that the poetic images, spatial metaphors, and poetic voice in Letters to Martha represent aesthetic tools that reveal the tension between oppression and resistance and between isolation and the desire for liberation, making Brutus's prison poetry a form of psychological and cultural resistance within the colonial system.

## 2. Theoretical framework:

This research draws on the postcolonial approach to analyze the prison experience in Dennis Brutus's poetry, particularly in the collection Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison. The research is based on the perceptions of a number of postcolonial theorists, including Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, to reveal the relationship between colonial oppression, identity, place, and psychological resistance within the prison space.

Frantz Fanon is one of the most prominent theorists who addressed the impact of colonial violence on shaping the colonial individual's consciousness and psychological identity. He believes that colonialism is not limited to political or spatial control but extends to the psychological structure of the colonized human being, as it works to produce fear, division, and alienation within the self. He asserts that colonialism practices comprehensive violence that targets both the body and consciousness, noting that: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, and disfigures it." (Fanon 1963, p. 210)



This perception reveals that colonial violence not only subjugates man physically, but also seeks to dismantle his identity and distort his perception of himself and his history, which is clearly evident in Dennis Brutus's prison experience, where prison turns into a space for reshaping consciousness under the pressure of colonial authority. Apartheid policies that sought to marginalize and exclude blacks culturally and socially, as well as attempts to reshape their consciousness within spaces of oppression and imprisonment. Therefore, prison appears in Dennis Brutus's poetry not only as a place of punishment but also as a direct extension of the colonial violence practiced by the Apartheid regime against black individuals. Violence represents the foundation on which colonial regimes are built, and this clearly applies to the apartheid regime (Apartheid) in South Africa, which relied on racist laws, spatial isolation, prisons, and political oppression in order to impose domination over blacks. The Apartheid regime used violence as a tool to subjugate individuals and control their movement and identity within society, making prison an essential part of the colonial structure in South Africa.

Homi k. Bhabha is one of the most prominent postcolonial theorists who addressed the concept of hybridization (Hybridity) in his book *The location of culture* (1994) as a direct result of the friction between the culture of the colonizer and the culture of the colonized. Bhabha believes that identity in the colonial context is not fixed or pure but rather is formed within an intermediate cultural space that results in a hybrid identity that combines conflicting elements. Therefore, the relationship between colonizer and colonized is not based on complete separation but rather on the continuous overlap and negotiation between cultures and identities. Bhabha asserts that hybridity weakens the idea of pure identity claimed by

colonial discourse because it reveals that identity is always shaped by difference and interaction. In this context, he points out that:

“Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities;” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 159).

This quote demonstrates that hybridity is not just a simple cultural mixing but a direct result of the colonial power structure that produces unstable and constantly shifting identities. Bhabha related to divided identity and intermediate space (Third Space). He believes that identity in the colonial context is not fixed or complete but rather is formed within a state of tension and division as a result of constant friction with colonial authority. He points out that:

“Identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality. “(Bhabha, 1994, p. 73)

From this perspective, identity within the prison space becomes a fractured identity suspended between submission and resistance, as the prisoner experiences a state of psychological division between the desire for steadfastness and a sense of human fragility. The concept of Third Space also helps explain prison as a space in which the self is formed through constant negotiation with oppression and power. The prison experience in Dennis Brutus's poetry can be understood as a space in which feelings of oppression and resistance, fear and the desire for liberation intertwine, leading to the formation of a self that is both divided and hybrid. Bhabha also believes that colonial identity is based on a state of confusion and duality (Ambivalence), as the colonizer needs the colonizer and at the same time fears and rejects him. And he says:

“The objective of colonial discourse is to con-struct the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin in order to

justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 101).

### 3. Psychological oppression in *Letters to Martha*:

*Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison (1968)* is one of the most important poetic works on the prison experience in South African literature during apartheid. Dennis Brutus wrote these poems during his detention in Apartheid prisons following his anti-apartheid political activism, and the collection was published in 1968. The poems represent poetic testimonies that reveal the psychological and political effects of colonial violence within the prison space, as the prison transforms from a place of physical isolation into a space for reshaping identity and consciousness.

*Letters to Martha's* poems reveal the profound psychological impact that apartheid has on people within the prison space. Prison is not presented only as corporal punishment but as an extension of colonial violence that seeks to control human consciousness and dismantle one's psychological identity. This is clearly evident in Letter 1, where Brutus describes the shock and state of internal tension that the prisoner experiences from the moment of arrest, saying:

*“After the sentence  
Mingled feelings:  
Sick relief,  
The load of the approaching days  
Apprehension” (Brutus, 1968, p.1-2)*

The phrase “mingled feelings” reveals a state of psychological division and internal tension resulting from the prison experience, where feelings of fear and anxiety intertwine with a kind of “sick relief” resulting from the end of the waiting period. A prison sentence does not represent the end of suffering but rather the beginning of entering an unknown space

full of violence and oppression. The phrase “sick relief” reveals a paradoxical psychological state that reflects the impact of colonial violence on the human self, as temporary surrender becomes a means of coping with ongoing oppression. This perception can be linked to the ideas of Frantz Fanon, who believes that colonialism is not satisfied with subjugating the body but rather works to dismantle the psychological structure of the colonized person and produce feelings of fear, alienation, and internal division (Mirončuka, 2023).

The coming days will turn into a heavy psychological “load of the approaching days”, as if time itself has become part of the system of oppression. The prisoner is not only afraid of a certain moment but also lives under constant pressure resulting from the expectation of violence and isolation inside the prison. In this context, Fanon confirms that: “colonialism is violence in its natural state” (Fanon, 1963, 61).

This violence is clearly evident in the prison experience within the Apartheid system, where repression turns into a continuous psychological state that affects the prisoner's perception of himself and the outside world. Brutus also reveals the internal conflict that the prisoner experiences between the desire for steadfastness and the feeling of human weakness he saying:

*“Vague heroism  
Mixed with self-pity”*

This duality reflects a state of ambivalence spoken of by Homi K. Bhabha, where identity within the colonial context becomes an unstable identity that moves between resistance and brokenness. The prisoner tries to maintain the image of a resistance fighter, but at the same time he faces his psychological fragility within a space of isolation and oppression. In these lines, Brutus does not present the image of the “full hero”, but rather

reveals the fragile human side of the political prisoner, where feelings of resistance are mixed with fear and psychological fatigue. This makes the poem more realistic and profound, because it expresses the true psychological impact of colonial violence on humans.

*“And tempered by the knowledge of those  
Who endured much more  
And endure...”*

These lines reveal the poet's transition from individual consciousness to collective consciousness, as he realizes that his suffering is not an isolated personal experience but rather part of a collective experience experienced by blacks under apartheid. So individual pain turns into a form of solidarity with others who “endure much more”. This shift reflects what Fanon points out about the connection between the experience of the colonizer and the collective destiny of oppressed peoples, where individual suffering becomes part of the collective political consciousness. This passage also illustrates the transition from the individual voice to the collective poet, who no longer expresses only his personal suffering but rather represents the collective suffering experienced by all prisoners and persecuted persons under the apartheid regime.

When he uses words like “*/Those Who endured much more*”, this is consistent with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) view that African literature under colonialism does not only aim at personal expression but also works to preserve collective memory and resist attempts to obliterate African identity and culture. Writing within oppression therefore becomes a form of cultural resistance.

Language not only reflects reality but also becomes a means of resisting oppression and rebuilding identity within the prison space. This is consistent with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) view that language

represents a tool for cultural resistance and identity preservation. The word “sentence”, which has two meanings; it refers to the judicial ruling, and at the same time, it means the linguistic sentence, reflecting a resistant linguistic consciousness that reproduces the meaning rather than accepting the meaning imposed by the colonial authority.

The study suggests that Letter 1 relies on intensity and calm in describing violence inside prison, with Dennis Brutus using simple, indirect expressions to express repression and psychological fear. This approach reveals the use of symbolic and intense language that conceals violence within calm expressions, reflecting the nature of writing under oppression, where language becomes a means of allusion and resistance rather than direct confrontation. He also explains that Brutus relies on linguistic economy and concise expression to convey the psychological impact of colonial violence inside prison (Ishaku, 2020).

Repetition in “*those Who endured much more*” here is not used only for emphasis but rather reflects the insistence on steadfastness and continuity despite oppression. This can be linked to *Gayatri Spivak’s (1988)* ideas that language gives marginalized people the ability to express their existence within a system that attempts to silence them.

#### **4. Spatial oppression**

The features of spatial oppression in Letter 1 begin from the first moment the ruling is issued, as the prison transforms from a legal idea into a new space based on isolation and control. In a phrase: “After the sentence” The word “sentence” does not only refer to a judicial ruling but represents a moment of transition from the space of freedom to the space of prison. From this perspective, prison becomes a spatial and psychological boundary that separates the self from its former world. Also, the phrase:



*“The load of the approaching days”*

It reveals that time itself turns into a form of oppression, as the coming days become a space full of fear and psychological pressure. Letter 17 reveals prison as a colonial space based on isolation, control, and reshaping man's relationship with place. Prison in the poem is presented not only as a physical place but also as a tool of the apartheid system that aims to restrict both the body and consciousness.

“With a small space of sky  
cut off by walls  
of bleak hostility  
and pressed upon by hostile authority”  
(Brutus, 1968, p. 17-19).

The phrase “small space of sky” reveals the diminished sense of freedom within the prison, as the sky, which usually symbolizes openness and freedom, turns into a small, limited space seen from behind the walls. Also use the phrase “cut off by walls”. It makes walls a symbol of oppression and isolation, as they not only restrict movement but also separate the prisoner from the outside world, nature and normal life. The prisoner not only lost his physical freedom but also lost his natural relationship with open space. The sky is no longer a vast space but rather a small part enclosed by walls, reflecting the nature of the apartheid system, which was based on spatial isolation and control over the movement of blacks within South African society. (Trinya, 2015)

The prison thus becomes a microcosm of the spatial structure of the Apartheid system itself, which relied on geographical separation and strict boundaries in order to impose political and social dominance from this perspective, prison becomes a direct extension of Apartheid policies based on segregation and spatial isolation. This perception can be explained through the ideas of Frantz Fanon (1963), who believes that colonialism is



based on dividing the world into separate spaces based on power and submission, as he describes the colonial world as “a world divided into compartments” (Fanon, 1963, p. 3). This division is clearly reflected in the poem, where there is a sharp separation between inside and outside the prison and between the closed space in which the prisoner lives and the free space represented by the sky and the birds.

The phrase “pressed upon by hostile authority” It reveals the transformation of power into a material and psychological force that constantly puts pressure on people. Power here does not appear only through laws or guardians but becomes a permanent presence that controls both the body and consciousness. This can be linked to Edward Said's ideas about the relationship between power and place, as he believes that colonial regimes use geographical space as a tool to dominate and control individuals, as he says:

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography,  
none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography”  
(Said, 1994, p. 7).

From this perspective, the prison in the poem transforms into a political space that reflects the nature of the racist system that reorganized the place in order to control blacks and isolate them psychologically and socially. The feeling of spatial oppression reaches its peak when the poet says:

“There can be no hope  
of seeing the stars:  
the arcs and fluorescents  
have blotted them out”

This image reveals the control of power even over man's relationship with nature and heaven. The stars, representing hope and freedom, disappear due to the artificial lights inside the prison, reflecting the colonial

regime's attempt to control both vision and imagination. Therefore, repression is not limited to restricting the body, but extends to depriving the prisoner of a sense of the outside world. Thus, Letter 17 reveals that prison under the Apartheid regime represents a space for reproducing colonial violence through spatial isolation and psychological pressure. Walls, power, and artificial lighting all become symbols of domination, making the place itself an instrument of oppression and control within the racist system.

### 5. Imagination and Resistance:

Despite the spatial and psychological oppression imposed by imprisonment in Letter 17, Dennis Brutus does not present the imprisoned self as completely submissive but rather reveals the ability of imagination, nature, and poetry to create a form of inner resistance. When body movement is restricted within the prison space, the mind begins to search for a symbolic alternative to freedom by contemplating nature, the sky, and the birds. Therefore, the elements of nature in the poem turn into symbols of psychological resistance and the restoration of a sense of humanity.

This appears from the beginning of the poem when the poet says:

*“In prison  
the clouds assume importance  
and the birds”*

This image reveals a shift in the prisoner's consciousness, as simple objects such as clouds and birds become of exceptional importance within the isolation space. In normal life, these elements seem ordinary, but the prisoner deprived of liberty begins to rediscover them as symbols of movement, openness, and life outside the walls. Nature therefore becomes a psychological means of escaping the spatial oppression imposed by



prison. The poem also reveals the mind's attempt to transcend the boundaries of place, as Brutus says:

*“The mind turns upwards when it can”*

This phrase reflects the beginning of inner resistance, as the body remains trapped inside the prison while the mind attempts to break free through imagination and contemplation. This perception can be explained by the concept of Homi K. Bhabha on Third Space, which sees identity as forming within an intermediate space between oppression and the desire for liberation (Bhabha, 1994). The prisoner here lives between the physical reality of the prison and an imaginary space through which he tries to preserve his psychological freedom.

*“the complex aeronautics  
of the birds  
and their exuberant acrobatics”*

The birds in the poem represent a counter-image to the state of imprisonment and stability, moving freely in the sky while the prisoner remains trapped by the walls. Therefore, the movement of birds turns into a symbol of the freedom that black people were deprived of under the apartheid regime. Some critical studies suggest that Brutus uses images of nature as symbolic forms of psychological resistance, where the free movement of nature becomes compensation for the loss of physical freedom (Sinyuy, 2022).

The poet also explains that even traditional images of freedom have a new meaning inside prison, saying:

*“cliches about the freedom of the birds  
and their absolute freedom from care  
become meaningful” (Brutus, 1968, p.19)*

This phrase reveals that the prison experience changed the poet's perception of simple words and ideas. Freedom, which seemed like an



ordinary idea outside, has become a real and profound meaning inside prison. Hence, poetic language turns into a means of reproducing meaning and resisting oppressive reality, which is consistent with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's conception, who sees language as a form of cultural resistance and identity preservation (Ngũgĩ, 1986).

The poem ends with a state of nostalgia and symbolic communication with the outside world, as he says:

*“where are they going  
where will they dissolve  
will they be seen by those at home  
and whom will they delight?”*

These questions reveal the prisoner's continued connection to the outside world despite isolation, as clouds turn into a symbolic means that connects the prisoner to homeland, family, and memory. This can be linked to Edward Said's ideas about the relationship between exile and place, where a person remains connected to the place he has been deprived of even in moments of forced isolation. These questions reveal a poetic voice based on contemplation and the search for meaning that transcends the boundaries of prison. Instead of direct political rhetoric, Brutus relies on calm language and open-ended questions that express nostalgia and a desire to connect with the outside world. Therefore, the poetic voice transforms from an isolated individual voice into a human voice that reflects the experience of oppression, exile, and the search for freedom (Said, 1994).

Brutus also relies on repetition as a means of affirmation and resistance, especially in his saying:

*“those  
Who endured much more  
And endure...”*

Repetition here not only performs a rhythmic function but also reflects the insistence on continuing and persevering despite oppression. Also, the open ending in the word “endure” reveals the continuation and infinity of suffering, giving the poem a human and collective dimension. This use of language can be explained by Gayatri Spivak's perception that language represents a way for marginalized people to regain their voice within systems that try to silence them (Spivak, 1988).

## 6. Conclusion

Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison reveals that the experience of imprisonment under apartheid is not limited to physical isolation but represents a colonial structure that reshapes human consciousness and psychological identity. Through Letter 1 and Letter 17, Dennis Brutus depicts prison as a space of psychological and spatial oppression, where walls, isolation, and power become tools for producing fear, alienation, and internal division. The study showed that Brutus uses poetic images, contemplative language, and inner voice to reveal the transformation that the imprisoned self experiences from shock and fear to contemplation and psychological resistance. In Letter 1, the effects of colonial violence are highlighted by feelings of anxiety and division between heroism and weakness, reflecting a turbulent identity formed under the pressure of oppression. Letter 17 shows how imagination and nature become symbolic means of resisting isolation and restoring a sense of freedom, as birds, clouds, and the sky become images that reflect the self's desire to transcend the boundaries of prison.

The study also showed that Brutus's prison experience can be understood in light of the postcolonial perceptions of Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, prison is



associated with colonial violence, psychological division, control of space, and attempts to obliterate cultural identity. In contrast, language and poetry become tools of cultural and psychological resistance, allowing the self to maintain its voice and humanity within the space of oppression.

Thus, the research shows that Brutus presents prison not only as an experience of individual suffering but also as a space that reveals the nature of the racist system and its psychological and cultural effects on the black person in South Africa. It also shows that the transition from repression to meditation in Letters to Martha does not represent surrender but rather marks the beginning of a new awareness based on inner resilience and resistance through language, imagination, and memory.



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