

Andre Brink's *The Wall of the Plague* and the Alter-Native Literary Tradition in South Africa

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*Various critics have taken a swipe at South African writers' 'monolithic' approach of narrating the racial oppression in their nation during the era of apartheid. However, a few writers have appropriated the unfortunate historical incident from a different perspective. Therefore, this essay is an attempt to read Andre Brink's *The Wall of the Plague* as a paradigmatic appropriation of South African socio-historical realities during the period of apartheid. The central assumption of the paper is that South African writers face some restraints and challenges in narrating the problem of apartheid in their motherland. It highlights Brink's imaginative appropriation of South African history with a view to determining his political allegiances and commitment, that is, his political correctness or otherwise. It is argued that Brink's reworking of a socio-political epoch disrupts the categorisation of South African literature as purely sociological. It is also revealed that, while Brink is committed to critiquing apartheid, he is equally interested in giving an alter-native rendition of the issue. It is established that Brink is an innovative writer, not just a witness against the injustices of apartheid. It is concluded that *The Wall of the Plague* offers a deconstructive and subversive narration of the particular mode of discourse that emerged in the history of South African literature. Brink's fictional approach in the novel offers an alter-native interpretation of events in apartheid South Africa, including social stratification, alienation, segregation and racial discrimination.*

Key words: Andre Brink, South African fiction, Apartheid, Realism, African literature, Text and context, History and fiction, Allegory

“While black authors tend to see the political dimension of literature as inescapable, white writers more often view themselves as having an ethical obligation to respond to the rampant injustice that characterizes their society. Perhaps the most outspoken in this regard is the Afrikaner novelist Andre Brink. After an early career as a member of an avant-garde Sestigers (writers of the sixties), Brink turned in his fiction to overt political topics and in his criticism to a Sartrean insistence on the ethical responsibility of the South African writer.”
(Susan Gallagher 1991:5)

The nexus between literature and life has become a staple of literary analysis in Africa. It is apparent that African writers and critics do not accept the autotelic, self-sufficient and self-referential character of a literary work. Rather, African writers and scholar-critics, mostly, believe that the ‘word’ can decidedly intrude into the ‘world’. At the centre of this controversy is the question of representation, ideology and the relationship between the literary and political systems. Similarly, Arnold Kettle (1970) opines that great revolutions in human society modify and alter human’s consciousness and revolutions, not only their social relationship but also their philosophy, art, music and the like (63). This observation is very true of the South African experience. The South African society has undergone a lot of socio-political transformations which have brought along with them, among others, socio-political changes. Until 1990, South Africa was the site of one of the most cruel and barbaric

racist regimes in the history of mankind. This historical epoch, also, finds an expression in the role of the South African writer. He is a watchdog and a historian in the society. He sees himself as the judge, the conscience and the teacher of human values. His various commentaries on society relate to political, educational and, even, cultural issues.

Art cannot, therefore, exist without reference, whether explicit or implicit, to human situations. Mao Tse Tung says: “there is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake” (1975:21). From Plato and Aristotle to the present, literature has been conceived as being inextricably tied to the social circumstances and forces of its era. To the sociologists of literature, a work of art is explicable in terms of three factors: its author’s race, the author’s milieu and his historical moment (Abrams, 1981:178). Hence, to some extent, art is essentially a reflection of the socio-historical strains of its enabling environment. It, more often than not, manifests both the internal stresses and the progressive tendencies of the era in which it is produced. This is also the view of Niyi Osundare who avers that African writers must write “not to entertain and please, but to change the world in the process” (2007:30). Ngugi wa Thiong’o also supports this claim:

Writers and critics of African literature should form an essential intellectual part of the anti-imperialist cultural army of African peoples for total economic and political liberation from imperialism and foreign domination. (1981:31)

Also, Olu Obafemi, in his Inaugural Lecture entitled “Literature and Society on the Border of Discourse,” asserts that literature is a veritable means of textualising and periscoping the realities of its enabling milieu. In his words, “literature reflects, represents and refracts the reality of the world across age and time. It is not just a work of imagination aimed solely to give pleasure” (1997:7). To a great extent, Obafemi’s opinion captures the essence of literature, most especially in the neo-colonial/postcolonial African society. The importance of social awareness and recognition of the critical fact that a writer should play a purposeful role in the human drama of his time cannot be underestimated. The notion of art for art’s sake is not relevant to the immediate African socio-political engagement. In line with this opinion, Achebe affirms that “the writer in our society should be able to think of these things and bring them out in a form that is dramatic and memorable” (1973:2). Achebe is not alone in holding this position. Other famous African writers and critics have, at one time or the other, elaborated on this issue, mostly agreeing that the milieu in which a writer finds himself/herself goes a long way in shaping his/her thematic concern (Shatto Gakwandi, 1977; Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1981; Lewis Nkosi, 1981; Aduke Adebayo, 1983; Jude Agho, 1995; Elleke Boehmer, 1995). Also, Nadine Gordimer, the notable South African novelist and critic, has observed that “black writers choose their plot, characters and literary styles; their themes choose them” (1973:11). This statement validates the notion that literature draws its materials from society, and it also seeks to influence the society by transforming the imagination of the reader with a view to advocating positive social, cultural and political transmission.

Wole Soyinka’s essay, “The Writer in a Modern African State” (1968), in which he argues for an engagement with socio-historical realities, somewhat provides a path-clearing critical manifesto for African writers. Commenting on the relevance of literature in combating imperialism and neo-colonialism in Africa, Soyinka avers that

“the time has now come when the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity” (1968:20). Therefore, some African writers, including Brink, prioritise the prospective status and function of literature. Instead of limiting their works to the retrospective function, they write in order to envision an alternative society that is better than the present one marred by conflicts and intolerance. Lewis Nkosi also ascribes to the writer a redemptive role. However, he pushes Soyinka’s literary agenda forward by viewing history as “a conspiracy of malevolent force” (1981: 31). To Nkosi, “out of the raw materials of history, the novelists construct for us ‘fictions’: in so doing, they create patterns of meaning out of a jumble of meaningless chaos” (31-32). Therefore, commitment to reality and political involvement have marked South African fiction since the 1950s and have carried it into the twenty-first century. South African writers use their works to chronicle everyday life in their milieu.

George Nyamndi offers an illuminative and comprehensive enunciation of the role of African writers, most especially in an age of strife and conflict. His view is worth quoting at length:

What Eliot calls shape and significance, and Nkosi patterns of meaning are redeeming strengths that underline history’s ability to wrest itself from chaotic negativity and transform into source material for human worth. History incessantly confronts the writer with a jumble of meaningless chaos. His duty is now to extract, from this jumble, such elements into works for the vivification of his society. This is the road that Soyinka invites the African writer to ply in advocating informed selectivism in regard to the source material that is African history. (2008: 567)

In every society, there are events that transcend their times and others that merely survive their histories. A defining event of South African political development is apartheid, which is unmistakably the greatest and deepest source material for South African writers. Commenting on the persistent ultra-naturalistic temper of South African fiction of the apartheid period, Andre Brink opines:

Because of the very nature of his situation—the fact that, through history, culture and the colour of his skin, he is linked, like it or not, to the power Establishment, nothing he says or writes takes place in a vacuum; it always elicits a response. (1983:76)

It is within the framework of the foregoing exploration that this paper examines the interplay of history and fiction in Andre Brink’s fiction with a view to commenting on his role as the conscience of his society and how he has condemned apartheid in memorable terms. An attempt is, also, made to explore his art as an alter-native tradition in the fictional rendition of the unfortunate apartheid era in South Africa. It is further argued that Brink has extended the hitherto narrow range of South African writing by going beyond a British tradition to draw on French tradition and writings (*nouveau roman*).

It is germane to dwell, briefly, on the biography of Brink, because it is pertinent in the ongoing critical endeavour. He was born on May 29, 1935 in Vrede, South Africa. He is a poet, novelist, essayist and teacher. He is a key figure in the modernization of the Afrikaans language novel. He won a Commonwealth Writers

Regional Award for Best Book in 2003. He was made a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters, and was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government. In 1992, he was awarded the Monismanien Human Rights Award by the University of Uppsala for making known the injustice of Apartheid to the wider world. In the 1960s, he and Breyten Breytenbach were key figures in the literary movement known as *Die Sestigters* (The Sixty-ers). This group used Afrikaans to criticise the Apartheid government, and also to bring into Afrikaans Literature the influence of contemporary English and French literatures. Due to Brink's vehement reactions against the Apartheid policies, his novel *Kennis van die aand* (*Knowledge of the Night*) (1973), was the first Afrikaans book to be banned by the South African Government. His novels are mostly concerned with the historical realities in his milieu, which were, initially, the Apartheid policy. However, his recent writings engage new issues raised by life in post-Apartheid South Africa. Brink is, perhaps, one of the future recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature. This view is in support of Bernth Landform who claims that "other prominent white South African writers who, occasionally, have been mentioned as possible Nobel Prize candidates are Alan Paton, Andre Brink, Athol Fugard, and J.M. Coetzee" (1988: 244).

In *The Wall of the Plague*, Brink transposes a French story to South Africa with the intention of putting an aesthetic distance between himself and his society (South Africa). His innovative fictional strategy was also an attempt to avoid the sledge hammer of the repressive state apparatuses that hounded protest writers and censored their writings. Through his innovative narrative techniques, most especially his reliance on allegory, Brink translates his countrymen's predicaments into terms that speak more directly to outsiders. 'The wall of the plague', as allegorically rendered in the novel, is not solely on the plague of apartheid but also all the barriers that confront racial harmony and peaceful human relationships. Therefore, what we have in Brink's *The Wall of the Plague* is a broader depiction of the issue of apartheid. Unlike many contemporary South African novels, Brink, in this novel, jettisons some basic tenets of realistic fiction, including realistic setting and credible characters. The setting of the novel is far away from South Africa; it is set in the countryside of Provence, not in Soweto or any place in the country. The characters also have universal significance. The protagonist, Andrea Malgas, is a young 'coloured' South African woman who flees Cape Town with a white lover, Paul Joubert. Andrea spends eight years in Europe trying to distance herself from her past. Thus, her experience depicts a coming-of-age story of anybody who metamorphoses from liberal apathy to a final commitment to a struggle for change in any society that is inundated with racial disharmony.

Andrea is influenced by two men in her ordeal to give herself an identity in her highly racialised society—her current lover, Paul Joubert, a middle-aged Afrikaner expatriate whose roots are now in Paris, and a black South African militant named Mandla Mqayisa. Paul, a frustrated novelist and film maker, asks Andrea to marry him, which means that she will never return to South Africa. However, she settles for a metaphorical meditation on the blight of apartheid—by writing on the film about the Black Death and by giving indirect aid to the opposition. Then, Mandla intervenes in her life. In Europe, Mandla raises money for the anti-apartheid cause. He also inspires Andrea to go back and join the struggle in South Africa due to his (Mandla's) extraordinary physique.

Thus, *The Wall of the Plague* is ostensibly a diary of Andrea's change of heart and mood as she drives through Provence. This white-coloured-black scheme is Brink's way of envisioning unity in diversity among the races in apartheid South

Africa. Andrea is abruptly confronted with a political choice. Thus, she says about Mandla: "He'd begun to threaten my wholeness" (177). Later she says: "Inside me I was aware of a terrible emptiness expressed in flesh and bone. And it had been this emptiness to which he'd addressed himself" (185). Her political and moral quandary or the emotional turmoil behind it depicts the problems of a person in a racially skewed society struggling to imbibe an identity. To provide an alter-native rendition of the problem of apartheid, Andrea foregrounds her sexual difference instead of her racial problem. She says: "You make me feel a woman, a person" (184). This gives her a clichéd identity crisis. Therefore, the apartheid South African dilemma is not treated purely as racial, unlike many other South African novels that dwell on the problem of apartheid. She frames her predicament as primarily a sexual, rather than a racial one. She tells Paul the first time they make love: "I'm a woman. I'm coloured. I'm everything that can be exploited" (188). Like her literary cousin in J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (Magda), Andrea warns Mandla, "But please don't ever turn me into a story. I'm not a story. I'm me" (213). She is disappointed in her father and her society. In a like manner, Paul's crisis of conscience as an Afrikaner is overshadowed by his crisis of creativity as a well-known writer in Europe. He negotiates the trouble in his mother-land with a dose of self-deception. His assumed responsibility is to "shake off the fear, to look my world in the face, to risk everything, to write what I have within me" (266).

In this novel, Brink dwells on the irony of life in South Africa, a land that is portrayed through the images of natural beauty and abundant physical resources. However, through the skewed relationships of the characters, the reader is made to know that the natural beauty of the land is inundated with unjust social conditions and oppressive political structures. Also, to signify the dissonant human relationships in apartheid South Africa, *The Wall of the Plague* is replete with waves of protest, ebbs of governmental suppression and turbulent interactions. Memories of the pangs of apartheid are found in the quotations from Paul's large library of works on the plague that are scattered through the novel. With this style, Brink is able to depict the uniquely appalling situation in South Africa and broadens the peoples' dilemma.

According to Lewis Nkosi:

Critics claim to expect more from Southern African writers than a mere rendering of 'the surface meaning of the scene', but the nature of this expectation is itself controlled by what is perceived to be the proper relationship between literature and commitment, between truth and art. (1981: 76)

Nkosi, therefore, argues that South African fiction is dominated by sociological propaganda, whereas researches into the works of writers who negotiate the problem of apartheid, Brink, most especially, have been neglected. This lopsidedness in the discourse produced so far then gives the exaggerated position to South African fiction being merely sociological and ultra-naturalistic. This paper, therefore, argues that Brink's fiction creates another approach for understanding the issues of racism in South African fiction.

J.M Coetzee is also suspicious of the kind of social-realism or 'literature of commitment' that sees the South African writer as the diagnostic organ of the body politics. However, it should be stressed that Brink is not as evasive as Coetzee on what should be the role of the South African writer during the apartheid era. Andre Brink has emerged as one of the most powerful South African writers. He is an

exemplum of Nkosi's ideal South African novelist. In *The Wall of the Plague*, *States of Emergency* and *An Act of Terror*, Brink's thematic preoccupation shifts to denunciation of apartheid by a revelation of its systematic delimitation of human possibilities and scope of action. In line with Nkosi's advice, Brink engages in what could be described as oppositional writing; his fiction is the anti-critical realist type. He is not interested in depicting typical characters in typical and realistic settings; he avoids overt political comments. In fact, in Brink's fiction, history is counter-discursively employed. Indeed, *The Wall of the Plague* is a compelling exploration of the agonising effects of apartheid in South Africa. Brink depicts the effects of apartheid on the dehumanised people, including the black, the coloured, the marginalised and all other sets of people who are oppressed by apartheid and its official oppressive institutions.

A humanist, Brink's sympathy and compassion lie with the oppressed masses. He uses an alter-native narrative technique to creatively counter the overwhelming perception of South African literature as mere journalistic and sociological tracts. In the novel, Andrea, a coloured expatriate from the Cape, comes to Provence to research the background to her lover's, Paul's, film on the Great Plague. Mandla, a fellow South African and black activist, travels with her; her intense convictions make her question her own life and beliefs. This form of interracial relationship is in line with the argument of Homi Bhabha, a strong adherent of Fanon, that neither the colonizer nor the colonized are independent of each other and that colonial identities on both sides of the divide are unstable, and are in a constant state of flux (in Loomba, 1989:63).

Brink's vision for a future South African society is worth discussing. He envisions a trans-cultural, pluri-sexual and multi-nationalistic society. Thus, the reader is introduced to a peaceful co-existence of a coloured woman (Andrea) and a black man (Mandla). The remaining leg of the tripod (a white man or woman) is, therefore, called upon to complete the cycle of peaceful co-existence of the people. Thus, at a metaphorical level of meaning, Brink's message is that whites, blacks and coloureds are interdependent on one another for survival, growth and sustenance. Andrea and Mandla are, therefore, literary clones of Brink. This is reflected in their longing for interracial interactions. Like Brink, Andrea and Mandla are liberal-minded humanists who crave for a social relationship without any class stratification, political schisms, cultural segregation, colour discrimination or whatever form of constraints obtainable in the South African situation. They yearn and long for an uninhibited relationship with blacks and whites alike, but they are constrained by the South African situation that enacts a wall of difference and opposition between blacks and whites.

Actually, the root of the human problem that confronted the South African novelists was apartheid. Thus, before the dismantling of the policy of apartheid, the writers became the "mouth-pieces" of the silent, oppressed people, calling for understanding and support for the eradication of the inhuman and primitive apartheid system. South African writers captured, as vividly as possible, the typical South African life so that the various problems facing the black South Africans are made known, even to the ignorant ones for them to see the need for a better tomorrow, which has subsequently arrived. However, it is pertinent to comment that, due to the innovative style of Brink in appropriating the socio-historical realities of South Africa, that is, his refusal to engage in merely rendering the surface meaning of the dissonant racial situation in Apartheid South Africa, he has not been given adequate critical attention. This assertion is supported by Lekan Oyegoke:

Prior to 1994 South Africa writing had been treated by the rest of free Africa mostly as black South African writing, which has the effect of either excluding liberal white writers who were sympathetic to the black cause of accommodating them in an uneasy kind of relationship. Writing in Afrikaans was a rule ignored in black African literary studies, and as a result the writings of some liberal Afrikaner writers were excluded from mainstream of literary interest and scholarly concern in the rest of Africa. Inevitably, works by the likes of Andre Brink were generally ignored, even by those scholars who were sceptic about a narrow political or sociological view of commitment in literature. (2002: 4-5)

Lewis Nkosi (1980:29) brings black South African writers to the drawing board and concludes that most of their writings are mere journalistic representation of the apartheid situation. He re-echoes the advice given to black South African writers to renounce literature temporarily so that the political problem of apartheid might be permanently solved. According to Nkosi, it is necessary for South African writers “to renounce literature temporarily, as some have addressed, and solve the political problem first” (1983:132). In fact, representations of interracial situations in Apartheid South Africa were always tangled and disingenuous.

In order to redress the omissions and occlusions of the main canon of South African fiction from the growing repertoire of critical discourses, Brink, in his novels, endeavours to re-write the South African literary tradition. According to Heather Hewett, “literary traditions are constantly being made and remade. Literature, after all, is continually evolving and changing, and the definitions that denote categories and literary lineages are constantly debated by readers, critics and the writers themselves” (2005: 75). In consonance with this assertion, in Brink’s fiction, there is an alter-native mode of engaging in the business of social commitment and protest. What Brink offers in his fiction is an allegorical rendering of the political and social conditions in South Africa, particularly the suffering caused by imperialism and apartheid. This novel mirrors the nation, with a view to catching a glimpse of its face, even, if only, to later reject or denounce what is seen there as an outrage. Commenting on the influence of existentialism on Brink’s fiction, Isidore Diala opines:

Andre Brink, the eminent South African novelist with a firm international anti-Apartheid reputation, has recurrently drawn attention to the influence of French existentialist writers on his fiction (2008:356).

In *The Wall of the Plague*, Brink relies heavily on existentialism, a vast philosophical movement that stresses the importance of an individual to create and live a personally valid, authentic and meaningful life. Therefore, Brink’s characters choose a set of truths that allows them to actualise their potential selves beyond the limits of a conforming society. Thus, with the influence of the writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, Brink conceives of racial conflict as an existential problem, not a peculiar problem as we have in most literary writings by black South Africans. Also, instead of revealing only the agonising effects of apartheid, he depicts the psychological impact of the problem on both the victimisers (the white) and the victimised (the black). With this, Brink is able to prove that conflict is a whirlwind

that brings nobody any benefit. Diala (2008) offers a critical opinion about this balanced and objective criticism of the problem of apartheid in Brink's fiction:

Brink privileges a history characterised by rebellion against tyranny and an affirmation of human dignity and freedom. Brink's condemnation of Apartheid was thus basically inspired by his conviction that it impoverished the humanity of the Afrikaner. (2008: 356)

Therefore, according to Brink, apartheid denies "the best in the Afrikaner himself. It reveals that side of him which is characterised by fear, by suspicion and by pigheadedness" (Brink, 1983: 19). There is a sense in which we can claim that Brink is a dissident novelist whose responsibility is the political liberation of the black and the redemption of the Afrikaner from the ideology of apartheid. His artistic credo is to struggle not just against what is evil in the Afrikaner, but also

For what he perceives to be his potential for good. In other words, it is not just a struggle aimed at the liberation of blacks from oppression by whites, but also a struggle for the liberation of the Afrikaner from ideology in which he has come to negate his better self. The dissident struggles in the name of what the Afrikaner could have become in the light of his own history, had not allowed adversity (both real and imaginary) to narrow down his horizon to the small hard facts mere physical survival. (Brink, 1983:20)

Hence, in Brink's fiction, there is appropriation and recreation of history for fictional purposes. According to A.J Hassal, Brink's fiction has an intertextual link with the fiction of the Australian novelist, Patrick White, most especially the

disregard for the merely factual and [he] invents the 'historical' records on which his book pretends to be based, What he, like White, wants from the past is a story comprehending the origins of the present, and which can enrich a spiritually impoverished society, lacking in humanising myths. (1987: 7)

In fact, the ideological orientation of Brink towards commitment in South African literature is that art should contribute to the transformation of South African society. Therefore, Brink's imaginative reconstruction of history and documentation of the cruelties of apartheid constitute his attempt to participate in the democratisation process in South Africa and to redeem the Afrikaner from a certain apocalyptic threat of virtual self-destruction. However, he believes that this does not imply that the artistic value of a literary work should be sacrificed on the altar of propaganda. Art should, therefore, contain veritable aesthetics to qualify as art, and it should also be used as an instrument of change in society. He, therefore, avoids the tendency that could lead South African literature into "getting caught inside the narrow framework of an onslaught of Apartheid" (1990:472). Thus, Brink's fiction offers a positive reaction to the popularly-held view that the South African novel is a mere journalistic writing, rather than artistic construct (See: Lewis Nkosi, 1980: 30).

The plausibility of Brink's narrative and historicity is founded on the contemporariness of the events, situations and conjunctures in *The Wall of the Plague*.

The cosmos of the novel, like the typical South African society during the era of apartheid, is marred with racism, which is the source of violence among the minority group and the oppressed majority. Frantz Fanon's two definitive books, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, address the dysfunctions that occur in the psyche of the oppressed people. Thus, Brink, in the Fanonian temper, imaginatively chronicles the imperialist epistemic violence towards non-whites, which forces the black majority to value their lives, traditions, mores, cultures and communities in relation to the 'superior' white norms. Indeed, *The Wall of the Plague* explicitly invokes existentialism as a possible discourse through which the trauma of colonial encounter can be understood.

The Wall of the Plague offers an allegory which is not specific to the South African society. In the novel, the reader comes across scenes which depict shocking violations of human dignity and freedom by apartheid or its similar manifestations across the world. In this novel, Andrea and Mandla confront the uneasy relationships which develop between themselves and their lovers. Like Adam and Elisabeth in Brink's *A Dry White Season*, Andrea and Mandla's hostility slowly disappears in the process of narrating their personal experiences. They begin to recognise in each other something of their own needs and fears, sufferings and aspirations. The relationship between Mandla and Andrea, also, depicts human life in apartheid South Africa as very excruciating; it was a society where human beings constantly moved towards death. For instance, the black activist, Mandla, is followed to France and is finally eliminated by the invincible agents of apartheid. The characters' difficulties signify those faced by two disparate continents as they undertake the process of reconciling Europe's past and Africa's present. The novel, also, dwells on issues that are germane to the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. Commenting on this humanistic temper of Brink's *The Wall of the Plague*, Diala opines thus:

Brink, even at the peak of the cultural struggle against Apartheid, strove towards apparent timeless typical human experience to a pattern of interpretation that is central to our understanding of our humanity. His inclination was always to attempt to transform political insights into valid timeless humanist insights. If he remained sensitive to the demands of his South African environment, his commitment to his international audience was equally passionate. (2008: 372)

At any rate, if any South African novelist has the sense of vocation, of commitment and of a mission as a writer first and foremost, Andre Brink is such a novelist. It is not stretching issues to declare that the quintessence of Paul's book, *The Black Death*, alluded to in Brink's *The Wall of the Plague*, is to open the white racists' eyes so that, in future, they can start refining their crudest mistakes. Paul himself attests to this postulation by saying:

No, once a person has become aware of evil he can start doing something about it. And it's not only a question of South Africa. It's the whole world, whenever one class exploits another. (1984: 433)

Thus, Brink, in *The Wall of the Plague*, has reconstructed the social realities in South Africa as a fiction. In fact, this is a testimony to Brink's skills. He is able to dissect South African life in all its brutal hopelessness and comes away with the satisfaction and hope that South Africa has also produced a novel as intelligent and rich as *The*

Wall of the Plague. In envisioning a society devoid of interracial dissonance, Brink resorts to the *deus ex machina* of interracial love. Indeed, through the novel, he has contributed immensely towards exposing the racial disharmony in South Africa. This claim corroborates an earlier one made by Andre Viola (1985):

Brink is a courageous writer who has greatly contributed to making the South African situation known to a larger audience (especially in France where he has a wide and faithful readership). (1985: 137)

However, what is explored in *The Wall of the Plague* is not South African history in any particular (synchronic) phase, but history in its diachronic perspective. What are foregrounded and automatised in the novel are the existential realities of birth and death, pleasure and pain, power and victimization, poverty and wealth, happiness and sadness—that is, the ‘reality’ of human experience. These are treated in a general abstracted manner, as constant transhistorical and ubiquitous continuities in human existence. The following scene reflects Brink’s adroit mastery of the technique of transposing the South African ‘plague’ of apartheid into a universal plane:

Because I’d been exposed before to the quality of that light which once again struck me when, after so many days of aimless wandering, I crossed the Rhone and faced the brown walls of Avignon. (1984: 65)

The foregoing scene reveals the universal nature of human misery, pain and conflict. Thus, the problems that people encountered in Apartheid South Africa are portrayed as timeless mythical experiences. Hence, Brink, in his fiction, speaks for all times through the historical fact of apartheid. The deployment of the narrative technique of first person omniscient narration reveals that the problem of apartheid in South Africa is an ubiquitous issue. Thus, the omniscient narrator, in the novel, is an ‘every man’ who lives at ‘every place’. Therefore, Brink, in the novel, refuses to localise the issue of apartheid; rather, as a philosopher-novelist, he uses the South African situation as a convenient launching pad to comment on the predicaments of peoples across the globe. Brink has been able to suggest, through the ordeals of his characters, that human beings, in all societies, where racism exists, as in South Africa, are exiles, and they, therefore, anticipate another outbreak of the Black Plague, the same plague that swept away Francesco Petrarca’s Laura and much of Europe.

In the novel, Andrea Malga captures the gory and dehumanizing situation of South Africa thus:

The point is, I got the impression that a country like South Africa has no place for people who simply want to carry on living, indulge in their sins, have a good meal from time to time, enjoy a bit of music or a good painting or a good book. You’re forced to walk right into the fire. Otherwise, the only choices you have are to go mad or to die. (37)

But it is pertinent to add that Brink cannot be said to be a historical novelist, as one would say of Richard Rive, Alex La Guma, Eskia Mphahlele, Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer. Brink is, in *The Wall of the Plague*, less concerned with psychological contact and conflict; he is less concerned with the cage of class and more concerned with the cage of race. He shows a penchant for disregarding the merely factual or historical; he rather reconstructs the historical realities of his

society. What Brink probably wants from the past is a story comprehending the origins of the present, “which can enrich a spiritually impoverished society, lacking in humanizing myths” (1983:6). He chronicles the traumatic experiences of apartheid through surrealist and metaphysical approaches not through the popular form of political directness. Hence, the approaches are used to hold state action up to censure on several issues, such as racial persecution, injustice, torture by police, and the damaging effects of apartheid, including its prohibition of sex across the colour line.

In choosing the “Plague” as an image for apartheid in South Africa and as a quarry for his novel, Brink has addressed the question of the plague in the context of South African society, which is both parallel to, and different from the French society. Also, Brink’s decision to put some aesthetic distance between himself and the problematic society in which he lives is signified in his decision to transplant a French story to the South African literary terrain. For instance, Paul asks:

Do you realize that up to the present time there are still only five or six areas in the world from which the plague regularly starts all over again —and that one of them is in South Africa? (40-41)

Brink mediates the story through a young black woman (Malgas) a young black activist (Mandla) and a white artist (Paul). The distancing or alienating effect employed by Brink, in the novel, presents him with some challenges of verisimilitude. It, also, demonstrates the degree of imaginative sympathy needed to cross the institutionalised barriers of apartheid, and to confront the common humanity of black and white, and of woman and man. The enduring brilliance of the novel lies in its experimentation with formal patterns and the ingenious manipulation of the naturalist tradition. While he makes use of symbolic and metaphorical patterns, Brink still relies upon adroit manipulation of facts to carry his burden of socio-political commitment. According to David Ward Brink, “makes the decisive break from the kind of formal realism which draws the reader into acquiescence, inviting, instead, an uncomfortable relationship between reader and text, one in which uneasy questions must clamour without any certainty of answers” (1989: 154). Thus, *The Wall of the Plague* offers an illustration of the human condition which transcends all cultural, racial and regional particularities. The essentialist and existentialist approaches adopted by Brink in the novel are quite appropriate for abstracting the refracted history in the novel from its real history, that is, from the social and political matrices to which it is a response. It is apposite to comment further that Brink’s discursive strategy in the novel is premised on the belief that an essential precondition to the establishment of a free and non-racial cultural community in South Africa is the adoption of a holistic approach towards South African society. This approach assists him “to avoid the traditional trap of evaluating the success or failure of South African society primarily from the perspective of social behaviour of the whole population” (Ndebele, 1989:27). Thus, in *The Wall of the Plague*, Brink packages South African politics into unfamiliar fictional tropes.

In this novel, Brink shows that the white in South Africa have betrayed the black, not only by dispossessing them of their rights and denying them a meaningful stake in their own country, the common fate of indigenous people colonised by Europeans, but also by creating a racist policy that justifies the deliberate dehumanisation. This claim is evident in Mandla’s posture about the hypocrisy of the white colonialists in South Africa:

On the surface, where the world could see them, they kept on talking about ‘negotiations’ and reform. But below that surface, where it really mattered, where they could grab us in the dark, there was violence. (328)

Therefore, Brink needed to go back to some countries to find an image of doom and wreckage (plague) that he could set against the jail of Apartheid South Africa, and his story probes the choices and conditions that have made it the prison it became. A riveting aspect of Brink’s artistic craftsmanship is the peculiar manner in which he chronicles the bastardization of a noble wilderness by rapacious imperialists who brought a poisoned ideology of racism and developed a social order that denied humanity to the rulers and slaves alike. To buttress the issue of the socio-political malaise in South African society, the following quotation from the novel will suffice:

Scared of that pack of starved people who suffered so much that they didn’t care anymore. They had nothing to lose. An army of the sick and the poor, rejects, scum, people with death already in their eyes, some of them no more than bones with flaps of skin around them, half-rotten people. (282)

In the cosmos of Brink’s novel (South Africa) blacks and whites are seen as natural equals separated only by the uncompromising racism of the whites. Thus, in the novel, Brink foregrounds sexual relationships between Blacks and Whites, especially the forbidden relationship between Andrea and Paul. Brink portrays both as expected sexual partners who might be normal socio-political partners.

Believing that the racial policies of his government are an outrage against justice and sanity, Brink had no choice but to oppose them to the extent that he was often accused of having a “penchant for violent sensationism” (Lindfors, 1988:224). However, he does not believe that political change is a viable goal of his writings. In his oft-quoted book, *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*, Brink clearly comments on his unique and innovative brand of realism in South African fictional discourse:

However close my work is to the realities of South Africa today, the political situation remains a starting point only for my attempts to explore the more abiding themes of human loneliness and man’s efforts to reach out and touch someone else. My stated conviction is that literature should never descend to the level of politics; it is rather a matter of elevating and refining politics so as to be worthy of literature. (1983:59)

In *The Wall of the Plague*, South Africans are at the mercy of a passionate craving for their homeland, a craving which their despairing hatred of its inhuman race laws and its evil Security Police cannot subdue. Expatriates in European countries are confronted with as cruel a dilemma as Mandla and Andrea are. The characters may choose political, racial and sexual freedom away from their home (for example, Andrea), or they may return to that home, knowing they face bigotry, persecution, loss of all civilized freedoms, and, if they make enough trouble, imprisonment and, almost certain, death.

It should be emphasised that Andrea faces the ultimate choice to return home, despite the cost. This is inevitable, however much it is resisted. Andrea has

determinedly created a life for herself outside South Africa; first in England, and then in France. At the beginning of the story, she is considering an offer of marriage from Paul Joubert, and she knows that her acceptance of the offer would complete the severance from South Africa that she has struggled to maintain during her years of exile. She has hardened herself against the bitter experiences of her fellow expatriates and the increasingly disturbing news from home. When Andrea first meets the black activist, Mandla Mqayisa, she detests him, but, later, they are forced to share affection while researching Paul's book on the plague. She is drawn against her will to recognise that Mandla is her country and her race, calling her home, and her increasingly desperate resistance only delays the inevitable. However, her return remains largely unexplored.

The Wall of the Plague signifies Paul's attempt, bewildered and only partly successful, to understand why Andrea has left him to return to her home, to political activism, and to imprisonment, torture and eventual death. She had earlier said that there are two alternatives for lovers: to stay together or to betray each other. There are only two alternatives for South Africans, as Brink sees it. The first is:

To fight the regime if you are black or coloured, or even white like Ben du Toit in "Rumour of Rain," facing and accepting death in the process. (1983:120)

The second alternative is to betray your country by leaving it, dying morally and spiritually in the 'safety' of exile. Andrea makes the cruel decision to betray her lover in order to be true to her country, her people and herself. Therefore, in Brinkian novelistic discourse, forbidding of interracial love is an allegory of segregation of the peoples in apartheid South Africa. In fact, in line with one of the fundamental tenets of Albert Camus (1947), apartheid, as portrayed in Brink's *The Wall of the Plague*, is a plague that erects impregnable walls between interracial lovers.

We cannot gainsay that Brink has used the image of the plague to expose and lampoon the South African society whose well-being was poisoned by the divisions of apartheid. He has, indeed, reconstructed a deeply felt socio-political reality into a compelling and moving artistic achievement. In *The Wall of the Plague*, Brink has catalogued the misdemeanour of the racists in South Africa: it was a taboo to possess books (24); rape was a common fate of the black and coloured (34); indiscriminate detention was preponderant (342); death is preferable to apartheid (428); indeed, the incredible dignity of Mandla's death, as he lay there ("Invincible—Nothing could touch him any more: Police, vans, batons, nail-studded planks, hate, suspicion, Nothing," 428) shows that death is preferable to the agonising experiences of life in apartheid South Africa.

Brink, through *The Wall of the Plague*, has proved that racism (apartheid) is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Andrea declares: "there's other wall too. Anybody that can keep one person away from another is a 'Wall of the Plague'" (374). Hence, Brink contends that apartheid is more than a socio-political concept; it extends to sex, religion, occupation, status and level of education. However, as a visionary writer, Brink does not fail to give a panacea for combatting the policy of apartheid:

You can't get rid of racism by treating it like the plague: the only way is to regard them as sick people who have to be healed with patience. Until at last we'll all have grown out of our mental Middle Ages into a slightly more civilized future. (220)

Brink's solution to the problem of interracial conflict in apartheid South Africa is the idea of reaching out beyond the boundaries of race for human contact. Hassall adumbrates this panacea for apartheid thus:

In Brink's South Africa, Blacks and Whites are seen as natural equals separated only by the uncompromising racism of the Whites. In all his books, Brink explores sexual relationships between blacks and whites, especially the taboo relationship between a black man and a white woman, and he portrays them as natural sexual partners who might be natural political and social partners if only the Afrikaners establishment would allow it. (1987: 21)

It has been established in this paper that Andre Brink is one of the South African novelists who act as the synthesizers and conduits of the concerns of the society for which they claim to speak. As such, Brink may be regarded as not only having stronger-than-ordinary sensitivity to the human problems of his milieu, but also a strong sense of empathy with his readers. His novelistic agenda is that of liberation and the creation of a new society. It is also revealed that *The Wall of the Plague*, like Brink's other novels, has the traits of humanist universals, and the story is relevant to local and regional racist issues. This was an effort to wage an urgent and crucial battle against apartheid at a period when the hostility was becoming unbearable. In fact, the temper of South African prose fiction has been drastically altered by Brink. This is evidenced in his inauguration of a new perspective of narrating the unfortunate incident of apartheid. He has given a new perspective of narrating Apartheid South Africa in a "state of siege." *The Wall of the Plague* represents a subversion and destruction of the apartheid old order and the process of reconstruction, peaceful co-existence and unity of warring parties to tackle the internal schisms. Through the novel, Brink has called for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence among the races in Apartheid South Africa, while advocating for equal rights of all the races. This is with a view to bringing about socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural development in the nation.

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