



Acquired Human Violence and Taught Humanhood in South African Fiction: A Perspectivism of the Protagonists in Alex La Guma's *a Walk in the Night* and Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy*

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Authors BG and TJB designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors BG, MF and TJB managed together the analyses of the study. Author MF managed the literature searches. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Literature mirrors society and the two cannot be disconnected. *Mine Boy* and *A Walk in the Night* are two tools used by South African writers cum literary critics from other parts of the globe to depict and mirror South African society during Apartheid. This study pinpoints the interface between two protagonists in two fictional prose writings in South African Literature. It is a literary analysis which throws light on Xuma in Peter Abrahams' novel *Mine Boy* majored to Michael Adonis in Alex la Guma's novella *A Walk in the Night*. Comparative approach was used to explore common and different traits of the two central characters in tandem and to answer two questions such as why one

becomes violent and why one engages in a fight for light and against human right. It was found that Adonis is a more violent and bottled with anger character unlike Xuma who is engaged in a struggle for freedom along his stay in the south from the north.

Keywords: Fiction; South Africa; protagonist; la Guma; Abrahams; violence; apartheid; manhood; perspectivism; literary analysis.

“Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.”

Simone Weil

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it [1]. Ordinarily, Literature depicts human beings coping with the world around them. In most of cases, literary critics convey the messages of human against their nature which changed “man that was born nice”. Fiction reflects the reality of what people experienced at particular settings and what some of them are still experiencing in various parts of the globe. Inherently, Nnyagu and Udogu [2] contend that literary authors are inspired by what happens around them. They added that the reason why literature needs to be studied is because fictitious works represent a phenomenon although based on imagination. In most of South African fiction, the recurrent theme of apartheid has had a big room and still impacts a big part of audience. Akin to many literary works set there, Alex la Guma’s novella *A Walk in the Night* and Peter Abrams’ novel *Mine Boy* underlie similar themes but different characters, especially the protagonists, although the two authors drew on the same pool. Both characters are the victims of racism which, according to Rezazade et al. [3], is still a rampant issue among the human societies since the end of the 19th century particularly Black people predetermined due to their skin color as the inferior creatures who are socially, politically, and culturally deprived of their rights as human beings.

Injustice towards innocent members of a society, especially Blacks, has been the main concerns of many writers and has prompted them to write for their rights [3] using characters in their works of art. Having been the leader of the South African Organisation of Coloured People (SAOCP), la Guma acted as a speaking voice of the Blacks.

While Martin Luther King once said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that”. The situation in *A Walk in the Night* is darkness against darkness.

In fact, we are told that ‘*Mine Boy*’ is a “*country come to town story*” that takes on the transition of Xuma who comes with his very own romanticized ideals and holds the thorough view that the white man is his enemies but comes to realize that the white man is merely a victim of the Apartheid system [4].

1.1 Aims of the Study

The aim of this study was to carry out a literary analysis of the two fictional works in South African Literature with particular interest in characterization; one of fictional elements which cannot be disconnected from plot and is concerned with events flowing in a cause - effect relationship. The researchers wanted particularly to explore the messages that the two authors wanted to convey to their audience specifically the effects of apartheid on the one hand and violence acquired through exposure to violent situations alongside the two fictitious prose writings on the other hand. They also wanted to compare and contrast the protagonists in the two writers’ works of art. The study sought to answer two main questions such as (1) what are the messages that are conveyed in Alex la Guma’s *A walk in the Night* and in Peter Abrahams’ *Mine Boy*? (2) How far are the protagonists Xuma and Michal Adonis comparable?

2. THEORY AND METHODS

The study is framed on characterization and thematic perspectives in tandem. In literature, characterization is a literary tool coined in the mid-15th century. The term refers both to the ways in which traits (of all kinds) are ascribed to a character in a text and to the interpretative processes by which readers of a text form an idea of that text [5]. The 12th edition of Glossary of Literary Terms has defined characterization as it consists of techniques a writer uses to create and develop a character by what he/she does or

says, what other characters say about him/her, or how they react to him/her. Among these characters, the protagonist is the main character around whom the story revolves. In literature, characters guide readers through their stories, helping them to understand plots and think over the themes [6].

In this study, implicit characterization is greatly concerned where characters in the two fictional works are described in tandem with how behaves each, what they say and how they say it. This is what makes them comparable as two distant protagonists although their authors drew on the same pool, i.e South African fiction. Abrahams [7] asserts that the chief character in a plot is called the protagonist (or alternatively, the hero or heroine), and if the plot is such that, then he or she is pitted against a ferocious opponent. That character is called the antagonist. Hence, it is often quite hard if not impossible to discuss the protagonist without talking about the antagonist as the two halves that make a whole.

Concerning analysis, the researcher put much emphasis on central characters viz Xuma and Michal Adonis in comparative perspective. The researchers used solely literary qualitative analysis based particularly on characterization and themes as the two interwoven literary generic elements which cannot be studied in isolation. In the view of Vandana [6], characters are the means through which a reader interacts with a piece of literature whereby every character has his or her own qualities, which a creative author uses to support in forming the plot of a story or creating a mood. Characters are an essential component of the novel as the story centers round human beings and their actions, passions and motives. Thus, the researchers started by a reading of each of the two novels with emphasis on the characterization. Following closely, the researchers pay particular attention to the two characters under study so as to compare and contrast them, focusing on the events and actions that affect them both. Next, the two characters' deeds, actions and behaviours were discussed measuring them concurrently. Finally, a brief summary and conclusion was drawn to recall on how these two protagonists are similar and how different they are, as well.

3. DISCUSSION

According to Orhero and Sunday [8], Apartheid in South Africa began when the "white" Dutchmen

known as "Boers" or "Afrikaans" settled fully into South Africa and became integrated fully as parts and parcel of the society. The same authors add that the year 1948 is generally taken to be the starting point of South African institutionalized apartheid with the strict rules of the South African National Party aiming at the total control of the black populace by limiting their freedom. Elsewhere, reading *Mine Boy* gets the audience abreast of the "sorry" experiences of the blacks in the hands of their white counterparts a situation where blacks experienced perpetual slavery and extreme poor living conditions in the slums resulted from the ills done to them by the whites as they live in elevated places; do anything they wish to do without fear of any kind [2]. The protagonist Xuma from the north is initially described as hungry and tired, having been lost all sense of direction since he was wondering where he was, but later was welcomed as revealed in these words: "...This is Xuma from the north. He is hungry and tired... give him food" [9]. Later, he was respected and became a very popular young boy among mine boys since he was appointed as a boss only by the White Boss. The latter respected Xuma too and tried intentionally to make friend with him because other mine boys respected him. Thus, we are presented with Xuma as a more popular and well reputed boy than his white boss in the mines.

The only place where he was completely free, was underground in the mines. There, he was a master and knew his way. There, he did not even fear his white man, for his Whiteman depended on him. He was the boss boy. He gave the orders to the other mine boys. They would do for him what they would not do for his white man or any other white man. He knew that, he found it out. And underground, his white man respected him and asked him for his opinion before they did anything. It was so and he was at home and at ease underground. His white man had even tried to make friend with him because the other mine boys respected him so much [.....] but he did not want to be friend with the white man. Work for him, yes, that's all [9].

Actually, the brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear [1]. The above lines reveal the extent to which Xuma is a brave man, his maturation and popularity among his peers. The fact that the Whiteman depended on him implies that Xuma had a good reputation

and a way of convincing his fellow mine boys. Of course, he was judged and treated following his deeds and behaviours among the peers, hence he was called the mine boys' reliance in as far as decision was concerned. The situation had taught him and transformed him into a mature fearless young boy who now knows to distinguish what is right and light and what is not. He had already triumphed over fear and is then a courageous young boy geared by maturity in his struggle for light to drive out darkness that has affected his fellow mine boys, both black and white.

In a *Walk in the Night*, on the other hand, the author portrayed the sufferings and violence done on coloured people which made them violent in turn; thus violence was acquired due to being bottled by the effects of violence. We are presented with the central character, Michael Adonis as an angry and violent character after his boss fired him from the job when he tried to speak back to him. He is seen as a vengeful character since "[...] his mind switched back to the incident with the police and then further back to the work's foreman with whom he had had the argument resulting in him losing his job and he thought with rage Effing sonofabitches"; and he is very angry and is still remembering the effect of what has been done to him as he vowed to revenge in the words like "that sonavabitch, that bloody white, I will get him. Anger seemed to make him bolted his food." [10]. The situation as it stands here, Michael Adonis was a black colored youth thrown in the whirlpool of poverty, petty crime and violence [10] thus in a situation which isolated coloured people as well described in [1]. Certainly, *A Walk in the Night* reflects the problems of apartheid whereby the author shows that the coexistence between the coloureds is hard if not impossible as one side acts against another's human right. This is the reason why Michael Adonis is affected and is bottled by anger auguring violence not because he was born violent but because he was exposed to it and motivated by his being fired unfairly from his job by his boss.

In *Mine Boy*, however, one can see Xuma as coming from the north to the city. He is on a quest, job specifically. He will later be engaged to fighting for man's freedom as he says "[...] When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast it is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them." [9]. At first, Xuma was confused and could not understand that man is man first but was

then convinced by his fellow *Mine Boy* Paddy in a dialogue they had. Paddy convinces Xuma by saying:

"...I am here, you see, I come from my people, but I am not 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, you see? [...] Listen to me, you are from the north and I am from the south but the people are the same, heh".

...It is good to love one's people and not to be ashamed of what one is. But it is not good to think only as a black man or only as a white man. The white people in this country think only as white, and that is why they do this harm to your people" [9].

While Xuma had in his mind that he could think as a black first, Paddy taught him that he should think as a man first regardless of colour, - whether to be black or white;. Although he is white, Paddy is well convinced that what is being done against human being is unfair. In what he says, he feels the value of humanity regardless of colour and he places himself on the side of the oppressed and wants Xuma, who feels placed on the side of the oppressed, to understand that not everyone white person is an oppressor rather some of them consider humanity first before they think of colour as he says:

"No. You must think as a man first. You must be a man first and then a black man. And if it is so you will understand as a black man and also as a white man. That is the right way, Zuma. When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are inside who can help free those around them" [9].

Paddy's words changed Xuma's mind who still does not understand why it is wrong if Leah sold beer and right if a white person sells beer" [9]. He took time and thought of them and concluded to act as man first and then as black since "He thought about Paddy's words. Turned them over, examined them .To be a man first, think like a man first, and then a black man" but could not understand well how one can think of people without colour in an eyed-witnessed situation that he experienced where people were victimized by their fellow human beings. Xuma reflected back and made reference to Eliza whom he would then be with if man were man first regardless colour and concluded that in that perspective he

would feel a man among others. By that time, he understands well what the Red one (Paddy) meant and henceforth he was taught that man should be free from racial discrimination, be they Blacks or Whites [9]. From this situation Xuma is taught human rights and is by then a light against darkness and human rights violence unlike Michael Adonis who has become a violent young man due to the violence committed against him by people of different colour.

4. CONCLUSION

In sum, it is important to benchmark literary analysis on Frye [11] who opines that the critical study of literature provides a basic way "to produce, out of the society we have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in." A comparison between Xuma and Michael Adonis reflects the human's ills done on his fellow human beings. While the universal Declaration of Human Rights holds that all humans were born equal in dignity, the idea is that no one should violate his next door's right pretending any difference be it racial, regional, gender religion or the like. The two authors in South African Literature convey a good message that apartheid and any kind of discrimination, violence and injustice as rooted in the dim colonial period should be eradicated not only in Africa but also in all other parts of the globe. Xuma is the protagonist engaged to fighting for human rights, thinking as a man first regardless of colour as he was taught so. Quite the contrary, Adonis is violent not because he was born so but his violence is a kind of revenge against the violence he was exposed to and experienced in his youth during apartheid in South Africa. Thus Adonis is a victim of "darkness" and seeks revenge as he is led by the anger resulted from his being expelled from his job in a sheet metal factory while Xuma is a fighter for "light" and "human right" as two factors militating in tandem to drive out darkness and vicious violence.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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