

## **History as a Central Focus of South African Fiction: A Study of Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy***

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**ABSTRACT:** *Among the popular South African novelists whose novels are read with every seriousness is Peter Abraham. His novels not only entertain but also profusely enlighten. Basically, literature writers are inspired by what happens around them so they mirror societal facts in their works and subtly craft them in a way that such works entertains the reader. However, if the sole aim of the writer in a particular work of art is to entertain, then such work should not be taken very seriously. Works of imagination are usually the author's weapon to fight certain abnormalities in a given society. This is why it is believed that fiction is a mirror through which a society is seen. Peter Abrahams is one of those who believe that with fiction, certain abnormalities in a society can be addressed thus *Mine Boy*, albeit seen by some as a journalistic history of the South African society, it is a fiction, whose inspiration was drawn from what happens around the author. The researchers' interest in this paper is basically to explore the novel and find out how adequately Abrahams has managed his facts in the writing of *Mine Boy* as to qualify the novel as fiction rather than history.*

**KEY WORDS:** literature, Abrahams, protest literature, fact and fiction, South Africa.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It is an acknowledged fact that literary artists are inspired by what happens around them. According to Abrams M. H, fiction is a work of imagination which represents a phenomenon. Writers of fiction do not write from the vacuum; they base their works on what happens in their society. This is why fiction is meant to be studied as a means of understanding the author's society. It is a fact therefore, that a literature written by an Igbo x-rays the way of life of the Igbo, likewise other regional literatures. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* for instance, is a work of imagination but profusely based on the way of life of a typical Igbo society in the pre-colonial era. The novel is generally regarded as an ethnography of the Igbo at the point of

contact with brutish British colonizers that disrupted the former's way of life in a bid to impose their own culture on the natives.

Further, M. H. Abram, believes that literature entails fictional and imaginative writings. He goes further to explain that on the broad sense, literature designates also any other writings (including philosophy, history, and even scientific works addressed to a general audience) that are especially distinguished in form, expression, and emotional power. Lewis Nkosi, himself, a black South African, observes in his article, "Fiction by Black South Africans" that with the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of Black South African any significant and complex talent which responds with the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posted by conditions in South Africa. To him, Black South African writers lack talents, rather, they simply like journalists, tell stories about things they observe or they go on crudely attempting to solve the same problems which have been solved before. Nkosi observes that it is better to write from a distance and not to tell a story of a recent episode. This, he calls journalistic fact and he says it is common among Black South African writers. In the article, Nkosi is concerned about the quality of literature his contemporaries produce in South Africa. Like John Dryden and other neoclassical writers who criticized the poor writings of the seventeenth century, Nkosi is blunt about his criticism of black South African literature. He figures out Richard Rive's novel as a display of bad writing. His criticism is akin to Dryden's criticism of Thomas Shadwell whom he likens as a literary son of Flecknoe simply because of the semblance in their individual works which Dryden never seen as any good writing

Nkosi failed to see anything good about Rive's novel. According to him, "Richard Rive's novel seems to me quite unfortunate. Its value can only be to add a footnote, and not a desperately needed one, to the political events leading to the declaration of a state of emergency in South Africa in 1960. The novel is wholly unimaginative, totally uninspired and exceedingly clumsy in the construction" (114).

To vivify his reasons for the abhorrence of Rive's novel, Nkosi goes further to state that the bad jerky writing of which this novel has examples in great abundance and long chunks of dialogues add nothing to the understanding of the characters. Although critics maintain that any good novel must contain as many dialogues as possible, Nkosi's argument is that Rive's dialogues add absolutely nothing to the understanding of the characters. He also indicts Rives of being unable to create realizable people. According to him, Rive's characters are flat and uninteresting. He blames this lack of ingenuity on other Cape Coloured writers whom he says are all bad writers.

As had been disclosed earlier in this article, it is a known fact that literature is very vital in the development of any society. Aristotle had earlier described literature as an imitation of life. Matthew Arnold states that literature is the only thing that can help man live his life. In the view of Arnold, literature interprets life to man. Supporting the view that literature is very indispensable in the life of man in any society, Bernard Shaw, a 20<sup>th</sup> century writer, maintains that literature, be it tragedy or comedy, must in a way or the other, affect life. According to

him, "...but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening." Shaw, by this statement, is of the opinion that literature is not just written to amuse, literature, while it amuses, equally affects life; it brings history closer to people as well as gets the audience abreast of other people's culture.

### **South African Fiction as a Juxtaposition of Fact and Imagination**

Critics are of the view that literature must mirror society. That is a fact but quite imperative to state at this juncture, that literature is fiction and not history. In writing a novel, what the author does is to invent characters and endow them with human attributes so that the characters and settings invented can mirror the author's society rather than being seen as a mere history. The writer, trying to create characters and settings, must bear one thing in mind – credibility. Unless fictional characters are credible and act in accordance with the tradition of the fictional setting, then the work of art cannot be plausible.

The question remains; are South African novels fiction or fact? A writer is usually inspired by what happens around him and that is why a novel from a particular area is enjoyed and better appreciated by the people from the society since the novel shares their experiences.

Critics upon critics have continued to criticize South African literature. Almost all of them are of the opinion that South African writers lack talent and that what they write is protest literature. South Africa is a nation with her citizens heterogeneous. According to history, the aboriginal Khoikhoi people who had inhabited the region for millennia are believed to be the real people of South Africa. White South Africans are the descendants of later European settlers, mainly from Netherlands and Britain. The coloureds are the products of the union of blacks and whites. In spite the large population of the blacks, they are humiliated by the whites thus the birth of the protest literature. Despite whatever, Peter Abrahams' novels are fiction and must be analysed as such. Abrahams has, like other writers, based his novels on real facts which were what inspired him. Every other writer takes his or her inspiration from his society so Abrahams' novels are true works of fiction

### ***Mine Boy* as a Protest Literature**

Peter Abrahams aptly x-rays the reign of apartheid in South Africa. A careful reading of *Mine Boy* gets the audience abreast of the "sorry" experiences of the blacks in the hands of their white counterparts. Whites allocate to themselves everything good in South Africa. They live in elevated places; do anything they wish to do without fear of any kind. Blacks on the other hand live in the slum. They work for the whites who believe that blacks are perpetual slaves. The notion about being slaves to the whites makes the blacks to live in perpetual horror for they are always hunted and taken to prison. Above all, they are meant to carry "pass" along in their own country.

The major character of the novel, Xuma from the North comes to Malay Camp where he meets his fellow blacks who live in Leah's poor apartment devoid of all amenities. Leah takes care of her fellow poor blacks, feeds them from the proceeds of her beer parlour business. As a black, Leah lives in fear of being arrested by the police for doing the same business that the

whites do without being disturbed. In order to survive, Leah decides to keep bribing a coloured police officer who keeps her informed of proposed visits of police to her premises. In Malay Camp, Xuma is welcomed by Leah. His response to Leah's question about his mission to Malay Camp vivifies the hopelessness of the black race in South as well as the reason for migration to the area.

The writer uses Xuma to pass across his message. Xuma says; 'I came for work. There is no work where I came from. And here, they say, there is much work.' When asked of where he intends to find work, he says. 'In the mines. It is a man's work'

Leah shook her head and poured herself a drink.

'The mines are no good, Xuma, later on you cough and then you spit blood and you become weak and die. I have seen it many times. Today you are young and you are strong, and tomorrow you are thin and ready to die' (5).

The above dialogues show the kind of gory jobs blacks do in South Africa. The author also uses the dialogue to show the disparity between the blacks and the whites in South Africa. Whites do not involve themselves in any form of hazardous venture, rather, they have blacks work for them while they live in affluence.

Again, blacks do not enjoy free movements in South Africa as the whites do. Xuma, being new at Malay Camp and being ignorant of the events in the place, fails to run when police came to arrest blacks. He sees no reason why he must run when he has committed no crime. Consider the excerpt below:

Suddenly a pick-up van swerved round a corner. Policemen jumped out and ran down the street. The crowd scattered.

'Come!' Joseph said

People ran in all directions. The gamblers made a grab for the stakes and ran. The two 'swankies' disappeared down the street. Only the coloured people did not run.

'Come!' Joseph urged again

'But we have done nothing.'

'They will not ask you,' Joseph said in disgust and dashed down the street.

A policeman was only ten yards away and he was coming straight to Xuma.

Xuma waited. He had done nothing. He had just stood there watching. The policeman came nearer. He raised his stick and brought it down with force. It missed Xuma's head and struck his left shoulder. Pain shot through his body.

'I have done nothing,' he said and grabbed the policeman's arm before he could hit again

'Let go! Bastard!' the policeman shouted and kicked out.

According to David Ker, Abrahams' theme in *Mine Boy*, is the black man's attempt to regain his manhood and self-respect, which alone can help him to achieve true freedom in a world dominated by the white man. According to Ker, "Abrahams believes that until this is done it will not be possible for the black man to mix with the white man on a personal level and with easy relaxation". Ker goes further to states that:

Abrahams' vision is, as he puts it in *Mine Boy* (1945), "man with colour," a world in which every man will be judged as an individual and where colour would be irrelevant. This is why in his earlier novels, he set the freedom of the mind over and above political independence. True freedom is of the spirit and is more difficult to achieve than political freedom. "Only the liberation of the heart and mind from fear are real" (106). Thus, Abrahams believes that man is not different from another anywhere, it is only the skin colour that differs. He wonders why white man should segregate from the black as if black is evil but the same white man has affairs with black woman hence the birth of the coloureds.

Having hit the police in self-defence, Xuma is rescued by a coloured who takes him to his house. To Xuma's surprise, the coloured has a black woman as his wife. One may say that the message Abrahams wants to pass here is equality of races; there is no difference between the black race and the white race since they intermarry. But Abraham has only fictionalised what he experienced. In South Africa, before 1994 when apartheid rule was abolished, whites actually married blacks and their children are the coloureds or half castes. What however, astonishes the blacks is that the coloureds still go ahead to join the whites to antagonize the blacks. Abrahams gives a vivid picture of the reason behind the mixture of races in South Africa in *Mine Boy* through the explanation given by Johannes to Xuma. He believes that the people that made up the population of South Africa are immigrants. According to him, "They are not of the city, they come from the farms and some are from the land of Portuguese and others are from Rhodesia. The white man fetched them" (34).

South African writers, no doubt, have unique technique. Not only Abrahams, all other Black South African writers based their writings on history. In his article "Post modernism and Black Writing in South Africa," Lewis Nkosi has this to say; "...Time and again, in its gasps and stutters, in its nightmares and premonitions of a past to be endlessly repeated, black writing shows clearly its relation to this colonial history; the manner, for example, in which it discloses, at the most unexpected moments, its memory of the Sjambok (*African Literature an Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, 666).

### **Juxtaposing Facts and Fiction in *Mine Boy***

Peter Abrahams represents the black race in South Africa. As earlier mentioned, black South African writers, dwelt so much on the issue of racial segregation which was common in the area. Unlike some others like Alex La Guma whose *A Walk in the Night* is more of history than fiction, Abrahams in *Mine Boy* tries to present his true life story as fiction. He tells a simple tale of love affairs between a black, Xuma and a black young woman Eliza who, though a black, wants to live like the whites. She keeps telling Xuma that she wants him and does not want him. She admits she loves Xuma but because Xuma is a poor black, uneducated and not



as sophisticated as the white, she does not want him. The plot, as it unfolds, gets complicated so that through the simple story, the audience understands the great disparity between the white and the black in South Africa. Eventually when Eliza decides to accept Xuma, she wants him to always be with her and not to go to the mine where he works for his white man; Paddy. When this demand could not be granted, Eliza leaves Xuma. Again, Xuma is comforted by Maisy, who through all stretch of the imagination, is the one who actually loves and appreciates Xuma as a black. Although there is every possibility that the story Abrahams tells in *Mine Boy* actually happened as he tells the tale, the beautiful technique applied by the author in narrating the story makes it a fiction not minding that we are aware that the work simply chronicles Abrahams' experience as a black in South Africa. David Ker notices this ingenuity of Abrahams in *Mine Boy* when he says:

*Mine Boy* was the first South African novel written in English to attract international attention. After the ambitious attempt or song of the city, Abrahams seems to have realized the limitations of his capacity. Xuma's story is almost a duplicate of Dick Nduli's, but Xuma is a more credible creation, precisely because Abrahams has devoted more time and effort to him. Unlike *Song of the City*, *Mine Boy* is a unified piece of work, both in conception and execution; even a strong character like Leah cannot make us forget Xuma, in spite of the considerable amount of space devoted to her. The setting is the same as in Abrahams' earlier books; the coloured location of Vrededorp, where the author himself grew up and some of the characters who got honourable mention in *Song of the City* take the centre stage here as in the case of Ma Plank, or Daisy, thinly disguised as Maisy (p.162).

### **The Fate of Black Race in South Africa**

Albeit Abrahams contends that whites are responsible for the gory experiences of blacks in the city, he affirms that few of them are different. Paddy (also known as the Red One) has proved himself different from other the other whites. Abrahams artistically creates the picture of the Red One to consolidate the fact that all human beings are the same whether white or black, the only difference is the skin colour.

Blacks in South Africa are treated like second class citizens in their own society. The whites segregate from the blacks as though they were pariah. Paddy is a white man but reasons differently. He is friendly with the blacks. He stands solidly behind blacks, totally against humiliation of blacks. However his sympathy for the black, he does not live in the slum like blacks. Like his fellow whites, Paddy lives sumptuously in the city and has Xuma as a head-boy working for him in the mine. On one occasion when Xuma comes to the city and storms at Paddy's apartment, Paddy who is at the moment, enjoying with his girlfriend Di, invites Xuma to his house. When he tells Xuma 'This is my house,' Xuma is amazed. He looks around for he had never seen a place as beautiful as that before. For some time, Xuma's mind thinks about many things. *Now I understand what Eliza wants. But these things are only for white people. It is foolish to think we can get them.*

He looked round the room. Yes, it was fine. Carpets on the floor, books, radio. Beautiful things everywhere. Fine, all fine, but all the white man's things. And all foolishness to want the white man's things. To drink wine and keep the bottle on the table without fear of the police, how could a black person do it. And how could Eliza be like this white woman of the Red one (65).

Abrahams has effectively passed his message across that in South Africa, what the blacks do for which they are incarcerated, their white counterparts do it as if it is never a crime. Blacks are hunted and taken to prison for drinking beer while the whites do the same without fear of anything.

Like Chinua Achebe's Ezeulu who refuses to be the white man's chief, Xuma also refuses to be the white man's friend. In a dialogue with Paddy who wants Xuma to be his friend, Abrahams, through the voice of Xuma, decries the poor treatments given to blacks by whites. Xuma is amazed that Paddy said he understands the situation of blacks and that he would be delighted to have Xuma, a black as his friend. In amazement, Xuma says, 'You say you understand .... But how can you? You are a white man. You do not carry pass. You do not know how it feels to be stopped by a policeman in the street. You go where you like, you do not know how it feels when they say "get out! White people only."' Did your woman leave you because she is mad with wanting the same things the white man has? Did you know Leah? Did you love her? Do you know how it feels to see her go to jail for nine months? Do you know Leah's house? Did Leah talk to you and laugh with you from the side of her mouth? You say you understand. Did you feel these things like I do? How can you understand, white man! You understand with your head. I understand with pain, with pain in my heart. That is understanding, not just head and lips. I feel things! You want me to be your friend. How can I be your friend when your people do this to me and my people (172).

Further, with the following excerpts, Abrahams sums up the plights of blacks.

Round him people moved, a surging, throbbing crowd. Always it was so. A person would go away, like Eliza; or another would die like Daddy; another would go to jail, like Leah; but always the crowd would be there. The same crowd of nameless people, moving and living and laughing and fighting. People die, people went away, people went to jail, maybe one or maybe a hundred.

Eliza left Xuma because he could not live like a white, Daddy who is addicted to alcoholism, dies from injuries he sustained when he was knocked down by a vehicle, a symbol of white technology. Leah who symbolizes the tough black woman in South Africa goes to jail for struggling to survive; selling the same beer the white women sell and drink with pride. Also worthy of mention is the kind of degrading life blacks live in their own nation. We have seen how elegant the dwelling places for the whites seem and the kind of sumptuous meals they eat when Xuma visited Paddy. Now, the excerpt below exemplifies the eating houses for the blacks.

*Xuma got to the eating-house. It was full. He looked round and saw a place where he thought he could squeeze in, far in the corner. He went to it. His shoes grated against the sawdust on the floor. The smell of bad meat hung over the place. A babe of loud voices mingled with the louder din of fat meat flies.*

*Xuma squeeze himself into position and shouted for food. A dirty ragged old man dumped a plate of meat, swimming in its own gravy, and a hunk of bread, on the dirty table. The old man held out a greasy hand. Xuma pushed a shilling into it.*

*While he ate, he compares the place to the places where white people went. White people did not have to crowd into the place and sit on top of each other. They had bigger rooms. Not just one little room. They had nice eating houses in almost every street of the city (177).*

## CONCLUSION

Abrahams' *Mine Boy* can be classified as a historical fiction. Unlike other black South African writers and Cape Coloured writers Nkosi had lampooned in his article as having no tradition, *Mine Boy* is a displayer of the author's ingenuity. It is a fact that history, as it is always the case, inspired the writing of *Mine Boy*, Abrahams is meticulous in using apt dialogues, actions and narrations to paint a vivid picture of his experience in South Africa, making the novel a true fiction and not a history. Above all, his message in the novel is vivid.

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