

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*

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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.

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

31

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

35 Introduction and Background

36 Courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it (Mandela, 1994). Ordinarily,
37 Literature depicts human beings coping with the world around them. In most of cases,
38 literary critics convey the messages of human against their nature which changed "man
39 that was born nice". Fiction reflects the reality of what people experienced at particular
40 settings and what some of them are still experiencing in various parts of the globe.
41 Inherently, Nnyagu and Udogu (2018) contend that literary authors are inspired by what
42 happens around them. They added that the reason why literature needs to be studied is
43 because fictitious works represent a phenomenon although based on imagination. In
44 most of South African fiction, the recurrent theme of apartheid has had a big room and
45 still impacts a big part of audience. Akin to many literary works set there, Alex la
46 Guma's novella *A Walk in the Night* and Peter Abrams' novel *Mine Boy* underlie similar
47 themes but different characters, especially the protagonists, although the two authors
48 drew on the same pool. Both characters are the victims of racism which, according to
49 Rezazade et al. (2016), is still a rampant issue among the human societies since the
50 end of the 19th century particularly Black people predetermined due to their skin color
51 as the inferior creatures who are socially, politically, and culturally deprived of their
52 rights as human beings.

53 Injustice towards innocent members of a society, especially Blacks, has been the main
54 concerns of many writers and has prompted them to write for their rights (Rezazade et
55 al, 2016) using characters in their works of art. Having been the leader of the South
56 African Organisation of Coloured People (SAOCP), la Guma acted as a speaking voice
57 of the Blacks. While Martin Luther King once said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness,
58 only light can do that". The situation in *A Walk in the Night* is darkness against
59 darkness.

60 In fact, we are told that '*Mine Boy*' is a "country come to town story" that takes on the
61 transition of Xuma who comes with his very own romanticized ideals and holds the thorough
62 view that the white man is his enemies but comes to realize that the white man is merely a
63 victim of the Apartheid system (Oneya 2012 qtd in Msuya, 2014).

64 **Aims of the Study**

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

76 **Theory and Method**

77 The study is framed on characterization and thematic perspectives in tandem. In
78 literature, characterization is a literary tool coined in the mid-15th century. The term
79 refers both to the ways in which traits (of all kinds) are ascribed to a character in a text
80 and to the interpretative processes by which readers of a text form an idea of that text
81 (De Temmerman & Van Emde Boas, 2018). The 12th edition of Glossary of Literary
82 Terms has defined Characterization as it consists of techniques a writer uses to create
83 and develop a character by what he/she does or says, what other characters say
84 about him/her, or how they react to him/her. Among these characters, the protagonist is
85 the main character around whom the story revolves. In literature, characters guide
86 readers through their stories, helping them to understand plots and think over the
87 themes (Vandana, 2018).

88 In this study, implicit characterization is greatly concerned where characters in the two
89 fictional works are described in tandem with how behaves each, what they say and how

90 they say it. **This is what makes** them comparable as two distant protagonists although
91 their authors drew **on** the same pool, i.e South African fiction. Abrahams (1999) asserts
92 that the chief character in a plot is called the protagonist (or alternatively, the hero or
93 heroine), and if the plot is such that, **then** he or she is pitted against a **ferocious**
94 opponent. **That** character is called the antagonist. Hence, it is often **quite** hard if not
95 impossible to discuss the protagonist without talking about the antagonist as **the two**
96 **halves that make a whole.**

97 Concerning analysis, the researcher put much emphasis on central characters viz Xuma
98 and Michal Adonis in comparative perspective. **The researchers** used solely literary
99 qualitative analysis based particularly on characterization and themes as the two
100 interwoven literary generic elements which cannot be studied in isolation. In the view of
101 Vandana (2018), characters are the means through which a reader interacts with a
102 piece of literature whereby every character has his or her own qualities, which a
103 creative author uses to support in forming the plot of a story or creating a mood.
104 Characters are an essential component of the novel as the story centers round human
105 beings and their actions, passions and motives. Thus, **the researchers** started by a
106 reading of each of the two novels with emphasis on the characterization. Following
107 closely, the researchers pay particular attention to the two characters under study so as
108 to compare and contrast them, **focusing** on the events and actions that affect them **both**.
109 Next, the two characters' deeds, actions and behaviours **were discussed** measuring
110 them concurrently. Finally, a brief summary and conclusion was drawn to recall **on how**
111 these two protagonists are similar and how different **they are**, as well.

112 **Discussion**

113 According to Orhero and Sunday (2018) Apartheid in South Africa began when the
114 "white" Dutchmen known as "Boers" or "Afrikaans" settled fully into South Africa and
115 became integrated fully as parts and parcel of the society. The same authors add that
116 the year 1948 is generally taken to be the starting point of South African institutionalized
117 apartheid with the strict rules of the South African National Party aiming at the total
118 control of the black populace by limiting their freedom. Elsewhere, reading *Mine Boy*
119 gets the audience abreast of the "sorry" experiences of the blacks in the hands of their
120 white counterparts a situation where blacks experienced perpetual slavery and extreme

121 poor living conditions in the slums resulted from the ills done to them by the whites as
122 they live in elevated places; do anything they wish to do without fear of any kind
123 (Nnyagu and Udogu: 2018). The protagonist Xuma from the north is initially described
124 as hungry and tired, having been lost all sense of direction since he was wondering
125 where he was (Abrahams, 1963:1), but later was welcomed as revealed in these words:
126 "...This is Xuma from the north. He is hungry and tired... give him food" (p.3) Later, he
127 was respected and became a very popular young boy among mine boys **since** he was
128 **appointed** as **a boss** only by the **White** Boss. The latter respected Xuma too and tried
129 intentionally to make friend with him because other mine boys respected him. Thus, we
130 are presented **with** Xuma as a more popular and well reputed boy than his white boss in
131 the mines. Abrahams (1963:66) says that

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

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

152 In a *Walk in the Night*, on the other hand, the author portrayed the sufferings and
153 violence done on coloured people which made them violent in turn; thus violence was
154 acquired due to being bottled by the effects of violence. We are presented with the
155 central character, Michael Adonis as an angry and violent character after his boss fired
156 him from the job when he tried to speak back to him. He is seen as a vengeful character
157 since “[...] his mind switched back to the incident with the police and then further back
158 to the work’s foreman with whom he had had the argument resulting in him losing his
159 job and he thought with rage Effing sonofabitches”(la Guma, 1960:13) [...]; and he is
160 very angry and is still remembering the effect of what has been done to him as he
161 vowed to revenge in the words like “that sonavabitch, that bloody white, I will get him.
162 Anger seemed to make him bolted his food.” p.4. The situation as it stands here,
163 Michael Adonis was a black colored youth thrown in the whirlpool of poverty, petty crime
164 and violence (La Guma, 1960:4) thus in a situation which isolated coloured people as
165 well described in Mandela(1994). Certainly, *A Walk in the Night* reflects the problems of
166 apartheid whereby the author shows that the coexistence between the coloureds is hard
167 if not impossible as one side acts against another’s human right. This is the reason why
168 Michael Adonis is affected and is bottled by anger auguring violence not because he
169 was born violent but because he was exposed to it and motivated by his being fired
170 unfairly from his job by his boss.

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

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

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

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

193 "No. You must think as a man first. You must be a man first and then a black
194 man. And if it is so you will understand as a black man and also as a white man.
195 That is the right way, Zuma. When you understand that you will be a man with
196 freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are inside who can help free
197 those around them." p. 182

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

212 Conclusion

213 In sum, it is important to benchmark literary analysis on Frye (1990:4) who opines that
214 the critical study of literature provides a basic way "to produce, out of the society we
215 have to live in, a vision of the society we want to live in." A comparison between Xuma
216 and Michael Adonis reflects the human's ills done on his fellow human beings. While the
217 universal Declaration of Human Rights holds that all humans were born equal in dignity,
218 the idea is that no one should violate his next door's right pretending any difference be it
219 racial, regional, gender religion **or** the like. The two authors in South African Literature
220 convey a good message that apartheid and any kind of discrimination, violence and
221 injustice as rooted in the dim colonial period should be eradicated not only in Africa but
222 also in **all** other parts of the globe. Xuma is the protagonist engaged to fighting for
223 human rights, thinking as a man first regardless **of** colour as he was taught so. **Quite the**
224 **contrary**, Adonis is violent not because he was born so but his violence is a kind of
225 revenge against **the** violence he was exposed to and experienced in his youth during
226 apartheid in South Africa. Thus Adonis is a victim of "darkness" and seeks revenge as
227 he is led by the anger resulted from his being expelled from his job in a sheet metal
228 factory while Xuma is a fighter for "light" and "human right" as two factors militating in
229 tandem to drive out darkness and **vicious** violence.

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