

A Survey of Apartheid and Problems of Creative Writing in South Africa on *Tell Freedom and Mine Boy* By Peter Abrahams

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Abstract

*Literarily, Peter Abrahams' endeavours to capture the dilemma of Black man in South Africa as a critical problem. From the context of corruption, deceit, injustice, insecurity, insincerity, indiscipline and cheap popularity, the novelist portrays how the economic, social, political and host of other state systems have been bastardized. Most African leaders oppress and rule through the force of arms; instances could be seen in Empror Bukasa of Central African Republic (CAR), Sese-Seko of Congo, Abacha of Nigeria, Samuel Doe of Liberia, Gaddafi of Libya just to mention a few. These people became oppressive in their different countries. Moreso, this paper attempts to analyze and critically examine the two texts in view of the above topic: **TELL FREEDOM AND MINE BOY** would be examined from two approaches that is, empirical and descriptive. Finally, this paper concludes that Black man in South Africa has lost his essence (then) from his groaning under the cobweb of the white man. In view of this, the way out would be critically examined.*

Keywords: *Apartheid, creative writing, literary literature, protest writers, repressive laws and despotic leaders*

Introduction

As espoused by Moyana (1976:85) "A common sense thesis bandied about by casual literary theorists is that conditions of political economic and social repression in a country offer excellent material for rigorous literary activity". True to what Moyana says here it tends to give credence to Heywoods (1976:7) assertion which opines that "from its beginnings, South Africa literature has both reflected and transformed into his own idiom the pre-occupation of the parent communities of which Regency, Victorian and Edwardian England is one.

It is pertinent to chronicle the social repression meted out to the black people in South Africa so as to provide an illuminating insight into the exigency of their predicament and by extension to what inform the literary vision of most of their writers.

Tim Couzens (1976:66) quoting Selope Thema highlighted some of the repressive laws as follows:

- i. Restriction of the free movements of the natives
- ii. Inhibiting them from bargaining with their labour to their advantage
- iii. Excluding them from the benefits of the industrial conciliation act and the wage act.
- iv. Being responsible for the degradation of native character and for native crime.

Citing what Selope says above, it might be too far-fetched that the white settlers in South Africa have over the years neutralized and have to a large extent usurped all the indigenous legacies had bequeaths to the black race

there. Of course, the social political milieu in South Africa has inadvertently given rise to a literature of protest. Literary writers in South Africa therefore preoccupies than thematic sensibilities with the social predicament of the black man there who has been thoroughly dwarfed by the socio-economic circumstance in which he finds himself. What are realizes in South Africa every day is a burning anger in the soul, spirit and mind of the black race.

Problems of Creative Writing in South Africa

There is no gain saying the fact that South Africa laws have made several attempts to legislate literature out of existence. This act as dangerous and monstrous as they seem appears even more tragic when one ponders that the “cultural climate for literary production in South Africa would most likely have remained poor even of these laws had not been passed” so asserted Moyana (1976:85)

A critical appraisal of most literary works in south Africa, according to a school of through abound is mediocrities perhaps what Lewis Nkosi (1965) says seems to corroborate this notion. He says; *“With the best will in the world, it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both rigour of imagination and sufficient technical resources to the problems posed by the conditions in South Africa.*

Moyana’s (1976:86) reaction to what Nkosi says above throws much light to the problems of South African writers. He posits that “Nkosi was particularly critical of what he called journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature, which abounds in most of the fiction’s. This he thought, showed a lack of stylistic skills which other writers on the continent had long mastered”. “The South African black writers was working in a vacuum, thereby rendering their works in the reality of concrete cinematic accuracy but untransmitted by creative imagination into art”.

A cursory but critical observation of these two critics reveals a concrete invalidation of craftsmanship and artistic inferiority of most of these South African writers. This notion seems to be so when one considers literary works of Voltaire, La Guma, Dickens, Orwell, Richard Wright, Ayi Kwei Armah, Achebe Chinua, Nquqi and so on whose works as perfect, profound and artistic as they seem thrive on thematic preoccupation of protest literature too. What one is saying in essence is that South African fiction displays “strange observation of vision” “thinness of perception”. “There is escapism into fantasy like those writing in the Haggard school”. Wilfred Cartey, as quoted by Moyana (1976:86) described all these literary imperfections “as a weakness, and objective literary intellectualism that fails to produce a subjective emotional involvement”.

Ezekiel Mphahlele as cited by Moyana seems to catch the exigencies of black writers. He says “as long as the white man’s policies continue to impose on as a ghetto existence, so long shall culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to sink lower and lower and for so long shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute fraction of life”. Most black writers in South Africa know their clan or tribe or race more than they will ever know others and so the social milieu presents him with a racial referant with which to interpret what they see, hear and think. All these aforementioned explications bear eloquent testimonies to the thematic pre-occupations derivable from the two novels under review

MINE BOY: Analysis

Mine boy is a novel that draws its inspirations from the parallelism of the empirical lives of the black and white in South Africa. The life of the white epitomizes affluence, better opportunities and all other things that provide

maximum comfort for any living soul on earth. Almost all the goodies of life are always at their disposal. Their life could be said to be thoroughly paradisiac here on earth.

Against this back drop is the life of a typical Blackman in South Africa – life of squalor, deprivation, depression and hopelessness. In other words, both the lives of the blacks and whites are sharply dichotomized. The former being a hellish life and the latter being utopia in all its ramifications.

Since Mine boy is a work of Art that transform the socio-economic dimension in South Africa into fiction, it therefore means that Mine boy still thrive on empirical raw passion of what obtains in south Africa thereby leaving much to be desired on creativity and wonderful power of imagination on the part of the writer. Little wonder then, the comment of Dennis Brutus (1976:86) could still hold sway: he contends that there is too much surface anguish and bitterness; too much of raw experience untransmitted into art”.

The mere fact that the writer Abrahams escaped from South Africa system to write for western newspapers attests to the state of mind of the writer and the excessive biases against racial prejudice in South Africa.

Xuma, the protagonist and the narrator in the novel is merely used to attest to the writer’s ambivalent method of approach to racial prejudice in South Africa. For example, Abrahams seems to be cautiously kind on the subject of the white bias for example of the three commands at the mine, two are liberals. Xuma confirms this when his boss says that “it is not good to think only as black man or white man.... The white people, in this country think only as white people, and that is why they do harm to your people”.

In this light, what Moyana (1976:87) says about this notion may tend to be pertinent.

He says:

Silent back faces or servants often appear at the convenient places to be recipients of white charity, real or verbal. The African characters themselves are disturbed to suit the white man’s quest for forgiveness..... often the whites present a strange psychopathic condition which is exacerbated by the presence of the black men.

What one can infer from Moyana’s assertion is that the relationship between the blacks and the whites in South African though may be bizarre, strained and anguished, there are some moments in all these relationships that could engender pity, soul searching and humility on the part of the whites. What Xuma’s boss says here attests eloquently to this evocation.

A school of thought posits that Mine Boy exposes the black people’s poverty readers them miserable, disorientated, disillusioned and helpless. In his artistic sensibility and creations, Abrahams seems to bring the tempo of black-white dichotomy into subtle consideration. In this vein, one could not totally downplay the novel as a miserable one because in the middle of pain and anguish, joy seems to bust out rapaciously.

For example, the exuberance of the women who dance at Malay camps spontaneous parties help to wipe out the memory of the brooding Mine dumps surrounding the city. The novel could not be said to be entirely sentimental-“Xuma smiles at one of the old women, selling beer thus reminding him of his sweet motherly voice”. What one is saying here is that Abrahams artistic sensibility does not portray total anguish, desperation and extreme hatred between the blacks and the whites in assigning roles to his characters is his factional universe. The portrayal of black/white relationship is imperceptibly intertwined.

At that moment of joy in Xuma, having had a nostalgic feeling for his mother through the semblance between that woman in question and her mother, the anguish which dominates the emotion of the writer surface again which leads to a total turnover of artistic shift.

The ephemeral joy which Xuma derives in his idealized perception of the woman-beer seller crashes like a pack of cards. What Xuma said about the woman bears eloquent testimony to his assertion; he say “the motherly sweet voice turns bitter immediately when the women says: “Come up! Come up you sons of Dog! Come and choke your guts with drink!” Xuma concludes that there was nothing motherly is her voice. What Xuma says here tend to expose the inner mind and emotion of the writer who has been confusedly biased against the dehumanizing torture of remorse the black mind suffers under the tense atmosphere the white man has created for the blacks in South Africa.

If suffices therefore to say that against a backdrop of drunken arguments and stabbings which have been the unfortunate lots of the blacks in the novel, Abraham’s black characters are toughened and loyal to one another.

This loyalty, though may be forced due to forces of unavoidable circumstances could not remain as open wound on the mind of the black man. This may be because the separateness of their lives that is, (whites and blacks) flourishes everywhere in their daily interactions. It is so palpable that Abrahams cannot but unfold his emotions. Xuma say that “by contrast, relationship between whites seem as over-elaborate as the number of their material possessions as seen from the sparseness of their slums. What one is saying here is that the black people are forced to make a response to the contrast between back and white experiences for example, to the doctor who has book, and electricity all epitomizing the confortablility of the whites in this regards, Eliza, the female protagonist is tempted to be tortured by her craving for material possessions that belong to the whites. Driven by excessive passion and innate anguish, Xuma is shared into final protest by the cynical approach of Mine bosses to human rights and safety.

Abraham’s diction in the novel suggests a suppressed passion and a desperation in the face of a system already extremely efficient at keeping the races and the races’ standard of living-surely apart. For example, words like; “and and but Which are powerfully repeated tend to create an intensity which has biblical connotations. This may be so when one conceptualizes the novel as a work of art that thrives on prophetic connotations in asserting a predated declaration of apartheid in South Africa by just two years. The overall assessment of the novel tends to reveal that it may be impossible for even liberal whites to understand the complexities, the intricacies or even exigencies of the way black people are forced to live amidst dreadful tensions almost at a knife edge. What Moyana (1976:89) says tends credence to this notion. He says’ “the ultimate logic of all racial repression is either mass extermination of a people or their permanent enslavement.... Because of the economic necessity to keep at hand a vast human reservoir of cheap labour the ruling Boers have not as yet committed themselves to Hitler’s methods of mass extermination, but one already committed to a course of slow but equally murderous economic genocide”. Mayana’s position may be understandable when one considers the apparent evidence of the extraordinary high infant mortality in the impoverished homelands.

Conclusively, the rhetorical question posed by Xuma and by extension an authorian pronouncement seems to be the high point of the novel. He says “how far can anyone understand the experience they don’t share 2 “did you feel these things like I do? “how can you understand, white man! You understand with pain in my heart”. So, is the evil machination of apartheid in South Africa, which Mine Boy decries, with artistic loud’ imaginative cry.

TELL FREEDOM: Analysis

This is a novel that chronicles the autobiographical background of the author himself. Peter Abraham's is a coloured South Africa (a white mother and a black father) who is never spared the tyranny of the oppressive system. He was born in a society where such evils like poverty and want hold sway. Where the Africans cannot share the same school's drinks, food, house etc. with their white counterparts. Worse still, where they must not complain or show their sorrow or indignation either in newspaper, the magazine, radio and television or even placards.

It is a hydra-headed monster, called apartheid that has eaten deep into the fabric of the society. Amidst this monstrous social milieu grows up Abraham. One morning, after much want, poverty and sorrow, he left South Africa so that he could write and know for the first time how well freedom tastes.

Born out of this notion is the non-fictional work of this novel which is titled – **Tell Freedom**. The novel could best be described as literary piece that describes a fight for freedom against slavery, injustice and for justice too.

Lee's early life with his nucleus family looked bright to the ephemeral. The demise of this father is like a deadly blow or ill-wind that does not do him any good as he becomes almost a wanderer, moving from one family to another and from one location and job to another. Vrededorp experience sound very bizarre, arrowing and mystifying too. He confessed that vrede-drop is a slim unlike Johannesburg. For him, life was so difficult that his mother could no longer afford to keep him and so he moved to live with Liza and Uncle Sam in Elsebrug. Since experience is the best teacher, his wondering life makes come across different people both white and black, amiable and hostile, accommodating. Amidst this aura of disillusionment that pervades his psycle and he maintains a down-to-earth or even arowed conviction to educate himself so that he could actualize his literary vision about his experiences and inhumanity of man to another man in a very harsh environment where he grows up.

Having realized his need for formal education, he holds his educational destiny in his hand by approaching a principal of a black school who allowed him to attend his school on certain conditions.

This dream is short lived because at fifteen, his schooling stopped abruptly when he got a job in a hotel as a cleaner and as an errand boy. This job was very tedious, nerve-raking and exhaustive for him.

He got various jobs after this, going through anger and bitterness, but he had no choice but to succumb to the ridicules and hardship of life. Throughout his life he had questions what he wanted to ask but dared not. At one point or the other, he had to forgo school for work and vice-versa.

As an ambitious young man, he had read widely because he could now read and write. He was somehow well versed both in reading and writing that he sees himself as an armchair nationalist through the literature, restless as he was in his dogged ambition to get educated, he struggled to get a college education.

His various interactions with a lot of people he came across, especially in Johannesburg sensitized his awareness to maxism is a concept that, if properly applied in a place like south Africa with somebody like lee, it could help him solve the knotty riddles of apartheid. He was so visionary that taking to literary writing to him might be a bold step in creating awareness for the Godless living in South Africa.

Tell Freedom affords Abrahams to create new forms, new values, new songs, new history, new awareness, new symbols, new myths and new aesthetic because he wrote the book at a time when literary writing in South Africa and about South Africa was highly censored.

Wilson Harris (1975:17) seems to conform this when he said that “the South African writer has a less fixed notion his audience who may be white and who are, if so, the target for the message of his work”. He quickly provides a most workable formula for a writer like Abrahams in a colonial society with a complex history which has its root in the mercantile expansion of Europe:

“At the heart of the necessity lay the arts of a new vision grounded in the long-suffering infinity of man grounded therefore in something infinitely vulnerable, infinitely marvelous as the texture of man, the inner shadow of man seeking a dimension of creativity and freedom that involved a partial and deeply painful unraveling of investitures of fate by which he was so deeply conditional that they were painted on every organ of the premises of existence”.

What Harris says here tends to provide and illumination insight into the workings of the mind of Abraham who by all means wanted to make an impact in a society which has been so cruel, unjust and harsh to his entire existence.

Lee’s interaction with Jonathan and their discussion still tires a sort of desperate ambition in lee. “They walked and talked about how Christianity and church were preaching one thing and some Christians were doing another thing entirely. They talked about how whites spat and their faces. They spoke about the ease and joys of the villages. They talked about the attraction of the man’s things, the denial of these things to the non-whites and the sorrow from these denials”. And so, the perception of lee of about the socio-economic conditions in South Africa creates a crippling effect on his emotional feelings. He became cynical of such a society. He felt that the Whiteman has finally crippled the black man and has subjected him to perpetual slavery for a man of vision like Lee; the only option was to leave the country where he could foster his ambition.

He came to the conclusion that “it was all a catalogue of sorrows” “He could not write books and he wanted to write. He wanted to tell freedom but he was not free to tell the world what freedom meant. He was free to suffer but he was not free to shout to the world that he was suffering” so he left South Africa for England (P.222-224) telling freedom through writing outside South Africa seems to reciprocate the cruel gestures to South African censorship in literary writings. Moyana’s (1976:88) rhetorical question seems to enclorse lee’s flight from South Africa. He says

“How could one ever write a book which in the South Africa context, may be interpreted as innocent of promoting feelings of hostility between natives and Europeans, or engendering feelings of hostility between the European inhabitants of the union on the one hand, and any other section of the inhabitants on the other or representing antagonistic relations between capital labour or making reference to controversial international politics or carrying scenes of intermingling between black and white or pugilistic encounters between them.

Apparently, literary productions in South Africa especially by the blacks or coloured people are tantamount to writers who are constantly fishing in troubled waters. For a writer like Abrahams who could not keep silent, who would never allow the sleeping dog to lie and whose literary sensibility could not allow him to bow to the injustice brutality of the whites and the dehumanization of the blacks, the best option is to escape where he could actualize and idealize his literacy vision about South Africa.

It is a mystery that only those of the high hierarchy can solve if they will.... somebody will have to do something to prevent poor children from such ridicule and hardship. It has been going on for too long.

Conclusion

This paper has identified the issue of apartheid and problems associated with creative writing in South Africa as two phenomena that are almost intertwined. **Tell Freedom** and **Mine Boy** are literary works that afford, the reader to have an illuminating insight into the nature of apartheid and the efforts made by black writers there in confronting the socio-political arrangements that seek to dwarf the thinking pattern of an average black man in South Africa. Consequently, Peter Abrahams has done tremendously justice to the two texts as the topic above so that the readers of this paper will not be overlooked.

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