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PETER ABRAHAMS

DETRIBALIZATION AND RACIAL CONFLICT  
AS MAJOR THEMES IN  
PETER ABRAHAMS' AFRICAN WRITINGS

By

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The assimilation of Africa into western civilization has been a painful process involving much struggle and hardship for African tribal society. Europe was successful in conquering Black Africa because she was superior in arms and technology; but World War II undermined the authority of European colonial powers in Africa by revealing their internal weaknesses and by engaging their attention elsewhere. Since then, increasing numbers of African states have achieved their independence, and the world has become very aware of Africa. Africa is no longer merely the site for commercial exploitation; it is seen now as an immense complex of cultural energies, and of agricultural and mineral resources, with a destiny closely linked to the future of all mankind. Africa is at present a continent undergoing vast changes; the growing sense of an African consciousness, and the conflicts and tensions she is experiencing, inevitably find expression in the writings of her peoples. Literature becomes a means of interpreting Africa both to her own peoples and to the outside world. The South African writer, because of his country's complicated racial and political conditions, has an unusually tense and confused situation to deal with, and he therefore has a special obligation to

deal with it responsibly.

Because South African literature is so closely linked to her historical background and political system, it might be of some value to give a brief review of her history.

South Africa's main problem has always been the relations between the different groups that live in the country. In 1652, the first whites arrived in South Africa, when the Dutch East India Company decided to establish a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope. Jan Van Riebeeck's expedition was not considered a move towards colonization; but in 1657 some men were allowed to settle as free burghers (farmers) and they became the first colonists. The establishment of a free burgher class and the introduction of slaves led to an expansion of the frontier. But the Cape was already occupied by native tribes like the Hottentots. The right to land quickly became a central South African problem.

Gradually Dutch farmers began to move away from the Cape in search of more land and they became known as Trekboers (travelling farmers). The nomadic way of life shaped the emerging society. The Trekboer became hardy and independent and self-reliant, but his freedom was anarchic, not disciplined; his individualism was of the frontier, not of democratic society; his sense of freedom and individualism was bred apart from settled society where the rights of a man are limited by the rights of



his neighbour. As he expanded his frontier, he came into contact with native tribes, which, because of his superior arms, he was able to conquer; he developed the attitude that there was plenty of land, and that it was the right of the white man to own the land. His stern and dogmatic Calvinistic religion, with its doctrine of predestination, enabled the white man to regard the black man as inferior. The Trekboers maintained a sense of social cohesion through family ties, religion, and wars with the native people; centuries later this cohesion found expression in Afrikaaner Nationalism.

In the Eastern Cape, Europe and Africa met in the persons of the Trekboers and the Bantu tribes. The Bantu tribes were moving south, and the Trekboers were moving north; both were extending frontiers in search of more land. But they had different conceptions of the ownership of land. Private ownership was a part of European custom and law. In African custom, the land was owned by the tribe, not the individual; the individual merely occupied and used the land. Each group was ignorant of the other's customs, and this led to misunderstandings and injustice. Frequently there were wars over frontier boundaries, land ownership, trade and theft. The Bantu people, the greatest obstacle to the white conquest of Southern Africa, were defeated after a century, but they still retain their national identity.

Around 1793, Britain occupied the Cape. The British had a different language, habits and traditions from the Dutch, and these differences were responsible for much of South Africa's subsequent history. At this time in Britain, there were many evangelical and humanitarian movements; it is not surprising that missionaries had a great influence on South Africa. They brought Christianity and western civilization to Africa and thus began the process by which tribalism was fatally undermined. These missionaries championed the African cause and were resented by the Boers.

The British antagonized the Boers with the abolition of slavery, with the introduction of ideas that regarded black and white as equal, and with their proposals to anglicise the Cape. By 1836, the Dutch frontiersmen decided to trek away from British rule and nineteenth-century liberal ideas, and to establish their own states; but British troops and British legislative authority were forced to follow them to Natal and to the interior of Southern Africa because of the internal weaknesses in the Boer Republics, and because of the danger of native uprisings.

The Great Trek brought the African tribesmen into armed conflict with Boer Commandos, but after each local conflict, the social life of the African was not greatly different from what it had been; he might lose

some land or might be subjected to Boer rule, but he continued to live his simple tribal life. When he worked on Boer farms, he found the white man's ways strange, but he continued to do things he had been accustomed to: he tended cattle and sheep, grew maize and vegetables, and lived the unhurried seasonal life of a farmer; he retained his social customs. Despite the difference between the Christian white and heathen black, there was much in common between them because they were both farmers, and each had the leisure to adapt himself to the other's habits.

But gold and diamonds were discovered in South Africa. In Europe, scientists from the seventeenth century had paved the way for the industrial revolution that enabled their descendants to conquer Southern Africa, to develop its mineral and agricultural resources, to establish travel routes and to plant western civilization firmly on African soil. The mining treks were more catastrophic in their impact on the African than was the Great Trek. In Johannesburg the pace of life was much faster than it was on the farms. There was no place for women and children in the industrial towns where the men were drawn to work; in the overcrowded urban slums, tribal dignity, good manners and discipline disintegrated.

The rapid industrial and commercial expansion brought to light the inherent weakness of the social

and economic structure of South Africa. While the relations between blacks and whites were seen in terms of boundaries settled by war or annexation, the issues were fairly simple; the African could be ruled and his labour used as something separate from the social and political life of the country. Industrialization hastened the breakup of tribalism. It brought vast numbers of Africans to towns and cities, to overcrowded and unsanitary slums. It destroyed the customary social bonds of tribalism faster than they could be replaced by European standards; it uprooted the African from the land and created a black landless proletariat.

The next significant occurrence in South African history was the Boer War, which was a manifestation of the antagonistic relations between the Boers and British. After this, in 1910 the South African States were united at the National Convention. Relations between the Afrikaner and British were improved, but the Africans, who formed eighty per cent of the population, were unrepresented and their voting rights were unprotected.

Union made economic expansion possible. As a result of urbanization, African and Afrikaner moved into the industrial world of the city. The land problem remained; thousands of Africans were landless and the reserves were inadequate for their needs. The European ruling class found it difficult to admit the African

into the changing economic system and impossible to absorb him politically and socially. Economic integration is a prerequisite for industrial expansion, but it leads to political and social demands; the refusal to accede to those demands leads to economic disequilibrium.

In 1948, the Nationalist Party proposed a policy of Apartheid - the separate development of the different races. But the blacks, the overwhelming majority of the population were allowed only fourteen per cent of the land - which land in any case was overstocked and of poor quality. These reserves are scattered and are unlikely to achieve viable economies. Also non-whites were prevented by banning laws from making their opinions known. There are colour restrictions on skilled and professional jobs. The black South African exists under a burden of poverty and oppression.

In South Africa today, then, there are four different races with different languages, cultures, and religious and political beliefs; the atmosphere in the country is one of ever-increasing emotional and political tension. The sense of strain can be a powerful stimulus for the South African writer. At a Conference on English and Literature in South Africa in 1956, William Plomer expressed his belief that people write partly because

they feel themselves caught in a situation they are driven to explain; they feel they have some special knowledge, some special perception, which they must communicate, and which they can communicate to others in their own way. This feeling of compulsion, sometimes calls out their best efforts.

In his speech at the same Conference, Alan Paton asserted that a South African writer

can interpret South Africa in such a way that countless numbers of readers will respond to his vision, they will be excited by a revelation, not of something they do not know, but of something they do know, revealed to them in such a way that what they dimly sensed is suddenly illuminated, sometimes brightly, sometimes by an arrow of light that pierces the very heart, causing an emotional storm of grief, recognition, pain, exaltation, guilt and joy.<sup>2</sup>

When two different cultures come into contact, the people they influence compare them and have to choose between different values. In South Africa, the black people are becoming more separated from certain aspects of traditional tribal life and have to adapt rapidly to the influence and demands of white civilization. Modern African literature is expressive of the tensions and conflicts created between the black people's indigenous tribal experience and the western colonial experience.

The fact of race is everpresent in South African life. The doctrine of Apartheid presupposes

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<sup>1</sup> A.C. Partridge (ed.), Proceedings of a Conference of Writers, Publishers, Editors and University Teachers of English, (Univ. of Witwatersrand press, 1956), p.57.  
<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 247.

and proposes separate worlds for the different peoples; but in fact these do not exist. The fact of racial interaction and interrelation is all-encompassing and omnipresent in South African life. Race is not merely the material for a plot or structural pattern, or an obsession; it is the stuff of life in South Africa. The South African novelist naturally turns to race as his main theme; he is drawn to the drama and conflict inherent in the subject of race.

South African writers, and particularly black South African writers, frequently write from their own personal and tragic experience. In order to write creatively and not merely resort to self-pity, they must be sufficiently disciplined to distance themselves from their experiences. They face another problem too: the conditions for non-whites in South Africa are so bizarre and repressive that the outside world regularly finds incomprehensible situations and conditions the average South African black has been conditioned to accept and consider natural. These experiences demand expression. Most South African literature, by both blacks and whites, revolves around the conflicts, complexities and tragedies of the South African way of life.

All African writers face the difficulty of communicating from one people to another, from one culture to another; the problem is more acute for the South African writer, who, because he is frequently concerned with racial matters in his writings, often has his writings banned in his country and may even be denied the opportunity to write at all. Hence the South African writer can hope, at best, to write for a very limited number of his own people; he must instead attempt primarily to communicate with the outside world. Frequently, he is called upon to explain situations; hence at times the reader, and perhaps especially the South African reader, senses that the author is intruding into the story with explanations; though this often causes valid objection, the conditions imposed upon the writer must be borne in mind.

Race relations and the disintegration of African cultural and social traditions are the most important themes in South African literature. Many of the best known South African novels explore these themes. An outstanding novel of the early fifties was Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country. Plomer says of it, "At a moment in the evolution of South Africa when a kind of inward crisis seemed to have occurred in the South



African consciousness or conscience, the book caught and crystalized its significance."<sup>3</sup> It is the story of a black man in contact with a society with which he finds himself unable to cope: he is drawn into the lawless elements of that society and ends up a criminal; the society is accused of making him a criminal. Mopeli-Paulus' work Blanket Boy's Moon is a story about the conflict set up in a young native in Basutoland by the claims of tribal custom and white law; it is a work of great originality, with the tone of real tragedy. Harry Bloom's novel Episode deals with similar material; the story is set in the technological world of the white man that the black man has entered by socio-economic means - his need for work and the white man's need of his work. The work shows what hardships people suffer under the imposition of a particular policy, way of life or morality.

Comparable with these fine novels in thematic concerns and quality are the writings of Peter Abrahams, one of South Africa's finest novelists and the most prolific black South African novelist. A man of mixed heritage, he was born near Johannesburg in 1919. He began writing articles and poetry in his late teens, and, during World War II, wrote Dark Testament (1942), a collection of short stories, and Song of the City (1945), his first novel. His second novel, Mine Boy (1946), did much to establish him as one of the leading African novelists. Since then he has published five other

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

novels, two autobiographical works, a travel book and several articles and reviews. Abrahams now lives in Jamaica, where he works as a radio broadcaster-commentator and freelance writer.

The major strength in Abrahams' writings derives from his profoundly-felt personal experiences. In his early novels he gives an interpretation of the history and ways of the people of South Africa. One gains a partial insight into his method of writing from a short story in Dark Testament where the artist says: "With my pen and my burning heart I built canvas after canvas. The words became pictures. The pictures became stories. The stories became people " (Dark Testament p. 152). Abrahams repeatedly expresses his love and concern for his people in all his writings. In his South African writings, it is primarily with the restrictions and inhumanity imposed upon the Black people by Apartheid that Abrahams deals, although in his novel Song of the City he also dramatises the division between the white people of South Africa.

## CHAPTER 2

### TELL FREEDOM.

Although Tell Freedom was written in 1954, after several other works, it will be considered first, because a study of his autobiography might provide one with a greater understanding and appreciation of Peter Abrahams and his other writings. Tell Freedom is one of Abrahams' most moving and accomplished works, where biographical information is very effectively presented in novelistic form.

James Olney believes that autobiography has provided the finest literary vehicle for South African writers, because they have found it to be the form best suited to expressing and interpreting their experience. He goes on to say that black writers have produced autobiographical writing that is the most vital, intense and energetic that we have from Africa. South African autobiography deals repeatedly with progressive alienation and exile.<sup>1</sup>

Olney's remarks apply well to Abrahams' writings, for Tell Freedom seems to me to be one of his most successful works. Because of the tragic and unjust conditions in South Africa, such works run the risk of descending into mere self-pity; but Peter Abrahams,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Olney, Tell Me Africa, (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 248.

though he expresses strongly in his writings his anger and unhappiness over the South African situation, repeatedly shows his ability to see some light in a dismal situation. Perhaps this is a part of his South African heritage, for he says at one point in Tell Freedom, "Here, in our land, in the midst of our miseries, we had moments of laughter, moments of playing."<sup>2</sup> It is partly this ability to see some ray of hope, while being deeply aware of the unfair and wretched conditions, that makes Tell Freedom one of the most powerful autobiographies in South African literature.

Three different themes are presented in Tell Freedom. First, the work deals with Peter Abrahams' early life and development, and with the various forces that had an influence on his life. The second theme is the gradual awakening of his artistic consciousness as one part of the development towards manhood. Finally, his growth towards maturity has its basis in the experience of the black people of South Africa; the quality of the lives of black South Africans is the third theme in the work. The ease and skill with which Abrahams develops and unites these themes makes Tell Freedom a very sophisticated piece of writing.

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<sup>2</sup> P. Abrahams, Tell Freedom, (New York: Knopf, 1956), p.226. Page references for all other quotations from the novel will be given in brackets after each quotation.

The work will be examined then with these three themes as the central consideration.

The opening paragraph of the work is a poetic statement of a theme that Abrahams explores continually in his South African novels: that of the black man's plight in South Africa. Here, Peter Lee Abrahams is drawn away from the discomfort of his own surroundings into the enchanting world of nature. There is in fact something Keatsian in his evocation of the beauty and warmth within his raindrop world:

I pushed my nose and lips against the pane and tried to lick a raindrop sliding down on the other side. As it slid past my eyes, I saw the many colours in the raindrop...It must be warm in there. Warm and dry. And perhaps the sun would be shining in there. The green must be the trees and the grass; and the brightness, the sun...I was inside the raindrop, away from the misery of the cold damp room. I was in a place of warmth and sunshine, inside my raindrop world. (p. 3).

But just as the young boy is inevitably called away from the magic of the window to the dampness of his room, so he is cut off from the good things in life; it is this latter condition that the book goes on to explore.

The autobiography begins with information about his early life. Sketches of childhood incidents tell us about Peter, and also about the lives his people live. Such sketches not only recreate graphically the quality of life, but also fulfil an artistic function.

The incident concerning Moe, for instance, suggests something of Abrahams' determination to get what he must have, (which quality of persistence was necessary to enable him to transcend the limitations the South African situation placed on him.) At the same time, Moe's death precedes the death of Abrahams' own father, and suggests the conscious build-up of a climactic structure.

At Aunt Liza's place, he learns about the hard lives Coloured farm workers lead. These poverty-stricken people live on tiny plots of land and barely manage to eke out a living. The average coloured woman works from dawn to dark doing the white man's laundry. The outburst of resentment that comes only occasionally, - "I'm fed up with their dirt!" (p. 28) - intimates the quality of a life-time of repression and suffering. Yet they can do nothing to change things. Even the children do not live lives of carefree joy and innocence. The urgency of the struggle for survival is impressed upon them; when they collect dung for the fire, there is a tight desperation in the search because their lives are so dependent on it.

The harshness of the land is in keeping with the harshness of their lives. We are told that

The place itself seemed to fit into the bleak austerity of the land about it. There was not a tree in the valley below. To the east and west there was just the harshness of the sloping land under the curving sky. Even the sky seemed cold and remote and far away. (p. 15).

Winter is an arch-enemy and is personified as a monster. But - and this is characteristic of most of Abrahams' writings - he is not totally negative and pessimistic. Here, although he is a young child alone in a strange new world, he is able to find something to hope for or dream about:

Only the river promised a touch of softness in this hard place. A line of willows marked the course it took. They were the only trees in all the land about. I would go there, I promised myself. I would go down the river and look at the trees. (p. 15).

The seasons are in keeping with the conditions of the people's lives. With the first cold touches of winter, Joseph leaves because his father dies in the mines. With the summer comes the lightening of hearts that is expressed by the passionate interest that is taken in music and dancing. The fact that music is symbolic of the life throb of black South Africans is conveyed effectively throughout the work. It is through their music that the black people express their joys, sorrows, frustrations and anger. The evening dances and sing-songs serve the function of fortifying the people for the next day's struggle. The annual Coon

- Carnival revitalizes the people and sustains them through the hard year. At one point we are told that a man plays the guitar so movingly that he comes close to making Dinny, a rough street urchin, cry. Music and religion go together too; when the preacher sings, the people on the street join him, and the occasion calls forth an emotional response in them - the priest cries and Abrahams himself feels a throb of excitement. The black man's music is one of his last holds on human dignity and self respect, and is both a means of escape from pain, and an assertion of self.

Suddenly young Lee is transferred from the farming area of Elsburg to the slums of Johannesburg, where he grows accustomed to an urban life. Little scenes and details that are so much a part of South African life - the bonsella, the dice schools and pick-up vans - are sketched graphically for the reader. Because of the experiences of those close to him, certain conditions or results of the South African way of life are impressed upon him. Maggie, if she cannot afford to get an education and become a teacher (which profession afforded the sole possibility for advancement for the black), has no other way out of her situation but to work for the white people. When she does so, she can expect, unless she is very fortunate, the treatment her mother, Betty and Jim have at the hands of their white masters.



Betty steals from her employers to clothe Lee, and her reasoning (that her white masters have too much and that they are stealing her sweat) has a strange and bitter logic. When Lee returns to Vrédedorp, he watches Maggie dress his mother's wound, and his meticulous description of the painful scene calls forth almost a physical response from the reader. Then we learn about the inhuman part the white mistress has played in his mother's suffering. One can easily understand Maggie's bitterness when she says to her mother, "Now I must go and work for the whites; clean their dirt and look after their children just like you and all the others " (p. 70). Both Maggie and Harry find it difficult to bow to the white man, and are resentful of injustice. But though a modern psychologist would consider this a healthy response, there is no secure place for such people in South Africa under its present conditions; Harry is unable to adjust to or accept the black man's situation, and is broken by the system.

Abrahams strives to look at the white man honestly and without prejudice. But, for the white woman who gives him a slice of bread when he sells her firewood, there is the white man who expects Lee to be a thief and is angry when he is proved wrong; for the redhead who befriends him at the market, there is the policeman whose

anger and resentment of him makes Lee say, "I knew there would be trouble for me if I ever ran into that man, no matter where " (p. 197). But such incidents serve to point out Abrahams' broadening awareness. He finds the redhead confusing: "It made it so much more difficult to know where one was with whites. It complicated the business of building up defences" (p. 198).

The white man's demands make themselves felt in every part of the black man's life. Jim tells Lee how his desire as a man to be with his woman had caused trouble between him and his white mistress, as a result of which he lost his woman and his life was ruined. Lee learns from Jim how totally the black man's life is controlled by passes. The ridiculous nature of the pass system is well conveyed by the tale of the pass that enables certain blacks to live without passes. The pass system in South Africa insidiously attacks the black man's sense of human dignity.

It is not only by deliberate acts of repression and cruelty that whites hurt blacks. When Dinny and Lee play the game Debs, we realize their great need and longing for the everyday things that are a part of the white world. Yet, thoughtlessly and unnecessarily, whites crush the innocent dreams of sensitive people like Anne.

We learn about the grinding poverty of the coloured people in Vrededorp. Aunt Mattie is forced to sell liquor illicitly to maintain her family. When she is caught at this, her fine is about six pounds - a large sum for an African to obtain. The family put together all their savings, but they have to sell all Mattie's furniture and she has to spend several days in prison, before they manage to collect enough money for her fine. One can readily imagine the difficulties involved in her getting started again.

Yet though the blacks suffer most under African racialism, Abrahams learns that not all whites escape the pain. The shame and self hatred of people like Zena serve to round off the picture.

Such then are the experiences that are a part of Abrahams' background and heritage. Let us now look at Abrahams' personal development amidst these forces.

Abrahams begins his story at a crucial stage in his consciousness. He says:

These were my people and I was seeing them for the first time in a way I could remember for the rest of my life. What went before I know only from hearsay. A little of what came after has slipped back into the shadows.  
(p. 4).

He then proceeds to give us biographical information about his parents. His mother emerges as a strong, positive and sensitive woman, who is a source of

security and safety. Strong, reliable and efficient women appear repeatedly in Abrahams' novels, and often these characters seem to be based on the mother figure presented in Tell Freedom. Although Lee's father dies when he is young, his mother helps to reinforce a positive image of a father figure and this gives Lee a certain degree of security. A healthy pride in his family is developed; he is taught to recite his family tree. This type of security is not always a part of the coloured background. The coloured people have no real roots of their own; they have neither the past nor the traditions of the white or the black. They are attracted toward the world of both the whites and the blacks, and because the whites are the privileged class they attempt to move towards and identify with the white world. But they are denied a place with either group. The unstable position of the coloureds as a nation or race is reflected in the insecurity of their family lives, where poverty, slum conditions and the struggle for survival all serve to break up family ties. Towards the end of Tell Freedom Abrahams remarks on his mother's ability to give them a strong sense of family even though they were often apart. Perhaps this sense of security was one of the characteristics of his heritage that gave him the strength to break away from

South Africa.

At Elsburg, Lee becomes aware of the white man for the first time when he goes to buy crackling. The white man watches, amused and mocking, while the young Lee learns that the white man is the "baas". This scene is followed by a more significant contact with the white people. Lee gets involved in a fight with some white boys because they insult his parents. Resentful of the insults and injustice he retaliates, and in doing so shows a healthy sense of pride and self-respect. White South Africans make attempts to eradicate this awareness of human dignity from the minds of the black people, to undermine their self-respect. The black man is intimidated and reduced to grovelling before the white man as the only way out. Uncle Sam is forced to beat Lee for striking a white boy; after the beating he cries; what he expresses is not only his pain and sorrow but also his humiliation at being forced into such a position. Such situations break sensitive men for in the interests of survival they must yield to the white man's commands, but in the process they lose their own self respect and sense of manhood. Still, while the black man resents and reacts against injustice there is some hope for him.

But in the person of his brother, Lee is forced to see that this is not always the solution to the problem. Harry and Maggie, as a result of their father's influence, are conscious and resentful of unfairness of the black man's lot. Harry's sense of pride and self respect will not let him humble himself before the white man. When Lee sees Harry at the prison, he says of him, "He had the expression of an unhappy, whipped dog, hurt terribly without quite knowing why " (p. 154).

When Lee sees Harry later in the novel, he says:

When I first met him in Elsburg he had been gay and spruce, clear-eyed and sure of himself. Now I left him dirty, unshaven, baffled, bitter, a father, seething with a futile rage, yelling at the top of his voice in a filthy room. (p. 170).

At this stage, Lee notes in himself the "beginnings of a new awareness. Something was happening to me and the way I saw the world in which I lived " (p. 171). Later he says of himself, "I had submitted to their superior strength. But submission can be a subtle thing. A man can submit today in order to resist tomorrow. My submission had been such." (p. 369).

Lee begins to go to school and in time this opens new horizons to him. Because of his new needs and desires, a restraint grows up between him and his street gang. It is at this stage that he goes walking in white neighbourhoods, longing for the good things

that are reserved only for whites in South Africa. Signs of prohibition separate him from them. The idea of division that is suggested by the opening paragraph of the novel is reinforced here.

His critical consciousness grows more acute. The incident with the redhead teaches him that all whites do not behave in one way, hence his response to white people has to be a considered one. With his newly-discovered critical powers, and perhaps with the artistic disposition to see into the truth of things, he sees his people as they are; he feels temporarily alienated from Maggie when she expresses her resentment of Anne's "slum" family, without showing any understanding of their position. Abrahams for the first time feels ashamed of his sister, though he understands the situation. (Incidentally, this scene comes after Abrahams meets an educated black man who explains to him the attitude of educated blacks towards the uneducated: that they reject the uneducated blacks because they feel ashamed of them, but that they fail to consider the difficult circumstances these people are in.)

At college he undergoes another step in his development towards manhood; he learns to forget the white man's colour, and moves towards being a whole man. When he goes home at Christmas, Maggie senses the change

in him; for at college, not only has he lost his consciousness of colour, but he has also had much intellectual stimulation. His family worry about what is to become of him and he is forced to face the question himself. At the Bantu World, the community centre for educated blacks, the difficulties involved in being a black writer in South Africa are acknowledged. Abrahams has now become an educated and cultured person but the white man still expresses disgust at the sight of him. Abrahams, because he does not wish to become a teacher, and because he is so conscious of the injustice and inconsistencies in the South African way of life, feels compelled to leave the college.

He is then introduced to the doctrines of Marxism; as a result of his contact with Harold and Cathy, he realizes the humanity of even white people. He becomes a public figure, and then becomes involved in political protests. When he sees Maggie's desperate struggle for her survival, his determination to leave South Africa is crystallized. He analyses the effect of the South African system on him:

In my contact with them the Europeans had made it clear that they were the overlords, that the earth and all its wealth belonged to them. They had spoken the language of physical strength, the language of force. And I had submitted to their superior strength. But submission can be a subtle thing. A man can submit today in order to resist tomorrow. My submission had



been such. And because I had not been free to show my real feeling, to voice my true thoughts, my submission had bred bitterness and anger. And there were nearly ten million others who had submitted with equal anger and bitterness. One day the whites would have to reckon with these people. (p.369).

Eventually he manages to work his way out of South Africa. He says in the end,

I needed, not friends, not gestures, but my manhood. And the need was desperate. Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa. Also there was the need to write, to tell freedom, and for this I needed to be personally free. (p.370).

Stories and dreams are presented as a constant part of Abrahams' world. The work itself opens with Lee secure within his raindrop world. Stories and fantasies are associated repeatedly and positively with his father, and this helps to create for him a father image. At Vrededorp, Betty and his mother tell him stories, and young Lee says,

That night I entered a world in which the dividing line between reality and dream was so fine as not to exist. And I lived many quiet moments of many years in that strange region that is neither of this world nor out of it. (p.73).

At Aunt Mattie's, the children tell stories around the fireplace, and the atmosphere infects them with a sense of freedom, hopefulness and happiness. We see Lee as a sort of romantic dreamer when the boys go out stealing; he goes last because it is most dangerous; the romance

of the situation appeals to him.

At the smithy, Lee meets the dreamer, Nondi, and he says of him, "Sometimes his mad words fell into order in my mind. When that happened he revealed vivid depths of feeling " (p.138). Later, Lee has a certain vision of the land - "A strong sense of space and grandeur overwhelmed me. I longed suddenly for Nondi to be on this hill with me " (p.141). At this moment, his mother and sister seem strangers to him. The awakening of the artistic consciousness alienates him from ordinary people.

The turning point in Abrahams' life comes when he is read his first story. He is determined to go to school and makes his pledge that "when I can read and write, I'll make stories like that. " (p.173). Then, for the first time, he states his name - "Peter is my real name, Peter Abrahams." (p.173).

Learning opens a new world to him. He learns English and finds the range of his thoughts expanding with his new language. He says of himself at this stage:

With Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a new self-consciousness, were born. I desired to know myself in terms of the new standards set by these books. I lived in two worlds, the world of Vrededorp and the world of these books. And, somehow, both were equally real. Each was a potent force in my life, compelling. My heart and mind were in a turmoil. Only the victory of one or the other could bring me peace.  
(p.189).

When he works at the Bantu World, he comes into contact with other educated and artistic people. The black singer with the glorious voice gives the black people a sense of common identity and Abrahams shares and is moved by the experience. The significance of the experience can be understood when one realizes how difficult it is for the black and coloured to achieve any sense of nationalism in South Africa. In writings by black people, Abrahams sees expressed what he knew and felt; the reader is made strongly aware of the excitement he feels:

I turned the pages of The New Negro. These poems and stories were written by negroes! Something burst deep inside me. The world could never again belong to the white people only! Never again! (p.226).

Later Abrahams says of negro writers, "To them I owe a great debt for crystallizing my vague yearning to write, and for showing me the long dream was attainable." (p.230).

South Africa offers no opportunity for advancement for the black writer. Abrahams is drawn both to England and her literary tradition, and to America with her many opportunities. The pull towards England proves stronger and Abrahams determines to make what is in fact a pilgrimage to a spiritual home.

One of Abrahams' last experiences in South Africa is with the poverty-stricken people in the Cape Flats. Here he learns about the starving people in Namaqualand.

He says,

The memory of the man from Namaqualand and his quiet statement about death and starvation kept me awake for two nights. On the third night, I slipped paper into my battered typewriter and wrote. I called what I had written "Cape Flats Ltd." Then I went to sleep. (p.353).

The compulsion to write of his experiences becomes the potent force in his life, and he begins to fulfil one of the demands he places on himself: "I want to write books and tell them about life in this country.....I will try to tell everything; the bad as well as the good." (p.356).

## CHAPTER 3

### SONG OF THE CITY and MINE BOY

Peter Abrahams' first novel, Song of the City, was published in 1943. Ten years later, in Return to Goli, Abrahams says of this work,

I had made the most awful mess in my attempt at white people in Song of the City. They had come out unreal pasteboard figures with no life to them. And the other non-white writers whose works I had seen had not fared much better. Either those who claimed that there were innate and fundamental differences between people of different colours were right, or else we had become so blinded by prejudice that none of us could see a person of a different colour in the round and as a whole human being. This was the most challenging problem that faced me as a writer and a man.<sup>1</sup>

Abrahams' criticism of his early novel is of interest. Though the novel is in some respects a limited one, and Abrahams' criticism of it valid to a certain degree, it nonetheless establishes Abrahams as a balanced and dispassionate writer who consistently refuses to side with particular racial or social groups. A reader of a number of Abrahams' novels is struck immediately by his ability to explore sympathetically the experiences of people from different cultural backgrounds. The quotation above suggests that such sympathetic awareness and understanding was a hard-won achievement, and Abrahams is all the more

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<sup>1</sup> P. Abrahams, Return to Goli, (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 18.

Page references for all other quotations from the novel will be given in brackets after each quotation.

to be applauded for his determination to deal with what is a crucial problem, especially for all South Africans. It is perhaps this determination to deal with and solve a problem, together with the artist's need to love deeply in order to create, that enabled him to survive the type of bitterness and destructiveness that overcame other westernized, intellectual blacks like Jomo Kenyatta (whose position Abrahams explores in some detail in his essay "The Blacks"). In fact, Abrahams himself expresses these ideas in Return to Goli; he considers his emotional state before he left South Africa, assessing that:

My spiritual and emotional want, much more than my physical want, had been the driving motive behind my leaving the land of my birth. The need to be psychologically free of the colour bar had, over the years, grown into an obsession, blinding as all obsessions are. And in that year my obsession with this need had reached breaking point. I had to escape or slip into that negative destructiveness that is the offspring of bitterness and frustration. (p. 14).

He goes on a few pages later:

My business as a writer was with people, with human thoughts, conflicts, longings and strivings, not with causes. Painfully I was slowly groping to a view of life that transcended my own personal problems as a member of one oppressed group of humanity.....I knew that in order to write I would have to purge myself of hatred, for good writing has always been born of love. (p. 17).

In Song of the City, Abrahams attempted to deal many of the problems that face South African society. Although the work appears strained at times because it strives to cover too wide a range of material, it presents several of the themes and problems that Abrahams goes on to explore in greater depth and with greater efficiency in his later novels. The novel describes the political conditions in South Africa on the eve of her entry into World War II, and the strained relations between the English and Afrikaaner people is one of the central concerns of the work. But the most important theme is the one embodied in the Song of the City - the song that gives the novel its title:

They came from their homes to the city  
 They came from the green of the fields  
 They left all their loved far behind them  
 The sky and the stars and the earth.  
 And now they are slaves of the city  
 Away from the ones whom they love -  
 But none will return from the city,  
 Here they'll die for the song is in their blood.<sup>2</sup>

The song is a ballad improvised at dances and beer halls and is presented as a part of the oral tradition; its vitality and authenticity derive from the personal experiences and emotions of the black people living in the industrial surroundings of the city. The song tells of the people who leave their

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<sup>2</sup> P. Abrahams, Song of the City, (London: Crisp, 1943), p. 174.

Page references for all other quotations from the novel will be given in brackets after each quotation.

simple, peaceful lives in the villages and come to the big city where they are faced with a very different way of life. Despite the harshness of the lives they lead in the city, it claims them as her own and they are unable to shake off their emotional tie to her. It is chiefly on this theme of the detribalization of the native people of South Africa that the following commentary will focus.

The novel opens in a Bantu village where, although the simplicity and complexity of tribal life is intimated in the first few paragraphs, it is acknowledged to be a dying way of life. A feeling of pathos in the awareness of this dying of an ancient way of life is movingly conveyed. The story tells how Dick Nduli, a simple village boy, leaves his home for the city and learns a new way of life, and in the process develops a political consciousness. When Dick leaves for the city we are told that the people "shielded their eyes against the glare of the sun as they watched the solitary figure against the skyline" (p. 8); the brief description suggests the deep pathos of a whole way of life being brushed away and destroyed by a technically superior force, while the people can only protest ineffectually - for who can really defy the sun? The movement from the old world to the new world is described in the opening



paragraph of the novel:

The grey sandy path wound up the hill. Away from the village this time. Always it had been to the village, but now it was away from it. It led to the outer world now. To the world of the big city. (p. 7).

Later the curving of the railway tracks suggests the swing from one life style to another:

Behind him, far behind, lay all the things he knew and understood. Ahead, rushing on to meet him, lay the big city of Johannesburg and new ways he had to learn and the new people he had to learn to understand. (p. 12).

Gradually Dick is initiated into the ways of white South Africa. Daisy thinks this of Dick when she first meets him:

Desire is strong in his breast but he controls it. That is like a man who is strong. A man who is from the farms. But the city will get him. She looked at him. His broad smooth black face was beautiful. He still looks proud, she thought, the city has not touched him yet. It has not broken him yet. He still has the look of the Zulu warrior, proud and pushing, but soft in his strength .... (p. 48).

Daisy, who has been in the city many years, asks him if he loves his mother; he answers, "She's my mother"(p.47). The simplicity of his response serves to point out the differences between the ideologies and attitudes of tribal and western man. Dick has to learn new responses suitable for a more complex system of values. Soon Dick goes to a dance dressed in a gentleman's suit; the attraction towards western ways is inevitable. He looks into a mirror and sees a sophisticated, well-dressed

person, like the educated Timbata, who visits and drinks with white people. Daisy too is dressed as beautifully as white people. But though they adopt new ways they are not allowed into the new world. They are not allowed on a bus reserved for whites but must instead await a crowded non-white bus, and some of the magic of their evening is destroyed.

On the whole, the African in the city, whether he is the seasoned city man or an unsophisticated village boy, faces the same problems. He lives in constant fear of policemen, pick-up vans and white men. Dick gets arrested for no good reason and is thrown into prison, where he learns about the white system of justice. Court cases are run in a corrupt and unfair manner where no attempt is made to understand or evaluate different value systems. Men are judged and condemned without understanding what they have done wrong; hence no effective effort is made to reduce or eliminate crime.

As a result of his experiences in the city Dick's political consciousness is awakened. When he first meets Timbata his response is one of nervous diffidence. But, half-consciously, he analyses the situation: Timbata, a black man, is drinking with whites; yet drinking is illegal for blacks and Dick's friends<sup>are</sup> arrested for having beer in their possession. Dick, when he is first taken into prison, looks wild, lost and frightened; he comes out a different person.

Mbale thinks of him, "This was a new Dick who said things without speaking. The excited one from the farms is gone, --- this one wants to know things " (p. 142)

After hearing the man with no fear make a speech while he is in prison, Dick begins to think politically. He dwells continually on the idea of having no fear, or of having the white man as a comrade or brother. Dick is disturbed by the new things he learns, and by the inconsistencies between Christianity and Western philosophy on one side, and, on the other, the actual way of life of the people. Eventually he returns to his village; but the sickness of his mind is not healed. Though he finds it is good to be away from the city and the white man, he finds no peace. His horizons have been broadened and he longs now for the city and for the understanding of its western ways. He has become a child of the city, and, as the song tells, will ever be drawn to it.

The tension between urban and tribal life is epitomized by the figures of the women, Mnandi and Daisy. In the first chapter of the novel, we are told that "Faintly he heard the voices of the young women of the village. They rang out clear, with a faint insistence that would not die " (p. 7); the scene seems to foreshadow the persistence of the Mnandi vision. Dick's first visions of Mnandi are of a simple village girl who would "come every day to the house of my mother and work with

her, and always it was she who made my food ready and set it before me." (p.48). In the city he meets Daisy, a creature of joy, laughter and vitality, and finds soon that he "listened to the clear voice of Daisy and thought of Mnandi " (p.49). At the dance with Daisy, he feels that the peace that meant Mnandi has crept into his heart: "It was Mnandi that leaned on his breast and listened to his pounding heart. And round him were the things that made Mnandi more beautiful " (p.74). The vision of Mnandi is superimposed upon the reality of Daisy and the moon, and the song of life is associated with both. The moon shines on him and the folks at home; the vision of Mnandi helps him retain his contact with the village; the vision is based on Daisy who marks his tie with the city. Mnandi serves the function of bridging the worlds. This dual dream vision is one of the compensations for detribalization.

The single most powerful force in the lives of the black people of South Africa, as expressed repeatedly in Abrahams' novels, is music. Music is the sustaining force of the people in the city; they sing and dance to it, they hammer out their frustrations, hopes, dreams and fears to the passionate sound. There is also the savagely monotonous rhythm that is reminiscent of the drum-beats of tribal Africa. In Song of the City, Abrahams gives one of his fullest expositions of the role

that music and dance play in the lives of the people:

The tom-tom beat of the maraba was like a stream through which flowed the pent up emotions of a repressed people. In it they danced away the seething bitterness that is attendant upon repression. And like a stream the two-point rhythm washed away those nameless volcanoes so that on the morrow the houseboy would be a good and humble houseboy! And the kitchen-maid too. And the mine-boy. And the riksha-boy... Then days of work would flow smoothly till there was again too much beating at the heart. Then again the maraba. And again peace and good work and again the maraba. So the circle went round. (p.73).

But the song of the maraba is a lesser song than the song of the city which comes from the bowels of the earth. The landscape forms the backdrop to the experiences of the people. A heightened awareness of the natural surroundings serves to point out the drama of the people's position. Generally, the moon and the stars form an impersonal or ambiguous background. The mines are the potent force in the lives of the people:

On the earth the personality of Johannesburg was expressed in a hum. Incessant. Monotonous. Wrenched from the bowels of the earth; creeping through walls and windows, invading stillness and drowning it in the oppressing monotony....

For it alone there is no colour, no wealth, no race, no creed. Almost it seemed to say: "Without me there can be no rich. No poor. No black. No white. No gold....No city. (p.23).

At another stage we are told:

The moon hung low. Dimly the mine dumps towered on the fringes of the city. In the night light they were sinister. They conjured up a picture of a man piling up earth, grain by grain, in search of gold, till the grains made a mountain, higher than the highest building in the city. (p.78).

The Africans are drawn of necessity to the mines, and numerous social problems ensue.

Some of the results of detribalization are considered briefly in the predicament of one of the minor characters, Mtini. Because of the imposition of taxes, Mtini is forced to go to the mines where he, like countless others, works long and hard until he contracts the bleeding-lung disease. Then he spends his last days dying painfully in the overcrowded and insanitary compound, away from the love and comfort of his wife and children. The brief sketch of Mtini's life effectively conveys the sense of the tragedy involved in the break-up of family life.

Such is the life-style of numerous Africans. In the face of such problems, Timbata proposes his plan for the separate development of the various races. But his plan is in reality unfeasible. He does not really feel or understand the suffering of the people. He is, indeed, the tool of the white people, like the man in Tell Freedom who carries a pass in order not to carry passes. Ndaba, Timbata's political rival, is the true fighter for his people. Because he is never presented directly, and instead we hear of the tales that have grown up around him, Ndaba is effective as a contrast with Timbata.

The white people in the book are chiefly involved in English-Afrikaaner relations. But they are also seen

responding to the black people. Richardson's meeting with Timbata is reminiscent of the scene in Tell Freedom where a white man expresses disgust at any contact with Abrahams. In Tell Freedom Abrahams' emotional state is movingly suggested, perhaps because it was drawn from his personal experience. Here he tries to recreate the scene from the white man's point of view. Richardson feels insulted by the contact with an educated, sophisticated black person; but, perhaps because there is no understandable logic or reason behind his response, the scene is not convincingly created. Later, Abrahams conveys more effectively the shock and revulsion Van der Merwe feels at the discovery of Uys' bastard, half-breed child. He decides to pay off the mother and wash his hands of the responsibility for the child. We are told that "he wondered which hurt the most, the madman abusing the woman, or the blackness of the abused woman, or the yellowness of the bastard child." (p.126). And yet that should have been easy to decide. But, to balance the picture, Myra, the English woman, expresses concern for the child.

In Song of the City, Abrahams attempted to deal with a wide range of material relating to South African life. The song theme forms the skeleton or outline of the novel, and is also a part of its content; its pattern is imposed on the characters and is more important

than the characters themselves. It serves a unifying function, holding together the various themes Abrahams explores in his first novel.

Song of the City presents a panoramic view of South African society, where one focus of Abrahams' interest is the position of the African houseboy. In Mine Boy, the variety of characters is reduced, and the action of the story is based on the experiences of the mine boy Xuma. Here, in his second novel, Abrahams moves on to a more sophisticated level of racial contact and interaction in South Africa.

Xuma comes from the north, where there is no work, to the mining city. Leah, almost echoing Daisy's words in Song of the City says of him "You're all right ..... But the city is a strange place."<sup>3</sup> A few pages later she elaborates on this theme:

I came from my people, but I am no longer of my people. It is so in the city and I have been here many years. And the city makes you strange to the ways of your people. (p. 23)

Abrahams again examines what is one of the most important conditions of South African life: the transition

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<sup>3</sup> P. Abrahams, Mine Boy, (London: Heinemann Educational Bks., 1969), p. 17  
Page references for all other quotations from the novel will be given in brackets after each quotation.



from one way of life to another.

One of the first episodes showing Xuma in action comes when, as a novice in the city, he strikes a policeman who attacks him without cause. He is not yet accustomed to the corrupt system of justice in the city and rebels. His healthy (though dangerous) response to the situation is similar to Abrahams' reaction to injustice in Tell Freedom.

Leah teaches Xuma the law for survival in the city; one must fend for oneself, or one has no hope; one cannot afford the luxury of worrying about others because one's own immediate responsibilities and needs are so great. Xuma find it difficult to accept or understand this new philosophy, for in tribal custom, all the members of the group are protected together. The tragedy of the situation is that is apparently no solution to things other than Leah's way.

Xuma becomes a mine boy and he finds the men in the mines have the look of sheep when a dog barks. Qualities of individualism or personal initiative are largely eliminated. Music is the only source of ease and comfort. When the men start humming, Xuma feels the stiffness leave his body and finds the aching of his back is lessened. Again music is shown playing its role in every phase of black life.

In Mine Boy the theme of detribalization is worked largely in terms of Xuma's relationship with Eliza. Xuma is the simple man, just out of the tribal village; Eliza is attracted to western ways, but also to Xuma; the scene is set for a conflict of interests. When they first meet, Eliza is smoking a cigarette like a white woman; immediately there is a barrier between them. Leah tells Xuma:

That one likes you but she's a fool. It is going to school. She likes you but wants one who read books and dresses like the white folks and speaks the language of the whites and wears the little bit of cloth they call a tie. Take her by force or you will be a fool. (p. 51).

Abrahams himself has a more sensitive, sympathetic understanding of Eliza's plight. She is in the unfortunate position of being caught between two worlds. Her educated, well-dressed young men are unable to satisfy her needs. But even when she is at peace with Xuma, she then finds "Something hard drives me...One minute I know what I want, the next minute I do not know" (p. 87). She tries to explain herself to Xuma:

Inside me there is something wrong. And it is because I want the things of white people. I want to be like the white people and go where they go and do the things they do and I am black. I cannot help it. Inside I am not black and I do not want to be a black person. I want to be like they are, you understand, Xuma. It is no good but I cannot help it. (p. 89)

Eliza feels deeply the injustice of a system where, having learned to appreciate things like carpets and books, music and wine, she is, because of her colour, denied her right to any of them. She rebels against the system. Xuma is unable to respond to her plea for understanding. He feels "A white man and a black man cannot be friends. They work together. That's all . . . . . He did not want the things of the white man. He did not want to be friends with the white man " (p. 93). Xuma's resentment of the white man is partly due to the fact that the white man's ways have come between him and Eliza.

Gradually Xuma feels comfortable enough with white folks and especially with Di to talk about Eliza. He is firmly convinced that the whites and blacks are different, and that there is no point in wishing for the same things. Di says of him, that he's "not a human being yet. Just a mine boy. His girl's human and he can't understand her. He can't understand her wanting the things I want and have . . . There is confusion and bewilderment and acceptance . . . The man in your Zuma has not come out yet " (p. 99). At the doctor's home, he finds black people living like whites. He is disturbed; the doctor then explains the situation to him, and Xuma is forced to reconsider things; the

doctor says:

[It is] not like the white people's place. Just a comfortable place. You are not copying the white man when you live in a place like this. This is the sort of place a man should live in because it is good for him. Whether he is white or black does not matter. A place like this is good for him. It is the other places that are the white people's. The places they make you live in. (p. 109)

As a result of his association with Paddy, Xuma begins to think of people independently of their colour:

People were people. Not white and black people ...And one could understand a white person as well as a black....The vision carried him along. He could see himself and Eliza and Paddy and Paddy's woman all sitting at a little table in one of those little tea places in the heart of Johannesburg and drinking tea and laughing and talking. And all around them would be other people all happy and without colour. (p. 239)

Xuma's struggle to conquer his colour consciousness reminds one of Abrahams' own similar struggle. By the end of the novel Xuma decides to go to prison with his white man. Throughout the novel his personality grows in depth as he learns to make new responses to different experiences.

The other character in the novel who has gone through conflict like Eliza's is Daddy. He is introduced as a drunken old man who delights in street fights and brawls. But it is hinted that this fascination with fighting is a result of the fact that it brings back memories of his old war dances and battle cries. At one stage Xuma reveals his disgust with Daddy's

slovenliness and Ma Plank says:

You scorn him, heh? Yet when he first came to the city he was a man. Such a man! He was strong and he was feared and he was respected. . . . . He understood and fought for his people but he understood too much and it made him unhappy and he became like Eliza. He can read and write even better than she can. (pp. 115-116).

One cannot but be moved by the tragedy that befalls so many unfortunate people in South Africa.

Maisy is a child of the city. She is also, like Daisy in Song of the City, a child of joy and laughter and her happiness is infectious; she knows how to be happy and makes others happy too. It is Maisy who helps Xuma cross the bridge into city life. Maisy knows instinctively what will please Xuma; she soothes him after Eliza upsets him. She takes him to Hoopvlei where Xuma feels closer to home. And this eases the painful process of detribalization. In the end it is Maisy who waits for Xuma to come out of prison to rejoin her in the city.

We learn that the city causes transformations in the white man too. Once, while walking in the street, Xuma meets a policeman and we are told, "Xuma could see he was a kind one "; he thinks of him, "Not a bad one that. Maybe he's new" (p. 92). Interracial contact can lead to a greater understanding of different people. "The Fox", despite the harsh function he performs, understands and is understood by his victims. He is

one of the most greatly feared policemen, but his power derives from his humanity; he was the type who "did not mind sitting beside black people." (p. 190).

One of the most powerful features of Abrahams' writings is his ability to recreate the quality of black life. His strong affirmation of its vitality informs all his South African novels, and one is left with a lasting and profound impression of life in that country:

The warmth in the air even on a cold night.  
The warmth of living bodies; of living,  
breathing, moving people. The warmth that was  
richer than the air and earth and the sun.  
Richer than all things. The warmth of life,  
throbbing. Of hearts pounding. Of silence  
and of sound. Of movement and of lack of  
movement. A warm, thick, dark blanket of  
life. That was Malay Camp. Something name-  
less and living. A stream of dark life.  
(p.112 )

## CHAPTER IV.

### "The Blacks" & A Wreath For Udomo.

In Song of the City and Mine Boy, Abrahams considered the nature of the process of detribalization as the African comes into contact with the white man and western ways. In A Wreath For Udomo (1956), he deals with a detribalized, westernized African leader who has to contend with the forces of tribal life in his struggle for his country's freedom, independence and progress. Abrahams' essay "The Blacks" (1959) is a non-fictionalized expression of his interest in and concern for the detribalized man. This essay will be considered first, before we proceed to examine Abrahams' fictional version of the westernized black man in A Wreath For Udomo.

In "The Blacks", Abrahams concentrates on illuminating the position of the African intellectual elite who have been separated by western civilization and sophistication from the simple tribesmen. Western technology is the dominant power of the twentieth century; it is for Africa, through her own intellectual elite, who see and feel most clearly and deeply the complications and far-reaching effect of contact between the west and tribal Africa, to work out a fusion between tribal custom and modern ways. But the painful nature of the

transition from tribalism to westernism makes the task of these intellectual leaders a difficult one.

"The Blacks" is primarily an account of Peter Abrahams' meeting with Kwame Nkrumah, then the prime minister of Ghana, and of his recollections of an earlier meeting with Jomo Kenyatta; both men are representative of the westernized intellectual elite of Africa. They are the prototypes of the many detribalized fictional characters we find in Abrahams' novels.

"The Blacks" is no mere factual documentary; it is obvious from the opening paragraph that an artist is selectively synthesizing and organizing his experience, evoking almost effortlessly in the process a strong sense of place:

It was a hot, humid, oppressive August day in Accra, capital of the Gold Coast that was to become Ghana. The air had the stillness of death. I walked toward the sea front. Perhaps there would be a hint of a breeze there. As I reached the sea front I was assailed by a potent stench of the sea with strong overtones of rotting fish.

The houses were drab, run down wooden structures or made of corrugated iron, put together any way you please.

The everyday quality of life is effortlessly conveyed through colourful description and detail. There are, for instance, the "mammy trucks" that go

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<sup>1</sup> P. Abrahams, "The Blacks", An African Treasury, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1960), p. 42.

Page references for all other quotations from the essay will be given in brackets after each quotation.



hurtling across the country-side with little regard for life or limb. Each truck has its own distinctive slogan, such as "Repent for Death is Round the Corner, or Enter without Hope, or The Last Ride, or If It Must, It Will ..... or Not Today O Lord Not Today".

(p.42-43).

Abrahams' descriptions of African life are very convincing. Critics like Langston Hughes feel that "perhaps it remains for coloured writers. ... native to the soil, to tell us most faithfully what Africa is like today " (p.X). Abrahams himself expresses the belief that one should not only live the life deeply, but also distance oneself from the experience, in order to understand truly, and to consider sympathetically and sensitively, the life of black Africa.

In his essay, Abrahams remarks on the fact that Richard Wright was bewildered and disturbed by his visit to the Gold Coast, the land of his forefathers.

Abrahams comments:

What Wright did not understand, what his whole background and training had made difficult for him to understand, was that being black did not qualify one for acceptance in tribal Africa. But how could he, when thousands of urban-bred Africans up and down the vast continent do not themselves understand this? The more perceptive of the urban Africans are only now beginning to comprehend, but slowly.

(p. 44)

Later, in his novel A Wreath For Udomo, Abrahams illuminates sympathetically, in the person of Tom Lanwood,

the position of a detribalized and westernized man like Wright, who cannot find his place in black Africa. Abrahams himself establishes his own claim to Africa in the essay, by stating that he neither likes nor dislikes her - only outsiders do that.

He then goes on to say:

Being black is a small matter in tribal Africa. The attitude toward colour is healthy and normal. Colour does not matter.... There is nothing more to it until external agencies come in and invest it with special meaning and importance.

(p.44)

The last statement is especially significant in relation to the South African black, who, at the receiving end of Apartheid, is acutely conscious of his colour.

Peter Abrahams then describes his visit with Kwame Nkrumah; he recollects their past association in London as members of a Pan African group, where Nkrumah suggested that "each of us spill a few drops of our blood into a bowl and... take a blood oath of secrecy and dedication to the emancipation of Africa " (p.47).

Abrahams' ability to select and include effectively and economically relevant or pertinent information is apparent in this essay as it is in his novels. Here he notes Nkrumah's inclination towards tribal ritualism.

As the first African prime minister of a self-

governing British African state,

Tribal myths grew up around him. He could make himself invisible at will. He could go without food and sleep and drink longer than ordinary mortals. He was in fact the reincarnation of some of the most powerful ancestral spirits. He allowed his feet to be bathed in blood. (p. 48)

But in the interests of the progress of a twentieth-century state, the claims and superstitions of tribalism have to be disciplined and controlled and even eradicated, and this necessity led to great conflicts between Nkrumah and the tribal chiefs. The contrast between two different ideologies and ways of life is strikingly conveyed. In A Wreath For Udomo, Abrahams illuminates brilliantly the difficult position a man like Nkrumah is placed in.

Abrahams proceeds to describe Jomo Kenyatta as "the most relaxed, sophisticated and 'westernized' of the lot of us." (p.47). He adds that

Kenyatta enjoyed the personal friendship of the most distinguished people in English political and intellectual society; [he was a] balanced and extremely cultured man. (p. 47).

Kenyatta, even more than Nkrumah, is the man caught tragically between two worlds. As one of the intelligent and educated members of his society, he has a duty and responsibility to serve his people. Yet, because of his education, travelling and experiences, he has moved away from his tribal people. One system of values, one way

of life, has replaced another. Now when the twentieth century demands continual change and adaptation he finds that "Africa does not seem to change." (p.51). As evidence for this, we have the description of the full ceremonial tribal welcome Abrahams receives on his visit to Kenya, where as they move "into the heart of the African bush" (p.50), tribal ritual becomes increasingly important. No effort is made to adopt new ways. Abrahams effectively conveys the sense of tribal ceremony, with his description of the strange magic, the libations and the muted drums.

In this ritualistic tribal setting, Abrahams observes his "westernized" and sophisticated friend Kenyatta. He writes,

For me, Kenyatta became that night a man who in his own life personified the terrible tragedy of Africa and the terrible secret war that rages in it. He was the victim both of tribalism and westernism gone sick.  
(p. 52)

Abrahams sees in the person of this close friend the results of detribalization, sees the tragedy that ensues when the world does not make a place in the new system for the man who has been drawn away from and no longer fits in with the old way. Abrahams, whose writings show him to be a deeply sensitive and deeply caring person, is profoundly concerned with the plight of the detribalized man, the man walking the tightrope between two different

worlds, while fitting into neither; this concern finds expression in his writings repeatedly.

In "The Blacks", Abrahams gives one of his fullest expositions of the detribalized man's dilemma:

And then Kenyatta began to speak in a low, bitter voice of his frustrations and of the isolated position in which he found himself. He had no friends. There was no one in the tribe who could give him the intellectual companionship that had become so important to him in his years in Europe. The things that were important to him - consequential conversation, the drink that represented a social activity rather than the intention to get drunk, the concept of individualism, the inviolability of privacy - all these were alien to the tribesmen in whose midst he lived. So Kenyatta, the western man, was driven in on himself and was forced to assert himself in tribal terms. Only thus would the tribesmen follow him and give him his position of power and importance as a leader.

To live without roots is to live in hell, and no man chooses voluntarily to live in hell. The people who could answer his needs as a man had erected a barrier of colour against him in spite of the fact that the tap roots of their culture had become the tap roots of his culture too. By denying him access to those things which complete the life of western man, they had forced him back into the tribalism from which he had so painfully freed himself over the years. (p. 52)

There is no way out of Kenyatta's tragic predicament, and the only response he and Abrahams are able to make to the situation is to "drink steadily and in silence until we were both miserably, depressingly drunk." (p. 52).

In Return to Goli, Abrahams devotes a section of the work to his meeting with Kenyatta in Kenya - though here the detribalized man is not the sole focus of his attention as in "The Blacks". (where the argument is more tightly controlled because the work is an essay.) In Return to Goli, we have a more general documentary-type report of his visit to Africa, but Kenyatta's tragic position is an important consideration.

Here Abrahams says of Kenyatta:

I think Kenyatta has passed the point of creative possibility. I do not think the fine creative scholar who wrote "Facing Mount Kenya" will return again. Bitterness has gone too deep. But - oh, the tragedy that a man of such gifts should go to waste and darkness because the plural societies today have no room for proud, sensitive, self-respecting black intellectuals who would not lower their eyes before the white man! <sup>2</sup>

In Return to Goli, he notes the humiliation inflicted upon the chiefs and black intellectual leaders, and he considers the problems of the ownership of land and of the colour bar system. One of the last scenes he describes is that of the chief's prayer to the God of Abraham and Isaac, before the sacred mountain:

At last the going became too steep and rough for even the powerful cars. We got out and forged ahead on foot. All about the track was wild land, unmastered by Black or White man. The hot Kenya sun had grown gentle, for it was late afternoon. The sky was

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<sup>2</sup>P. Abrahams, Return to Goli, (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p.207.

dazzlingly clear and distant. Except where the curve of the land interfered, space stretched away to the utmost limits of sight. The impression of bigness, perhaps the most forceful of all African impressions, was overwhelming.  
(Return to Goli, p. 208)

Then, within the security of the land, the old chief turns to the mountain and utters his prayer "for our land, for our land is the blood of our life " (p. 217).

In A Wreath For Udomo, the theme of detribalization is developed through Udomo's struggle to free his country from the hold of tribalism which he sees as impeding the process of industrialization and technological progress.

The novel opens in London, where Udomo is introduced as the dynamic member of a Pan African group. He is described as a haunted and lonely man with a smouldering, caged restlessness; we learn of his hero-worship of Tom Lanwood, the great African political writer and fighter who has inspired his political consciousness. When Lois tells him about Tom, he expects Tom to come and see him immediately; the scene suggests something of the imperiousness of his nature. We see the violent force of Udomo's personality in action at a political conference; his passionate statement that "We will not fail!" has a powerful hold over

people. But Udomo is not merely passionate; he is also a competent thinker and worker; as Lois thinks,

He worker terribly hard, harder than all the rest of the group put together. He was the real force. His coming had affected the whole group. Before he came they had been a group of wishful dreamers. Now an organization had come into being. And they had plans rather than dreams.<sup>3</sup>

Back in Africa, though Udomo has problems with the Council members and the merchants, he finds support in the people; the people are ripe for change, and Udomo is the person to use and direct their emotions and energy. Jones says of Udomo, "There's an element of greatness, I think you'll agree, in recognizing the situation and using it; it needs boldness and daring at the level of greatness " (p. 180).

Udomo is a far-sighted thinker; he realizes the changes that must be initiated for an African state to become a powerful modern state and, as he says, in order to achieve this end,

We need to build up national loyalties as against tribal loyalties. Endura and his crowd play on all the tribal prejudices in the people. We have to counter that, otherwise we will never build a strong African state that is as modern as any of the European states. Before Africa's voice will be listened to in the world, we need strong modern states. (p. 203)

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<sup>3</sup> P. Abrahams, A Wreath For Udomo, (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 112.

Page references for all other quotations from the novel will be given in brackets after each quotation.



Industries have to be developed to provide economic power and for this he needs European investment. It is on this issue that Udomo faces opposition within his party.

The most important members of Udomo's party are Selina and Adebhoy. Selina is the powerful tribal African woman who finds London, the cultural centre of the western world, intolerable, and prefers to walk barefooted on her own African soil. Udomo finds her in the market place, which is described as timeless Africa. Selina is closely attuned to tribal customs; at one stage she offers Udomo a woman, and says in explanation, "She is your land. She is for you. You are a man and she's a woman. Is that not enough? Is that not how it has always been with us?" (p.162). Selina enlists the loyalty of the people for Udomo and is a powerful force in the achievement of freedom; but she is "completely illiterate, basically completely tribal still." (p. 178). The conflict between Udomo and Selina is caused by his recognition of the need for Europeans in his country and her wish to be rid of the white people. Mhendhi senses her discontent with Udomo when she says, "The white man is still with us here. We have not got rid of them all yet. Udomo says we still need them," and then shrugs. Udomo

attempts to build up the country with educational facilities and hospitals, and to fight ignorance and superstition; but Adebhoy and Selina say, "You are destroying our old ways, Udomo. The old ways are dying at your hands." (p. 301). Udomo considers the past and the old ways the greatest enemy to his country's progress. In their final confrontation, he sees Adebhoy as he really is:

Adebhoy had gone back to the past of blood ritual and ancestor worship. Really, Ade had always been there; always a lying smile, like one of those grinning masks from the past. Never a person because the person does not matter; just a unit in the group. Someone he'd never known because there had been no personality to know. (p. 302).

Udomo cares so passionately about his country's future that he betrays his friend Mhendhi in the cause. At one stage, he tries to explain this to Mabi - but Mabi's lack of understanding forces this outburst from him:

You want to be a patriot provided you can safeguard your precious soul. You know I had to. Only, no dirtying of hands for you! Leave that to foul Udomo. Mourn Mhendhi indeed! He wouldn't want to be mourned by you. Alright, go now, Mr Moral Mabi. I have to deal with reality, not your fancy ideas. (p. 275).

Udomo's total involvement is only understood by Rosslee and Jones. As Rosslee says,

There he stands smiling, charming them. And perhaps one or two of them have the vaguest idea of the burden he carries. 'And if you or I were to say to them, 'Gentlemen, this man is trying to carry his country over the great transition from one age to another', they may understand our words but not their full meaning. (p. 274)

Because Udomo initiates changes in their life style, because he retains contact with the white man, Adebhoy, (the westernized doctor who has reverted to tribalism) and Selina, arrange a ritual murder. The scene, with the low and insistent drum beats, the glazed unrecognizing eyes of the guards, the ritual dance of death, is effective conjured. Even Udomo feels the numbing effects of the drums: "The victim was ready now. The will to resist was ended. The tribal gods had asserted their superiority. Udomo lay on the floor, paralysed, eyes glazed, mouth open " (p. 306). But in the end, the pain makes Udomo conscious and he dies thinking of Mhendhi and Lois.

In the end, it is Mabi the artist who sees into the truth of things and speaks the final words on Udomo:

You can guess the reason for his murder. They wanted to go back to the days of tribal glory. You know there are people all the world over, white as well as black, who are attracted to tribalism. Among other things, it has security, colour, and emotional outlets that the bleak, standardized, monotonous chromium and neon benefits of mass-production civilization lacks. You know also there are many, mainly among the whites, who say that the trouble in Africa today is due to the fact that Africans have

moved away from tribalism too rapidly. They are foolish people who don't understand the true nature of tribalism. Udomo did. He worked against it, quietly, secretly at first and then, as recent accounts of developments there show, more boldly, more openly. And so he had to be hacked to pieces in true tribal fashion. But they were too late. He'd carried things too far forward to be able to put the clock back now. (p. 308)

.....  
I think he and Mhendhi were the only two who knew the price of what had to be done. And he was the only one among us prepared to pay it. (p. 307)

In this novel, Abrahams also considers the position of the westernized black man who loses his contact with tribal life so completely that he can no longer find a place for himself in Africa. Tom Lanwood is the great political writer who inspires all the young African Nationalists. In his portrayal of Lanwood, Abrahams mixes criticism with sympathy. Tom is presented as an inadequate leader from the beginning: he is not interested in meeting Udomo because it is cold outside. Such details effectively capture his character. One begins to sense that Tom is not involved intensely or passionately in the black struggle. As Mhendhi says of him, "Tom's the luckiest, though. For him it's an impersonal game of chess. He doesn't care about people. He hates imperialism and wants African power impersonally" (p. 28). Hence, later, he is unable to cope with the reality of black African life.

The fact that Tom is unable to understand things at a personal level is illustrated in the scene where he responds unsympathetically to Mhendhi's plight. Mhendhi's outburst is appropriate: "Movements are led by more than god-like speeches and pontifical books from the safety of London. Go to Africa! Fight there! And then come and lecture me about self-discipline " (p. 43). The episode foreshadows future developments in the novel. Though Lanwood's vision is limited, Mhendhi and Mabi are charitable about his limitations; we learn that they "saw past the self-deception, down to the real Lanwood; ... Lanwood was a frustrated ageing man, on the verge of self doubt ... Tom needed his defences more than any of them " (p. 44).

Tom has lived in London for thirty years and in the process has grown completely westernized. When he goes back to Africa, he is unable to accept the society. Selina does not provide him with a woman as she does Udomo and Mhendhi because, she says, "He is white for all his black skin " (p. 193). He goes through a painful process trying to grow accustomed to the country and people, and Abrahams reveals his customary sympathy for the position of the detribalized black. In the end, Tom learns to understand and accept his plight:

He knew suddenly that he would always be an outsider here. For all his dark skin the barrier between him and this world was too great, he was too old to make the crossing successfully. He belonged too firmly, had lived too long in the western world to be any good in any other. (p. 257)

Though he retains some sense of dignity in making the decision to leave, one is left nonetheless with a strong awareness of his painful and desolate position.

In A Wreath For Udomo, then, Abrahams considers the far reaching results of the process of detribalization. The novel emerges as a competent artistic analysis of a social phenomena that is at present playing an important part in the evolution of modern African states.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

There are few critical articles and reviews on Abrahams' writings, and, frequently, they tend to be no more than plot summaries of his novels because of the current interest in the subject-matter of African literature. In most of Abrahams' writings, race relations and the detribalization of the native people are his central preoccupation; so these are the themes that are considered most often in any criticism of his works. Abrahams' treatment of these themes, and the critical response to it, will now be considered briefly.

The rituals and ceremonies that are an inherent part of the tribal system have great dramatic possibilities for literature. Tribal life is a striking contrast to western life, and together they present interesting subject-matter for artistic exploration and expression. Abrahams recreates the quality of tribal life most effectively in A Wreath For Udomo. An article in the periodical Black Orpheus is critical of that novel, the writer

objecting to the impression he feels Abrahams conveys - that there are blood-thirsty tribalists in West Africa attempting to reestablish primitive glory:

It is really absurd, that the nationalistic leader who drove the white man from his country should at the same time succumb to the prejudices of the white man. As if an African could be respected as a human being only after he has been made to work in a factory. As if the talking drums of the Akan or the bronzes of the Benin were symbols of an undignified unhuman existence. Peter Abrahams has succumbed to the white man's myth of the "primitive" negro.

Another article, entitled "Race Relations and Identity in Peter Abrahams' 'Pluralia' ", states that Abrahams "himself seems to underrate the ancestral customs of Africa and the human values of tribal life." <sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the chief flaw in such criticism lies in the fact that it equates so absolutely historical and anthropological truths with fictional versions of such truths. Abrahams does reveal himself to be critical of tribalism; he believes that the tribal tradition entails the stifling and destroying of human personality and individuality. In his early works,

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<sup>1</sup> Akanji, "A Wreath For Udomo", Black Orpheus No.4, (Oct. 1958), p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> H. Maes-Jelinek, "Race Relations and Identity in Peter Abrahams' 'Pluralia' ", English Studies, L, (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1969), p. 109.



Abrahams objects to the fact that, in South Africa, non-whites are forced to be identified as Natives or Indians or Coloureds first, and only then as human beings. Freedom from racial consciousness is his prerequisite for individual freedom. In his later works, Abrahams denounces tribalism because it does not permit individualism. For the black man today, there is hope for emancipation and progress through his assimilation of the cultural and technological heritage of the white man. Abrahams condemns tribalism as the chief obstacle to the free development of the African individual because the tribal man is imprisoned by his ancestors. It is perhaps because African national consciousness is now beginning to acclaim the values inherent in the tribal system that it is sensitive to Abrahams' attacks on tribalism.

Tribalism and westernism are both related to the question of race, and Abrahams' position on race is of interest to critics. Repeatedly, Abrahams is acclaimed as a remarkably unbiased and unprejudiced writer. Hena Maes-Jelinek's view of Abrahams' treatment of race is that:

vision reaches beyond temporary necessities to a conviction that in order to achieve maturity, the multi-racial societies must first recognise their pluralistic character as well as the true nature and capacities of each of their communities, and allow all races to cooperate.<sup>3</sup>

She then goes on to say, "The Africa of his novels is that of the non-white races who strive after spiritual emancipation and technological progress in the face of either white tyranny or tribalism."<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, Abrahams has managed to eliminate from his writings the negative racial consciousness that is so frequently the heritage of South Africans. In his novels and short stories he considers the nature of interracial contact in a variety of situations, and his understanding of the complexities involved in the issue appear increasingly competent when one makes a chronological survey of his writings; he has moved from a simple consideration of the immediate results of black-white

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<sup>3</sup>H. Maes-Jelinek, "Race Relations and Identity in Peter Abrahams' 'Pluralia' ", English Studies, Vol.I, (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1969, p.111.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.111.

contact to a more complex evaluation of the far-reaching consequences of the detribalization of Southern Africa. Furthermore, his writings instill in the reader a deeper understanding of the plight of detribalized people in any land.

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