

CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY
BY ALAN PATON

Critical Paper
By Toby Siegel
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There are two famous South African writers whose books won The Nobel Prize; the first, Nadine Gordimer, born in 1923 and was chosen for the award in 1991, and the second, J.M.Coetzee, born in 1940 and was chosen in 2003 for his body of work. Those were the authors I read in preparation for our trip to South Africa in 1998. I missed Alan Paton completely until our friends who immigrated here from Johannesburg, Zambia, and Rhodesia all said, a few years ago, that the most memorable book they read was our choice tonight. "The New Republic" said that Paton is one of the greatest South African writers who wrote the most famous and important novel in its history. Bennett Cerf, the publisher from Scribner's suggested in 1948 that this novel was one of three worth reading in that year along with, "The Ides of March" and "The Naked and the Dead". I missed reading "Cry, the Beloved Country" because I was only eight years old at the time and the ravages of World War II were more important during the many years after. In college, I first heard of Apartheid and signed a petition against it, but that was in the late fifties, and the War in Vietnam loomed over students trying to avoid the draft. The perversity and evil of the Apartheid regime was not recognized by young people during that time.

Perhaps, you and I share some of the political malaise felt over the past few years, due to mangled elections, mass school shootings, climate change, and women's rights that has been legislated for, and created to impact our current society.

Hoping for respite, after our friends' suggestion, I read tonight's book and was entranced by the lyrical language, the relationships portrayed, the resilience of the characters and the dignity and respect shown by the Zulu community to each other, and especially Reverend Kumalo, their religious leader. When he wanted to take the bus to Johannesburg to find his son his innocence was shattered, as he lost his money to a con man who offered to buy him a bus ticket. This incident was the first of many, many, examples that showed the change in the culture as the natives came from the small villages to the big city and lost their ties to the mores of their friends and families they left behind. Gertrude, the wayward sister of Stephen Kumalo and his charismatic, rebellious brother, John, became a prostitute and a drug addict, divorced from the man she tried to find in Johannesburg. The sibling rivalry between the brothers challenged their relationships with each other, and lead to a bitter division of beliefs as we read in the biblical story of our childhoods; Cain and Abel, and to the contemporary Tom and Sid of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, with Tom and Al Joad, and Sonny and Fredo in *The Godfathers* novel and movie. It is an old story of conflict and revenge in families where you are tied together for a lifetime whether you like it or not. (The exception is the black eagle where two eggs are born and the first to hatch pecks the second to death).

The theme of inequality between the Afrikaners and the black natives as well as non-whites from India, is very clear in the economics, education, and government during Apartheid, but Paton did not use this as his agenda for the book in a blaring way. The Biblical references, the family struggles, the disappointments, the frustrations and triumphs are sympathetically portrayed. He was quoted as saying this is not a propaganda piece but a book where the country is the hero.

The history of separatism between the three races, as introduced by the Afrikaner National Party stated, "No equality in church and state," as the whites feared black domination, in 1948, when thousands of natives came to the large cities, ^{worked in the mines} bought guns and changed the equilibrium of the country, all in the pursuit of their lost rights as citizens of South Africa.. Police brutality spread and white fear was rampant. The farm communities with white owners and black workers, tried to enforce the laws of, "legalized racism", but Paton sympathetically wrote about the relationship between Jarvis, the white man and his neighbor, the black Reverend Kumalo, as they each shared the agony of losing a son. The hopefulness in the book showed in their friendship, but differs from the reality of South African black-white relationships, since the blacks were subservient and that lead to anger, frustration and violence as shown in Absalom's story of destruction and murder.

Mr. Jarvis. I have bad news for you. Bad news? Yes, Mr Jarvis, said the police captain. Is he dead? Yes Mr. Jarvis. He was shot dead this afternoon in Johannesburg. It is suspected by a native housebreaker.....There was no sign of any struggle. My God!, said Jarvis. He was our only child, captain.

Paton's short clipped sentences created a chilling, unemotional scene in this book, that was repeated over and over again in white households, surrounding the small villages where men like Jarvis questioned, "Why this should happen." His son was an idealist and worked to help the black community but that made no difference to the housebreaker, Kumalo's son, Absalom, who claimed it was an accident.

John Kumalo, the successful black politician expressed his frustration openly while his quiet, sensitive, brother Stephen, a passionate servant of God, did not understand that Apartheid caused the protests, riots, and boycotts that John incited as a resident of the city. Stephen demurred and finally gave up trying to sway his brother to faith and peaceful negotiations.

The old tribal system was, "For all its violence and savagery, for all its superstition and witchcraft, a moral system.....Our civilization has AN INESCAPABLE DUTY TO SET UP

ANOTHER SYSTEM OF ORDER AND TRADITION AND CONVENTION," wrote the deceased son of Jarvis. Key leaders world-wide realized that Apartheid needed to be abolished and in 1989 the following occurred: Nelson Mandela was released from 27 years of prison for his insistence that democracy needed to replace inequality. Freedom of the press was resumed, the ban on black political parties was lifted and the Prime Minister, P.W. Botha resigned from office. The country's important world-wide reputation changed, the economy with increased revenues, and security issues seen across the country caused by Apartheid, were slowly rectified in South Africa.

Absalom Kumalo did not deny his guilt in killing Arthur Jarvis and said he was afraid and never meant to kill Jarvis. He was still hanged for the death, leaving his new wife, child, father and mother to grieve. John Kumalo and his brother Stephen were not reconciled, "Brother had shut out brother, from the same womb they had come." The bitterness of John, due to racism, could not erase his brother's rules for decency and patience.

The goodness of James Jarvis was shown in his delivery of fresh milk and water to the villagers of Ndotshemi. In another act of kindness he built a much-needed new church in memory of his son. The people in Kumalo's new church prayed for Africa, the beloved country. Gertrude, the sister, who left her child and went back to Johannesburg. John, the outspoken brother, and Stephen Kumalo never reconciled. Three people from the same parents went three different ways. Interestingly, Jarvis' grandson came to Reverend Kumalo to speak the native Zulu language and had a great impact on Reverend Kumalo. This was Paton's symbol of possible future racial reconciliation.

At the end of Apartheid the victimization the natives felt was slowly replaced with unselfish leadership, democracy, and paths toward more equal education, and especially in farming, as Paton showed in this book. The goals were simple but the implementation was not. The farm lands were overworked, but the native chief preferred the old ways of planting and the young demonstrator came with ideas and new information that the farmers slowly implemented.

Indeed, there is something new in this valley, some spirit and some life, and much to talk about... Nothing has come yet, something is here already.

Yes, it is the dawn that has come. But the light will come to Ndotsheni,... never failing. But when that dawn will come of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret.

Paton created this book with an ending of hopefulness, describing the confirmation of the young natives in the village, not knowing how long the separate, unequal policies would last. It took fifty more years to abolish Apartheid and this book has endured and endeared itself to readers of all ages who, for over seventy tumultuous years are still, uplifted and mesmerized by the themes, the language and the dignity of, "Cry the Beloved Country." It is a classic.