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ALAN PATON AS A DEFENDER OF HUMAN RIGHTS DURING THE APARTHEID ERA

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ABSTRACT

The following article points out the main characteristics of the South African politician, writer and teacher Alan Paton. One of the main ideas in his ideology is his belief in a change in South African society in which blacks and whites can live in peace. Paton was very committed with the South African reality during the apartheid. Consequently, he denounced the injustice situation that surrounded back people as a public person and in his literary production, as the examples from his novels that are used in this article point out.

Keywords: Alan Paton, ideology, South Africa, apartheid, human rights.

RESUMEN

El siguiente artículo pone de manifiesto las principales características de la ideología del político, escritor y profesor sudafricano Alan Paton. En su ideología destaca su apuesta por un cambio de sociedad en Sudáfrica en la que los blancos y los negros puedan vivir en paz. Paton fue un hombre comprometido con la realidad sudafricana durante la época del apartheid por lo que en todo momento denunció las injusticias que padeció la población negra en esta época en su vida pública y en su producción literaria, como manifiestan los ejemplos de sus novelas que aparecen en este artículo.

Palabras clave: Alan Paton, ideología, Sudáfrica, apartheid, derechos humanos.
INTRODUCTION

Everywhere and in every historical period there are people who are committed and have a very active role in creating a better world. During the apartheid period in South Africa many people fought for human rights and for the equality of the races; Alan Paton was one of them. His ideology, his career as a politician, and his writing contributed to change the social consciousness.

Alan Paton’s personality fascinated me from the moment in which I read *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948). The topic of the novel and his use of language made me become more interested in his literary production, and for this reason I decided to study the language of his three novels in my doctoral dissertation, which I finished in 2002. Paton inspired my writing because the message he was trying to share then is still a message that needs to be shared.

Three years after I finished my thesis, I thought it was the right time to come to Pietermaritzburg to do some research on the speeches, a very important part of Paton’s work that has remained almost unknown until now, to all but those people who were fortunate enough to be in the audience when the speeches were made. During the months of February and March 2006, I made the Alan Paton Centre my home, and I have gone deeper into Paton’s life and writing, as this paper will show.

Paton died on April 12, 1988. We can say that humanity lost a great politician and a great writer, but on top of that he was a human being committed to the defence of human rights. For this reason, in the next sections of this article I will explore some ways in which Alan Paton showed his commitment through his ideology and through his novels. Non-violent means were the ones in which Paton believed.

THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH PATON’S IDEOLOGY

Although Paton learnt strict moral principles from his parents, he only learnt about racial discrimination later, at university and at Diepkloof. He interprets the racial struggle as a fight against the domination of men, against dominating or being dominated. Paton wanted to free people from their psychological oppression, by eradicating feelings of inferiority and reliance on white people. He believed that freedom was essential to build a new South Africa, as he states in an article published in *Contact* in 1965:

> There is only one foundation on which the New South Africa can be built, and that is the equal participation and recognition of all South Africans. That means the abolition of the colour bar, the death of Apartheid, and political and economic equality. (Paton, 1965: 2)
This vision determined his improvements of Diepkloof Reformatory for black boys near Johannesburg while he was Principal (1935-1948). Paton came to think of Diepkloof as a microcosm of South African society; he introduced some changes in Diepkloof that were inspired by his vision of human life and of society, which had always been religious and moral. During his time there he showed that he believed in freedom as a powerful weapon for transformation. At the same time, his personality became harder, and he decided to concentrate in the African social system due to the contact Paton had had with young murderers. This experience made him write some short stories.

In Paton’s ideology we can see a combination of his Christian ideas based on non-violence, peace, tolerance and comprehension, and the Christian duty of doing something for those in disadvantaged situations. Religion was crucial in his ideology from his childhood, which can be seen in his political career and in his literary work, the other two dominating forces as Paton points out in an interview published in 1988:

Although politics has played a major role in my 84 years, it has not dominated my life. Literature and the love of the word, and the love of writing the word, have been equally important. And the third dominating force has been my religion, my reverence for the Lord Jesus Christ whom I could have served much better (to use Tolstoy’s words, I have not fulfilled a thousandth of His commandments, not because I did not wish to, but because I was unable, but I am trying with all my heart), and my sense of wonder when I contemplate the Universe. (Paton, 1988: 27)

His vision of the world was the one of a Christian. Christianity was for him a religion, a philosophy and a way of living. In his three novels there are many references to Christianity such as the following, which point out that Paton knew the Sacred Scripture well:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery to the blind, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (1981: 113-114).
- Brothers and sisters, this is the night of the Last Supper. And when the supper was over, Jesus rose from the table, and he put a towel round himself, as I do now in remembrance of him. Then he took a dish and poured water into it, and began to wash the feet of his disciples, and to wipe them with the towel. (1981: 236)

Paton believed in the defence of human beings and in dignity, he wanted to do something for those who are oppressed, and at the same time he wanted to promote a common society in which everyone can live in peace.
These were the basic principles of his existence. In *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (1981: 32-33) he shares the following ideas of his ideology through the narrator:

> Who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly at a closed and barred door? [...]  
> As for myself, with a full sense of responsibility and a clear conviction, I decided to remain in the struggle for extending democratic rights and responsibilities to all sections of the South African community.

This ideology allowed him to have a meaningful existence, and to keep hope in the construction of a better world. Paton never lost faith in tolerance, dignity and humanity. He fulfilled his responsibilities as a citizen because he was a man of action who was committed during all his life, as Chinweizu et al. point out (1980: 251) in the book *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*:

> It needs to be pointed out that when a writer fulfils his citizen responsibilities, even at the prize of imprisonment or death, this fact may change our estimate of him as a person. We might choose thereafter to admire him for his courage and heroism as a citizen, but even such heroism is no reason for his literary work to be esteemed more highly than it deserves.

During several years Paton wrote and travelled struggling between contemplation and action, as he makes clear in one of the questions that his son Jonathan Paton asked him in an interview in 1985:

> “I had a conflict between the person who wanted to write, and the person who wanted to do something about his country”.

From an early age he was very conscious of the socio-political situation of his country and decided to be active in politics through the Anti-Apartheid Liberal Association, which was founded in 1953, then it became the Liberal Party and had Paton as his president until it was forced to close in 1968. The party was based on non-violence, as Paton (1960: 5) highlights in an article in *Contact*:

> This party is openly and publicly committed to a policy of non-violence; this means that it will oppose when its duty is to oppose, but it will oppose by non-violent means.

His interest in Afrikaners was one of the signs that his beliefs in brotherhood were not limited by racial differences. His ideology was always in favour of a socio-political commitment that allowed him to be against the

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racial segregation in a historical period in which South Africa was divided from the racial and from the linguistic point of view. That is why the Liberal Party was open to everybody, independently of their race, religious ideas or social class. Paton made this clear in his writing, as we can see in the following article published in *Contact* (1964: 2):

The Liberal Party has always rejected the notion of separate politics. This rejection follows immediately on its recognition of all South Africans as citizens of the one common country, whose historic task it is, despite all omens, to work out a common destiny [...] 

Paton always kept in mind the psychology of the oppressed, the necessity to highlight the inner values of black people, and the importance of building a society in which brotherhood and equal rights for everybody were a reality. A central idea in Paton's ideology was to be against the inhuman ideas of racial segregation, and in consequence, he was always in favour of the defence of individual freedom and equality between races. Alan Paton's widow, Mrs. Anne Paton, shares the terrible situation of her time in a letter written in 1998 for *The Times*:

But it is not just about black-on-white crime. It is about general lawlessness. Black people suffer more than the whites. They do not have access to private security firms, and there are no police stations near them in the townships and rural areas. They are the victims of most of the hijackings, rapes and murders. They cannot run away like the whites, who are streaming out of this country in their thousands. (Paton, 1998: 2)

The previous paragraph describes very well the social situation that surrounded Paton's family, which is the social environment that inspired Paton's writing, political ideas, and that is also the situation that made him strong and have faith in a better future, as the following quotation shows:

My own faith is that this society can still be changed by work and devotion, aided no doubt by external and internal events. This is a faith, and some people would say that it has very little ground in reason. But I choose to hold it, because if I were to hold the faith that this society can be changed only by violence and terror, I would get out and go and live somewhere else. (Paton 1976: 17)

After what I have just said in the previous paragraphs, it is obvious that Paton's commitment made him perceive reality in a different way; his perception always implied an attempt to create a better society through action. The following statement from Chinweizu et al. (1980: 253-254) illustrates Paton's ideas:
Artistic commitment, as we see it, is therefore a matter of orientation, a matter of perceiving social realities and of making those perceptions available in works of art in order to help promote understanding and preservation of, or change in, the society’s values and norms. Thus, the commitment of a work is a matter of its quality, its orientation, and the perceptions it fosters. Commitment, so understood, requires, in particular, that even moments of private reflection, when treated in works of literature, be so presented as to be accessible to the audience, not coded in cipher meaningful to the author alone.

Paton understood dignity as something intrinsic in the human being, and he was conscious that not respecting or not knowing human rights in his society made people do terrible things against black population. In Paton’s view, it was crucial to work for a good relationship between the different races that were living together in South Africa (and that are still living). In this sense, Paton highlighted that South Africa must make an effort to become a country where human rights and freedom are respected so that the situation of the population could improve. He did not believe in separate societies, on the contrary, he believed in a common society in which differences among individuals are respected, as he made clear in an article published in *Contact* in 1958:

> That is the long view, not to waste our time in dreaming fantastic dreams of separate and independent societies, but to bend our energies to the building of a common society, with no nationalism except a common South African nationalism, with no discrimination except against all policies that make any person suffer because of his colour and race. (Paton, 1958: 9)

Paton always showed the expected attitude of a believer; in his novels, he established a clear division between good and bad people. He made clear that his ideology was against the politics of the National Government because he was active and fought for the improvement of black people. His commitment is evident in his novels: he was asking for social change, and highlighted the dangers of his society (Martínez Lirola, 2002a, 2002b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b).

He showed the dramatic situation that surrounded many people by placing the novels in a framework whose main characteristics are exploitation, hatred and fear. In this way he took part in the construction of a better society.

**THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH PATON’S NOVELS**

Paton always had a strong desire to serve humanity in his life, which made him become a politician. He saw in politics a chance to change the unfair social reality surrounding him. Literature also gave him the opportunity of serving others by sharing historical and socio-political facts with the readers. He always felt a strong desire to share the problems and the real situation of
South Africa with the rest of the world, and writing was a good way of doing it, as Colin Gardner highlights in an article written for *Reality* in 1988:

Paton’s style is significant because it is the voice of his essential seriousness which binds together not only the whole of his output as a writer but his varied activities and commitments as a public figure, the very project indeed of his admirably unified and dedicated life. (Gardner, 1988: 9)

Although his commitment as a defender of human rights is clear in all his literary production (articles, poems, speeches, essays and novels), I will just concentrate on his three novels, in which Paton dealt with social problems. They can be considered novels of social protest, whose main purpose is not to entertain but to inform the reader and move him/her so that some action takes place. Christianity is present in the three novels: Paton highlights freedom, respect and equality in humanity, and the importance of treating others as we want to be treated.

The three novels are the mode chosen by the author to show his social commitment with South Africa, its people, its history and its future. Paton was always a defender of a multiracial society in which human dignity was crucial so that every human being could live in peace and freedom.

In *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), we find the story of a white and a black family, the history of white and black social groups, and the society in which they coexist. It is a novel in which we find crime and the reasons for crime, tension and suffering, idealism and reconciliation. This book can be referred to as a documentary about South Africa, in which fiction appears with real socio-political facts. It is also a cry of pain, an exhortation, a prophecy. *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the story of Stephen Kumalo, a Zulu priest and the search for his son in Johannesburg is a product of his time because the tensions of the historical context can be observed, and also the search for brotherhood.

In *Too Late The Phalarope* (1955), set in an Afrikaner community, the main topic is not only a racial problem but also the lack of capacity of human beings to gain comprehension in intimate relationships. The novel shows how a white person ruins his life for having an affair with a black woman. Paton offers a difficult vision of the situation of South Africa, and of the problems of human nature. In this novel we can see Paton’s vision of the Afrikaner’s consciousness and attitudes.

Alan Paton dealt with the difficult relationship between a father who did not show his feelings and a son that keeps his emotions hidden for this reason. The title makes reference to the lack of capacity that the son has to reply to his sexuality, which makes him ruin his life. Pieter, Jakob van Vlaanderen’s
son, is the protagonist of the novel and cannot deal with the tension between his public personality that has the traditional virtues of Afrikaner people, and his emotional nature.

In *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful* (1981), Paton describes the main events that took place during the first years of the Liberal Party, and also some of the tensions and hopes of the moment. In the novel we see how the National Party puts into practice the apartheid ideology, which resulted in a period of darkness for South Africa. A few important leaders were convinced that they had found a formula that guaranteed the future of the white minority until the twenty-first century. The plan, as it is described in the novel, was to create a permanent majority of white Nationalist people in the government not allowing black people to vote. Africans were placed in different areas and the intention was that they had a political alternative of self-government and were independent to a certain extent.

The novel takes place in the fifties because it is in that time that the majority of the apartheid laws were proposed. At the same time, that is the historical moment in which black movements opposed them. In this novel, we find some letters and speeches that belong to famous people in that historical moment that add vividness to the narration.

The topic is different in the three novels: *Cry, The Beloved Country* points out how the terrible conditions in which black people lived in Johannesburg took Absalom Kumalo to an extreme situation; to kill a white man. *Too Late The Phalarope* condemns the inhumane part of racial segregation, as expressed in the Immorality Act of 1927 that prohibited sexual relationships between blacks and whites. In *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, it is pointed out how the National Party supports racial segregation and how the Liberal Party was created to stand for the interests of those racial and social groups that were disadvantaged.

The objective of the three novels is to criticise situations in which human beings are oppressed due to their race. The author's attitude and intention consists of sharing with the reader real facts that took place during the historical period that surrounds the novels. The three novels also transmit a real image of South Africa as it was at that time, showing its main characteristics to be exploitation, decadence, oppression, ignorance and hatred.

The analysis of the three novels points out that Alan Paton decided to use them to share certain aspect about the social situation of his time because he considers this to be an effective way to share with the reader of any country and any time some facts that had an effect in his life and in his ideology.

The analysis of the novels makes clear that they are a cry for justice; the same topics are found in the three of them: apartheid, the role and the psy-
chology of the white man, the difficult relationships between races and racial injustice. These topics appear in the three novels mixed with the emotions and the psychology of the characters. The main feelings are fear, hatred and love of the country.

Paton gives a special treatment to racial problems in the three novels. Apartheid and its consequences is an essential topic in Paton's writing. This topic gives him the opportunity of exploring universal facts that are important in his historical moment, such as human cruelty, suffering and resistance. In this way, Paton shows that he is against racism and all the principles on which apartheid establishes its philosophy. The three novels show Paton's social commitment, i.e., Paton uses his novels as a way of opposing racial discrimination, and as a way of sharing with the reader real facts, such as the white man's ambition to conquer South Africa, to exploit the place, and to steal from black people their land, their rights and their dignity.

The three novels share the same historical context, they refer to the main laws and to the main socio-political facts of apartheid. Paton describes a society that is marked by its history and the dominant culture. For this reason, it seems that the main purpose is to make readers reflect, be critical and discover the deep meaning of the situations that the novels describe. In other words, the objective of the novels is to create a conscience in favour of the disadvantaged groups in society, to show how unfair it is for black people to live in a society without freedom or equal opportunities for all citizens.

Paton shows a compassionate recreation of human lives during the apartheid period. He assumes a social responsibility in his novels, in his writings in general, and in his politics. He shows openly his resistance to apartheid politics. Paton has brought some of the problems in South Africa (racial, social and political) to the attention of the world. He had very strong ideals of nature and reconstruction that can be seen in his writings. Paton's social consciousness was respected by many people of his time.

CONCLUSIONS

After what I have said in the previous pages of this article, it is obvious that Paton was a human being committed to the society of his time: he made of Diepkloof Reformatory, which was a terrible prison for boys, a place in which education and freedom were a priority; Paton learned Afrikaans to be able to have a closer relationship with this group; he defended the black population throughout the second half of his life, especially during the time in which he was the leader of the Liberal Party.
It is evident that Paton’s ideology and values made him an outstanding person in the white minority that defended equality between races. The author’s ideology, which is expressed in the three novels, invites us to be against racism, and to experiment with an internal change that takes us closer to authentic brotherhood.

Paton chose two main ways to show his commitment to his country, his people, and his future: to be involved in politics—he was the president of the Liberal Party from 1958 until 1968, and to show a very clear opposition to apartheid through his literary writings, journalism, political and sociological articles. He always defended the dignity of human beings and the importance of a multiracial society in which everybody could live in peace and liberty.

Paton called for a change, he wanted to emphasize what made all human beings equal: the fact that we are born equal in dignity and rights. Human dignity was the top priority for Paton, which meant that he could not tolerate discrimination between blacks and whites. He was against discrimination based on race, religion, social position; he was also against the cruel treatment that black people received during the apartheid period. For these reasons, he always encouraged people to be strong in their beliefs, as we can see in the following lines published in the book The Long View in 1968:

Stand firm by what you believe; do not tax yourself beyond the endurance, yet calculate clearly and coldly how much endurance you have; don’t waste your breath and corrupt your character by cursing your rulers and the South African Broadcasting Corporation; don’t become obsessed by them; keep your friendships alive and warm, especially those with people of other races; beware of melancholy and resist it actively if it assails you; and give thanks for the courage of others in this fear-ridden country. (Paton, 1968: 251)

If I had to define Paton’s life and work with just one word I would use the adjective committed. Paton showed that being aware of a social reality and disagreeing with it was not enough because on top of that some action was necessary. His life and his work are a clear example of how to be active to contribute to a social change. Paton assumed a constructive role in society, and invited us to do the same so that human beings live in peace.

Paton encouraged the reader to be committed, and to be aware of the importance of human rights and the defence of freedom and justice. If readers decide not to accept an active commitment, at least the reading of the novels will make them reflect on the socio-political events that took place during

_These words are also used in the speech of the closure of the Liberal Party, which was spoken on May 7, 1968._
the apartheid era. Paton invited them to read with a critical point of view in
mind.

Cry, The Beloved Country (1948), Too Late The Phalarope (1955) and Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful (1981) are very powerful instruments that Pa­
ton used to show a very cruel social reality. The novels re-created the social
reality because it is through the novels that Alan Paton recreated historical
facts, social issues and human behaviours.

Paton’s message is a cry for ethical behaviour to take place in his society
so that no other country has to suffer what South Africa suffered during the
apartheid era. Hope in the improvement of the social situation, and faith in
God and in humanity were always in his ideology. Paton had faith in the tol­
erance and humanity of men and never lost hope in the change of his society.
He believed that South Africa would become a society in which all men and
women were equal and free. He was a man who believed in freedom, respon­
sibility, dignity and peace as the foundation of society.

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