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CHALLENGES FACED BY SOUTH AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS: A GRAMSCIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:-

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relevance of one of Antonio Gramsci's ideas, namely, intellectuals, to a different context from that in which his writings were conceived. It has been over seventy years since Gramsci's death in 1937; perhaps the time is appropriate to question whether the ideas of one of the most ingenious thinkers and theorists of the twentieth century still has currency in the transformed circumstances of the twenty-first century. I aim, in fact, to prove the continuing relevance of Gramsci's writings to a context other than early twentieth-century Italy by analysing, interpreting and assessing the ways in which his ideas on intellectuals still speak to us in the circumstances of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Gramsci is important to South Africa as conditions in this country are notably similar to those prevailing in Italy in Gramsci's time. I will show that South African intellectuals, like the Italian intellectuals described by Gramsci, also face numerous challenges. I will examine the views of various commentators on the roles, functions and challenges that South African intellectuals face in a post-apartheid society.

Keywords:-*Intellectual, Interregnum period, challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

Gramsci outlined many of the challenges faced by Italian intellectuals of his time and he offered suggestions that would allow them to effectively fulfil their roles in society. In contemporary South Africa intellectuals also face many challenges and it is imperative for the country as a whole that these intellectuals equip themselves with techniques and strategies that enable them to have a transformative function in South African society.

Whilst the 1970s and 1980s were very repressive years in the history of South Africa, those decades were also a golden era for intellectuals, who played an active role in the liberation struggle. Intellectuals during the apartheid era engaged in activities which at times put their lives at risk, such as organising and participating in protest marches and writing truths that the ruling elite wanted to suppress, which resulted in many of them being detained for extended periods of time without trial. Some intellectuals used their intellectual capital to write protest literature.

The Interregnum Period in South Africa

Nadine Gordimer (1988:219-237) in a seminal essay entitled 'Living in the Interregnum' described the period 1970 to 1994 in South African history as the interregnum. 'Interregnum' is a term coined by Gramsci (1971:276) in describing transitional periods: 'The old is dying, and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms'. Gordimer actually displayed this quotation from Gramsci as an epigraph to her novel *July's People* (1981). She (1988:226) defined an interregnum as existing 'not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined'. This very aptly describes one of the problems of identity in South Africa during apartheid, with Black people knowing that once the interregnum period had passed they would finally feel at home in the country of their birth whilst White people, even those who did not condone white supremacy, beset with uncertainty, not knowing whether they would also finally feel at home.

The interregnum period as defined by Gordimer was one in which intellectuals thrived and were most vocal with their voices and their pens. Among the novelists, Gordimer, in *July's People*, dwells on the utopia of an alternative future for South Africa and on the difficulties arising from the attempt to surpass the pitfalls of the old order in anticipation of a new one. However difficult the situation, attempts to create a better future must be made during the interregnum. Mongane Wally Serote in his novel, *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981), presents the engagement of a growing number of people in an organised struggle to overthrow the apartheid system. He offers riveting insight into political activity in the 1970s by exploring the tensions of state violence, Black apathy and the shift into violent dissension. J.M. Coetzee in *Age of Iron* (1990) addresses the position of the White liberal during apartheid. He portrays the spiritual journey of Mrs Curren, an academic, who is dying of cancer during the apartheid era. She has been philosophically opposed to apartheid her entire life but she has never actively opposed it. As her life nears its end she is forced to face directly the horrors of apartheid; for example, she witnesses the burning of a black township and the killing of her servant's son.

Poetry was also an influential literary genre during the interregnum period. Poets articulated their anger and frustration at the apartheid government and signalled to the oppressor that the anger of the oppressed people could explode at any time. Amongst the poems that were written during this literary revival were anthologies such as Oswald Mshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971), Serote's *Yakhal' inkomo* (1972), Spho Sepamla *Hurry Up To It!* (1975) and Mafika Gwala's *Jol'iinkomo* (1977). Poems gave expression to various forms of racial oppression and explored the need for political freedom.

Writers, during this period, also penned essays. Ndebele wrote a brilliant collection of essays entitled *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991) in which he mapped the development of the African intellectual under white hegemony onto the notion of the new African intellectual that would come into being under democratic, majority rule. Gordimer, in her many essays during this period appealed to intellectuals to use civil society creatively to oppose the dictates of the illegitimate apartheid state. She urged that the critical practice of intellectuals should always be in the interrogative mode.

At this time intellectuals relished their roles as 'active participants in the struggle for social and political change' (Gumede & Dikeni 2009:3). This was the function that Gramsci envisaged for the organic intellectuals; they had to play the roles of constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader" and not just a simple orator' (Gramsci 1971:10).

Dilemma Faced by South African Intellectuals

Gramsci asserted that, for a new social order in Italy to thrive, organic intellectuals had to continue their close engagement with the people-nation. He (1971:330) advised intellectuals to do the following:

Work out and make coherent the principles and the problems raised by the
Masses in their practical activity, thus constituting a cultural and social bloc.

Gramsci (1971:330) believed that the relationship between intellectuals and the masses should be a continuous one in which intellectuals would not cease to engage the masses. This was essential, as the masses needed the intellectuals to represent them. In South Africa, however, many intellectuals who were actively engaged in political, economic and societal issues prior to 1994 have now become silent. Yet South Africa is a new democracy and intellectuals have a crucial role to play in strengthening and maintaining this democracy. Commentators have offered many reasons as to why so many intellectuals in South Africa have slipped into the shadows.

Intellectuals have been intentionally evicted from public arenas by political critics who have reacted to their engagement in critical debate with negative comments such as 'sellout', 'unpatriotic' or even 'un-African' if the critic is Black and

'racist' if the critic is White (Gumede & Dikeni 2009:5). Intellectuals are faced with a dilemma because in the history of South Africa, race has always been a defining issue.

There are other reasons in addition to being called derogatory names that prevent intellectuals from entering a public arena. They are often afraid to criticise the new government, as this might expose divisions within the ruling party and imply an endorsement of apartheid or of the erstwhile colonial powers. Hence, many choose to be silent, which is a mistake, as criticism is vital in making the state conscious of its actions. If very few voices of intellectual dissent are audible, the state can easily marginalise them. Gumede (2009:15) describes the way in which ANC government led by Thabo Mbeki, whose administration demanded total loyalty, accelerated the withdrawal of intellectuals from public debate. Gumede uses the example of William Malegapu Makgoba who, as head of the Medical Research Council, questioned President Mbeki's policy of denial regarding the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Makgoba was harassed, asked to retract his views and threatened. Ngoako Ramatlhodi, the former premier of the Northern Province, accused him of 'betraying his race' and of not being a 'real' Black person. It is this type of behaviour on the part of government officials that renders intellectuals silent. Since the current state enjoys hegemonic power, it assumes that it always speaks on behalf of national interest. If one pursues this argument, it means that if intellectuals ever oppose matters of state they are automatically going against national interest - a totally untenable proposition.

A relatively recent example of the ANC government's silencing of intellectuals is the incident involving Ben Turok, an intellectual, former anti-apartheid activist and current ANC Member of Parliament. Turok broke party ranks and abstained from voting for the controversial Protection of Information Bill, also known as the Secrecy Bill, when it was brought to Parliament in 2011. At the time Turok claimed that he was acting on principle and suggested there had not been nearly enough rigorous debate and discussion of the Bill, which he believed to have ethical shortcomings. The ANC reacted angrily and accused Turok of ill-discipline, which illustrates again that, although the ANC boasts that it encourages diverse views, it in fact expects everyone to adhere rigidly to party decisions. Gramsci (1971:187) too believed strongly in party discipline, but he believed as well that robust debate, in which all voices would be heard, should take place before collective decisions were taken. Only after the issues had been properly aired and general consent had been reached would the decisions become binding.

Substantial protest against ANC government and its tripartite alliance has also emanated from church intellectuals. Abongile Mgaqelwa reported in October, 2013, that the office of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town issued a statement on behalf of the Anglican synod, the church's highest legislative body, calling on the ANC-affiliated South African Democratic Teacher's Union to refrain from engaging in stay-aways. The synod also appealed to parliament to declare the teaching profession an essential service. The South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), a powerful union represented in the ANC-allied Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), responded with a scathing attack on the synod, accusing it of interfering in labour issues and trying to colonise education (Mgaqelwa, 2013:2).

The previous president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, speaking from a church pulpit in Limpopo in the same month, admonished those, including church leaders, who did not respect authority. This was Zuma's way of silencing critics and preventing meaningful debate on issues affecting the South African populace. The response by the Anglican Bishop of the diocese of Natal, Reverend Rubin Phillip that the Church must regain the voice that it had in the days of apartheid suggests that there is some hope that intellectuals will not be bullied into total silence.

A conference was convened in May 2006 to address the role of Black intellectuals in the new South African democracy. This conference, according to Gumede and Dikeni (2009:5), concluded that Black intellectuals are marginalised or are marginalising themselves. Dr Blade Nzimande, the South African Communist Party General Secretary and Minister of Higher Education until 2018, has claimed that intellectuals appear to find it difficult to transcend oppositional politics in South Africa in order to find new forms of engagement (Gumede & Dikeni 2009:5). Jonathan Jansen (2009:143), the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State, presents a similar view, stating that the anti-apartheid intellectual would have built a strong emotional attachment to the ANC as it is seen as the party which fought for and achieved freedom for all South Africans and he or she therefore would find it very difficult to be critical. Thus, it appears that intellectuals who fought against the apartheid state need to find new rules of engagement. The cause of the problem clearly rests with the state, which has demanded unconditional loyalty.

A further problem is that, in the democratic government of 1994, many intellectuals were co-opted into or joined the government. This is also seen by David Hemson (2001:4) as a problem because it resulted in 'engaged intellectuals' leaving the field of labour to become part of the government, a movement which they saw as a 'stepping stone into business' and a change in their personal wealth. Gramsci (1971:117), who accepted that intellectuals could usefully be allied to a government, also perceived the danger inherent in this alliance:

[S]ince the State is the concrete form of a productive world and
Since the intellectuals are the social element from which
The governing personnel is drawn, the intellectual who is not
Firmly anchored to a strong economic group will tend to present
The State as an absolute.

To Gramsci it seems natural that the state would draw its personnel from intellectuals. However, in situations in which the intellectual is not closely bound to a 'strong economic group', he or she may ignore the class from which he or she was elaborated and give complete allegiance to the interests of the state.

A large portion of the blame for the silencing of intellectuals can be blamed on Thabo Mbeki, president from 1999 to 2008, as Gumede and Dikeni point out:

The legacy of the Mbeki administration will be hard to undo. It was not only within the state where demands were made for absolute loyalty to the cause, but in the wider society those with dissenting views often faced ridicule, marginalisation and attacks on their integrity. The smear is one of the most devastating weapons for stifling debate and silencing critics (Gumede and Dikeni 2009:2).

Mbeki expected those who worked within the state to be loyal and disciplined to the extent that state officials could not express views which were different from what he considered acceptable. Even people outside the state who were critical of government policies were punished in ways that ensured their future silence. Gramsci (2006:174), as mentioned, valued discipline, but he was very clear about what discipline was not:

[It was] certainly not a passive and supine acceptance of orders, a mechanical execution of assignments (though even that would sometimes be necessary: during an already decided and initiated action, for example), but a conscious and clear understanding of the aims to be realized. Discipline in this sense does not annul individual personality ..., but merely limits the will and irresponsible impulsiveness.

To Gramsci (1971:189) discipline in state and political party was important because he did not want a repetition of a situation that occurred in Italy after unification in which 'Piedmontese institutions' were imposed on other Italian regions because of the ill-discipline and 'political immaturity of the peripheral forces'. At the same time, he encouraged individual expression of ideas by both the rank and file and the intellectuals. He favoured 'democratic centralism', which he (1971:189) described as:

a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above, a continuous insertion of elements thrown up from the depths of the rank and file into the solid framework of the leadership apparatus [organic intellectuals] which ensures continuity and the regular accumulation of experience.

Gramsci's view that neither intellectuals nor rank and file should be silenced is significant as it encourages intellectuals, both emerging within their classes and established, to generate new ideas and to express their views without fear of reprisals. Only if intellectuals are allowed to function in an environment without fear can they fulfil their role in society. In South Africa this would mean organising the population so that they can challenge issues such as impoverishment and economic inequalities. It is imperative that South African intellectuals take the lead in organising the masses and creating and promoting a compassionate and rational society in which social justice prevails and the masses are cared for, because it cannot be taken for granted that the ANC will act in the interests of the nation.

A paper by Albie Sachs reinforces the view that it is simplistic to merely return to a past African culture. Sachs, a white ANC lawyer, writing during the interregnum in 1989, composed 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom' for an in-house ANC discussion in Lusaka and the essay was later published in a book by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press. Sachs's essay examined the volatile interconnections between culture and politics during the decolonisation process. The paper elicited a wide range of critical debate in cultural organisations, academic seminars and the like. The critical furore was caused by Sachs's (1990:19) suggestion that ANC members should at this time desist from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. Sachs claimed that such a belief results in a diminished art, causing artists and writers to stagnate as they merely produce work to be politically correct. He argued that the work of writers and artists was stuck in an apartheid mould and that their work was not reflecting the future South Africa. Sachs (1990:24) urged writers and artists in the emerging new South Africa to ensure that literature, which played a significant role in the liberation struggle, take on a new and vital role in the postcolonial and soon to be post-apartheid process of rebuilding.

In this paper, Sachs (1990:24) very clearly states that culture should play a significant role in 'building national unity and encouraging the development of a common patriotism, while fully recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country'. This emphasis on 'diversity' demonstrates Sachs's careful attempt to avoid ethno-nationalism and to build a nation that supports ethnic variety. In fact, his objective was not to create a model culture into which everyone had to assimilate but rather to acknowledge and take pride in the cultural plurality of the South African nation. This is quite unlike Serote (2000:27), whose assertion that the world comprises African and European culture is a great over-simplification. When Serote does acknowledge the existence of cultural diversity, he claims that it will not hinder human beings from interacting. However, his explanation that, as social beings, humans will only out of 'necessity relate to and interact with each other' is reductive and exclusionary.

Gramsci, too, in his understanding of post-Risorgimento Italy saw, in the imposition of Italian on the vernacular-speaking population, a classic pattern of colonialist denigration and subjugation of the cultural life of the colonised. Throughout his life he remained very proud of his own Sardinian culture. But, like Sachs and unlike Serote, Gramsci acknowledged

cultural diversity. Whilst he recognised the necessity of a national language and culture, he also felt that for culture to be a unifying force there had to be a deep-seated bond of democratic solidarity not only between the governing intellectuals and the popular masses but also among only between the governing intellectuals and the popular masses but also among the regions making up the whole.

Conclusion

Gramsci's ideas on intellectuals are not only creative and innovative but bear relevance for intellectuals outside the limitations of his historical context of early twentieth-century Italy. In a country such as South Africa, which has a legacy of colonialism and apartheid, resulting in the majority of the people-nation being suppressed culturally, socially, economically and politically, Gramsci's theory on intellectuals is especially relevant. In apartheid South Africa the majority of the people-nation elaborated their own organic intellectuals who played a crucial role in organising and directing them in activities such as mass demonstrations to oppose the state. These intellectuals not only formulated ideas but worked closely with the masses. Gramsci advocated this type of relationship between the intellectuals and the masses, with intellectuals engaging and working amongst the people. In post-apartheid South Africa intellectuals have an equally important role to play in constituting a web of relations between the people-nation and the state so that the needs and aspirations of the people-nation are adequately represented and fulfilled.

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