

# Original Research Article

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*

## **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 engaged in a struggle for freedom along his stay in the south from the north.*

**Key words:** fiction, South Africa, protagonist, la Guma, Abrahams, violence, apartheid, manhood perspectivism,

## **Introduction and Background**

Courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it (Mandela, 1994). 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 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 (2018) 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 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 from

32 the same pool. Both characters are the victims of racism which, according to Rezazade  
33 et al. (2016), is still a rampant issue among the human societies since the end of the  
34 19th century particularly Black people predetermined due to their skin color as the  
35 inferior creatures who are socially, politically, and culturally deprived of their rights as  
36 human beings.

37 Injustice towards innocent members of a society, especially Blacks, has been the main  
38 concerns of many writers and has prompted them to write for their rights (Rezazade et  
39 al, 2016) using characters in their works of art. Having been the leader of the South  
40 African Organisation of Coloured People (SAOCP), la Guma acted as a speaking voice  
41 of the Blacks. While Martin Luther King once said “Darkness cannot drive out darkness,  
42 only light can do it”, the situation in *A Walk in the Night*, is darkness against darkness.

43 In fact, we are told that ‘*Mine Boy*’ is a “*country come to town story*” that takes on the  
44 transition of Xuma who comes with his very own romanticized ideals and holds the thorough  
45 view that the white man is his enemies but comes to realize that the white man is merely a  
46 victim of the Apartheid system (Oneya 2012 qtd in Msuya, 2014).

#### 47 **Aims Of the study**

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

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60

## 61 **Theory and method**

62 The study framed on characterization and thematic perspectives in tandem. In literature,  
63 characterization is a literary tool coined in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. The term refers both to  
64 the ways in which traits (of all kinds) are ascribed to a character in a text and to the  
65 interpretative processes by which readers of a text form an idea of that text (De  
66 Temmerman & Van Emde Boas, 2018). The 12<sup>th</sup> edition of Glossary of literary terms  
67 has it that Characterization consists of techniques a writer uses to create and develop a  
68 character by what he/she does or says, what other characters say about him/her, or  
69 how they react to him/her. Among these characters, the protagonist is the main  
70 character around whom the story revolves. In literature, characters guide readers  
71 through their stories, helping them to understand plots and think over the themes  
72 (Vandana, 2018).

73 In this study, implicit characterization is greatly concerned where characters in the two  
74 fictional works are described in tandem with how they behave each, what they say and  
75 how they say it is what make them comparable as two distant protagonists although  
76 their authors drew in the same pool, i.e South African fiction. Abrahams (1999) asserts  
77 that the chief character in a plot is called the protagonist (or alternatively, the hero or  
78 heroine), and if the plot is such that he or she is pitted against an important opponent,  
79 that character is called the antagonist. Hence, it is often time hard if not impossible to  
80 discuss the protagonist without talking about the antagonist as the two are the halves of  
81 one set.

82  
83 Concerning analysis, the researcher put much emphasis on central characters viz Xuma  
84 and Michal Adonis in comparative perspective. The researcher used solely literary  
85 qualitative analysis based particularly on characterization and themes as the two  
86 interwoven literary generic elements which cannot be studied in isolation. In the view of  
87 Vandana (2018), characters are the means through which a reader interacts with a  
88 piece of literature whereby every character has his or her own qualities, which a  
89 creative author uses to support in forming the plot of a story or creating a mood.  
90 Characters are an essential component of the novel as the story centers round human

91 beings and their actions, passions and motives. Thus, the research started by a reading  
92 of each of the two novels with emphasis on the characterization. Following closely, the  
93 researcher pays particular attention to the two characters under study so as to compare  
94 and contrast them basing on the events and actions that affect them each. Next, the  
95 researcher discussed the two characters' deeds and actions and behaviours measuring  
96 them concurrently. Finally, a brief summary and conclusion was drawn to recall in what  
97 these two protagonists are similar and how different they are as well.

98

## 99 **Discussion**

100 According to Orhero and Sunday (2018) Apartheid in South Africa began when the  
101 “white” Dutchmen known as “Boers” or “Afrikaans” settled fully into South Africa and  
102 became integrated fully as parts and parcel of the society. The same authors add that  
103 the year 1948 is generally taken to be the starting point of South African institutionalized  
104 apartheid with the strict rules of the South African National Party aiming at the total  
105 control of the black populace by limiting their freedom. Elsewhere, reading *Mine Boy*  
106 gets the audience abreast of the “sorry” experiences of the blacks in the hands of their  
107 white counterparts a situation where blacks experienced perpetual slavery and extreme  
108 poor living conditions in the slums resulted from the ills done to them by the whites as  
109 they live in elevated places; do anything they wish to do without fear of any kind  
110 (Nnyagu and Udogu: 2018). The protagonist Xuma from the north is initially described  
111 as hungry and tired, having been lost all sense of direction since he was wondering  
112 where he was (Abrahams, 1963:1), but later was welcomed as revealed in these words:  
113 “...This is Xuma from the north. He is hungry and tired... give him food” (p.3) Later, he  
114 was respected and became a very popular young boy among mine boys whom he was  
115 the boss as appointed by the white Boss. The latter respected Xuma too and tried  
116 intentionally to make friend with him because other mine boys respected him. Thus, we  
117 are presented Xuma as a more popular and well reputed boy than his white boss in the  
118 mines. Abrahams (1963:66) says that

119 *The only place where he was completely free, was underground in the mines. There, he*  
120 *was a master and knew his way. There, he did not even fear his white man, for his*

121            *Whiteman depended on him. He was the boss boy. He gave the orders to the other mine*  
122            *boys. They would do for him what they would not do for his white man or any other white*  
123            *man. He knew that, he found it out. And underground, his white man respected him and*  
124            *asked him for his opinion before they did anything. It was so and he was at home and at*  
125            *ease underground. His white man had even tried to make friend with him because the*  
126            *other mine boys respected him so much [.....] but he did not want to be friend with the*  
127            *white man. Work for him, yes, that's all.*

128    Actually, the brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear  
129    (Mandela, 1994). The above lines reveal the extent to which Xuma is a brave man, his  
130    maturation and popularity among his peers. The fact that the Whiteman depended on  
131    him implies that Xuma had a good reputation and a way of convincing his fellow mine  
132    boys. Of course, he was judged and treated following his deeds and behaviours among  
133    the peers hence he was called the mine boys' reliance in as far as decision was  
134    concerned. The situation had taught him and transformed him into a mature fearless  
135    young boy who now knows to distinguish what is right and light and what is not. He had  
136    already triumphed over fear and is then a courageous young boy geared by maturity in  
137    his struggle for light to drive out darkness that has affected his fellow mine boys, both  
138    black and white.

139    In a *Walk in the Night*, on the other hand, the author portrayed the sufferings and  
140    violence done on coloured people which made them to be violent in turn; thus violence  
141    acquired due to being bottled by the effects of violence. We are presented the central  
142    character, Michael Adonis as an angry and violent character after his boss fired him  
143    from the job when he tried to speak back to him. He is seen as a vengeful characters  
144    since "[...] his mind switched back to the incident with the police and then further back  
145    to the work's foreman with whom he had had the argument resulting in him losing his  
146    job and he thought with rage Effing sonofabitches"( la Guma, 1960:13) [ ... ] ; and he is  
147    very angry and is still remembering the effect of what has been done to him as he is  
148    vowed to revenge in the words like "that sonavabitch, that bloody white, I will get him.  
149    Anger seemed to make him bolted his food." p.4. The situation as it stands here,  
150    Michael Adonis was a black colored youth thrown in the whirlpool of poverty, petty crime  
151    and violence (La Guma, 1960:4) thus in a situation which isolated coloured people as

152 well described in Mandela(1994). Certainly, *A Walk in the Night* reflects the problems of  
153 apartheid whereby the author shows that the coexistence between the coloureds is hard  
154 if not impossible as one side acts against another's human right. This is the reason why  
155 Michael Adonis is affected and is bottled by anger auguring violence not because he  
156 was born violent but because he was exposed to it and motivated by his being fired  
157 unfairly from his job by his boss.

158 In *Mine Boy*, however, one can see Xuma as coming from the north to the city. He is on  
159 a quest, job specifically. He will later be engaged to fighting for man's freedom as he  
160 says "[...] When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast  
161 it is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them." (172–3). At  
162 first, Xuma was confused and could not understand that man is man first but was then  
163 convinced by his fellow mine boy Paddy in a dialogue they had. Paddy convinces Xuma  
164 by saying:

165 "....I am here, you see, I come from my people, but I am not of my people. It is  
166 so in the city and I have been here many years. And the city makes you strange  
167 to the ways of your people, you see? [ ....] Listen to me, you are from the north  
168 and I am from the south but the people are the same, heh" (p.10-11)

169 ...It is good to love one's people and not to be ashamed of what one is. But it is  
170 not good to think only as a black man or only as a white man. The white  
171 people in this country think only as white, and that is why they do this harm  
172 to your people" p.182

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

180 "No. You must think as a man first. You must be a man first and then a black  
181 man. And if it is so you will understand as a black man and also as a white man.

182                   That is the right way, Zuma. When you understand that you will be a man with  
183                   freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are inside who can help free  
184                   those around them.” p. 182

185 Paddy’s words changed Xuma’s mind who still does not understand why it is wrong if  
186 Leah sold beer and right if a white person sells beer”( Abrahams, 1963: 177). He took  
187 time and thought of them and concluded to act as man first and then as black since “He  
188 thought about Paddy’s words. Turned them over, examined them .To be a man first,  
189 think like a man first, and then a black man.” but could not understand well how one can  
190 think of people without colour in an eyed-witnessed situation that he experienced where  
191 people were victimized by their fellow human beings. Xuma reflected back and made  
192 reference to Eliza whom he would then be with if man were man first regardless colour  
193 and concluded that in that perspective he would feel a man among others. By that time  
194 he understands well what the Red one (Paddy) meant and henceforth he was taught  
195 that man should be free from racial discrimination, be they Blacks or Whites (p. 183).  
196 From this situation Xuma is taught human rights and is by then a light against darkness  
197 and human rights violence unlike Michael Adonis who has become a violent young man  
198 due to the violence committed against him by people of different colour.

## 199 **Conclusion**

200 In sum, it is important to benchmark literary analysis on Frye (1990:4) who opines that  
201 the critical study of literature provides a basic way "to produce, out of the society we  
202 have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in." A comparison between Xuma  
203 and Michael Adonis reflects the human’s ills done on his fellow human beings. While the  
204 universal Declaration of Human Rights holds that all humans were born equal in dignity,  
205 the idea is that no one should violate his next door’s right pretending any difference be it  
206 racial, regional, gender religion and the like. The two authors in South African Literature  
207 convey a good message that apartheid and any kind of discrimination, violence and  
208 injustice as rooted in the dim colonial period should be eradicated not only in Africa but  
209 also in other parts of the globe. Xuma is the protagonist engaged to fighting for human  
210 rights, thinking as a man first regardless colour as he was taught so. Contrary, Adonis is  
211 violent not because he was born so but his violence is a kind of revenge against

212 violence he was exposed to and experienced in his youth during apartheid in South  
213 Africa. Thus Adonis is a victim of “darkness” and seeks revenge as he is led by the  
214 anger resulted from his being expelled from his job in a sheet metal factory while Xuma  
215 is a fighter for “light” and “human right” as two factors militating in tandem to drive out  
216 darkness and mundane violence.

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