

PETER ABRAHAMS: SOUTH AFRICAN CONFLICT AND THE USES OF HISTORY

ANDREW PEEK

Abstract

Peter Abrahams' pioneeringly affirmed the developing identity, consciousness and future of the black African, and his role within a multi-racial society of great and potentially enriching diversity, whilst at the same time recognizing the injustice, prejudice and divisiveness that is forced upon contemporary South African blacks and non whites.

Of particular interest, is the way Abrahams imaginatively uses historical pattern and actuality in order to come to terms with the South African situation of the 1940s and '50s. His first novel, Song of the City (1945) juxtaposes white and black experience in September 1939, as events in Europe were bringing to the fore conflict and schism in white South Africa, and emphasising huge anomalies between the status of blacks and whites. His second novel, Mine Boy (1946), is a more developed and sombre account of interaction amongst urban blacks forced to live in artificial and oppressed conditions as non-white South Africans - Marxist ideology is influential in Abrahams' analysis of historical and social issues, and in providing the means of building a new society.

The Path of Thunder (1948) deals with miscegenation and race hatred in the Karroo. Reflecting the Harlem Renaissance poetry of Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer, this novel tends to present tragedy as history, and consequently lacks the tension generated in Abrahams'

other novels. Wild Conquest (1950) is Abrahams' last novel totally set in South Africa, and, using Abrahams' characteristically "doubled" novelistic structure to evolve the implicatedness of white and black in South Africa, it returns to the Great Trek and Boers' confrontation with Matabele at a time when the Nationalist's Apartheid policy was currently (confirming) hardening racist attitudes.

Black prose in English dates back certainly to the 18th century, but the first modern black African novel in English has been taken to be Sol Plaatje's Mhundi, written about 1917, published in 1930. The great creative surge in African writing in English, coinciding with the Independence era in the continent, began with Nigerians, Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, and, in particular, Chinua Achebe, and later, the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o. These writers were beginning to publish in the later 1950s and early '60s, following which time literally hundreds of African novels have appeared. Between Mhundi and the later writers, was the South African Peter Abrahams, Cape Coloured in the race jargon of his native country, writing from the later '30s onwards. His novels pioneeringly affirm the developing identity, consciousness and future of the black African. In particular, they convey the value of the black South African's role within a multi-racial society of great and potentially enriching diversity, whilst at the same time recognizing the injustice, prejudice and divisiveness that is forced upon contemporary South African blacks and non-whites.

It is not difficult to place Abrahams as a conductor of the impetus of self-discovery amongst black Americans of the early decades of the century through to the African novel of the 1950s onwards (see Wade). In addition, more specific connections can be made between the multi-racial context of Abrahams' South African novels and the context in which black Americans of the '20s and '30s in particular were writing. Harlem Renaissance or "New Negro" poets Claude McKay and Countee Cullen convey their sense of the failure of multi-racial society in America, (Book II Chapter II) of Abrahams' autobiographical Tell Freedom (1954) records their impact on him, and their poems never

seem far from his South African novels (see below). Another black American important to Abrahams was Richard Wright, whose novel Native Son (1940) evokes a world of black ghetto dwellers in Chicago closely comparable to Johannesburg scenes in Song of the City (1945) and Mine Boy (1946), and may also have prompted details in short stories in Dark Testament (1942).¹

In many important respects, Abrahams' approach to the multi-racial society of South Africa remains entirely distinct from Wright's approach to America's. Native Son reflects a separatist view: it is dominated by the fact of race, the placing of characters within black and white camps, and a good deal of its impact and originality derives from its impassive presentation of violence, manslaughter and murder, as a principle means of self-expression, self-discovery and even fulfilment of the central character. The approach of Abrahams' novels is integrationist, in the sense that they see different racial and cultural segments of South African society - black, 'coloured', Asian, Jewish, Afrikaner and English - implicated with other, ultimately, each others' jailers and liberators. Though his words unflinchingly record the violence done to disadvantaged South Africans, his novels convey the belief that it has to be transcended, not returned.

Abrahams left South Africa in 1939 (to reside in England then Jamaica) and, since he published Wild Conquest, his last novel completely set in South Africa, in 1950, the whole post independence history of the continent and the shape of the African novel have moved on. In South Africa, the African National Congress finally abandoned the policy of non-violence in 1960, with the Pan-African Congress also deciding to engage in violent insurgency about this time. Elsewhere

throughout the continent, the wind of change blew through the later '50s and early '60s, the angrily committed tone with which West African books like Yambo Ouologuem's Bound to Violence and Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons deal with history has more in common with Wright than Abrahams, and the emphasis in the contemporary African novel has shifted away from the challenge of multi-racial to post-colonial issues (the incongruous continuance of Western orientation in political, beauracratc and economic structures in developing states: What has been called the 'weird historic experience of Europe-in-Africa, the casual transplantation of ideas and values into a foreign organism, often involving the forcible suppression of the signs of natural rejection that occurred', Wade, Nadine Gordimer, 145). In comparison with Marxist perspectives in Abrahams' early novels, Sembene Ousmane's Gods Bits of Wood (published in English translation in 1962) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood appear more detailed and analytical. There is some justification when Abrahams' readers feel tempted to level charges of simplistic optimism, sentimentality or at best inconsistency, at his novels: Ngugi wa Thiong'o talks of Abrahams' 'broken vision', with his social realism negating a 'romantic, sentimental vision of a society without colour'.²

However, this does inadequate justice to the ways Abrahams imaginatively uses historical patterns and actuality in his novels' combined cultural and social statements, and this is important, bearing in mind that tribalism versus nationalism, and multi-racialism and multi-culturalism, remain enduring realities in nations such as Kenya, Nigeia, Zimbabwe. Though the contemporary South African situation is an idiosyncratic one in present day Africa, I suggest that Abrahams'

confrontation with, and uses of, history in relation to the South African situation, can provide paradigms that continue to be relevant to the themes of conflict, violence, the power-relationship, and other issues involved in the developing tradition of the African novel.³ I will now analyse Abrahams' South African novels under four headings, the first, 'Structure and Symbol Counter History'.

(i) STRUCTURE AND SYMBOL COUNTER HISTORY

Song of the City is set in the weeks leading up to, and immediately following, the Parliamentary debate (September 3rd to 6th, 1939) as to whether or not South Africa should enter the Second World War. This issue, canvassed early in the novel, and associated with authentic accounts of secret societies, incitement to violence on the streets, reference to the Prime Minister, J.C. Smuts, emphasises the divisiveness of the South African situation (English against Afrikaner, white against black) that is the background to the fragmented, unhappy or selfish lives of the majority of white characters. (Abrahams is clearing the way for the subsequent novels of Nadine Gordimer here)

A good instance of white myopia, divisiveness and alienation is the case of Hendrik Van der Merwe. He is married to an English wife in Johannesburg, but as a Nationalist Member of Parliament, his loyalties incline him towards South African neutrality. A conscientious man, Van der Merwe is concerned about the ravages that war might bring to his native land, though as he agonizes over whether or not the risk of this should be taken to preserve freedom and democracy in Europe, he spends little time considering huge anomalies in freedom amongst the whites and non-whites around him. (Claude McKay's poem 'Look Within', in Baptism draws attention to precisely this type of inconsistency in the

American setting). Unable to decide which way to vote, the politician travels to the 'blue mountains' a little way outside Johannesburg, partly to gauge the opinion of his supporters there, but also because he believes it offers peace and a temporary return to the world of his childhood. Bearing in mind that it was completed in 1943 and published two years later, the novel's readers are clearly intended to register a feeling of inevitability hanging over events, they know that impending conflict and schism in white South Africa is going to be confirmed (as it actually was) by World War II. Hendrik Van der Merwe's 'blue mountains' dreams are destroyed the moment he arrives. He is met at the train station by his younger brother Uys, who has lapsed into turpitude and idiocy, (he takes dagga and, to Hendrik's horror, has fathered a half-baste child). Returning a little while later to Johannesburg, Van der Merwe determines he will vote for South African neutrality, as a result of which, his wife, unable to stay with him, leaves to sail back to wartime England. Van der Merwe is not an evil man, he is able to indulge himself in visions of multiracial harmony as he travels to the 'blue mountains' (114-115), however, he is ill-equipped to deal with demands made on him by South Africa's multiracial society.⁴

The urban blacks, on the other hand, are associated with a new consciousness of positive kind, epitomized by the career of Dick Nduli, the novel's central black character, who travels from Mafuta's Kraal in the 'blue mountains' to work as the Van der Merwe's houseboy. It is Dick Nduli's sister who is the mother of Uys' child and this is part of a system of symmetry and ironic contrast characteristic of the structure of all Abrahams' novels. Like his employer and other whites,

Dick Nduli has to invent a sustaining personal dream, which takes the form of 'Mnandi', a fictitious and idealized country-woman he conjures up as his betrothed, and he also makes a brief return to his mother and family in Mafuta's Kraal near the novel's conclusion. However, Dick Nduli's progress throughout is 'Away from the Past' (title of Chapter 1). He is exposed to harsh realities (being beaten by the police, the death of his friend Mtini), his idealized country-woman Mnandi 'dies' (177). The novel closes with Dick Nduli leaving his country home for a second time, to make a more purposeful and comprehending return to the city with Mhandi this time seeming to await him there (179). Other urban black characters include the workers accommodated with Mtini, Daisy the house girl next door, and like their historical counterparts, they have been forced by rural unemployment, land-taxes, the Natives Land Act of 1913, to leave their country homes. All the blacks were and still are the main element of the work force and vitally contribute to the running of the city and the national economy, and it is amongst them that we are shown the determination to come to terms with city-life. As is the case in Mine Boy, Song of the City lays emphasis on non-whites' communal events, such as dances (see, for instance, Chapter 6, 'Maramba') and Abrahams' first novel conveys a supportiveness and genuine concern amongst members of the black urban community.

Framing the narrative is Abrahams' version of a traditional Bantu village song and history which, within the novel's first four paragraphs, establishes a pattern of conflict and upheaval in South Africa extending back over two millennia. Specified are: the Bantu Migration south from Cameroun (approximately two thousand years ago),

'Driving all that went before them / Beast and brute and yellow bushmen' (7), and Chaka's Zulu empire, built during the early nineteenth century and beginning the period of Mfecane. Against the divisiveness of South African history past and present, the novel proceeds to develop the possibilities opened up by the city, and, in the final chapter, the city song is strongly affirmative, even though it regrets the loss of rural traditions:

Oh sing then the song of the city
Sing it when your heart is in pain
For you are a son of the city
And the song will lighten your pain;
Today there is pain - but tomorrow
The song will be gay - rich with hope (174).

The city's busy 'hum' regularly mentioned carries a symbolic meaning suggesting vibrancy and multiplicity, and also 'created peace and harmony' (79), and accords with the book's epigraph from Whitman's Leaves of Grass, which celebrates the rich community and industry of city life, and the poet's intimate identity with it. Associated with Abrahams' city implicitly is the Marxian view of the city as a dynamic setting for the growth and exchange of new ideas (in contrast to the traditionalism of rural culture). In an article published in 1961, Nadine Gordiner described Johannesburg as a 'white and black city not yet eighty years old, and though it has tremendous, clear-cut character of a kind unique on the African continent, it has no homogeneous substance from the past on which to draw'.⁵ Abrahams' first novel, whilst recognizing the plight of rural and urban black, expectantly embraces this city precisely because its raw newness makes it an appropriate symbol of faith in an alternative and better future

pioneered by developing black energy and consciousness.

(ii) IDEOLOGY COUNTER HISTORY

Mine Boy is a more developed and sombre study of the exchange and interaction amongst urban blacks forced to live in artificial and oppressed conditions as non-white South Africans. Through the innocent eyes of Xuma, who has come from the country to work in Johannesburg's gold mines, we see the non-white community of Malay camp and elsewhere as dominated by a highly competitive aggressiveness in terms of business dealings and personal conflicts. Xuma spends a good deal of time at the house of Leah, one of the numerous women who buys information from the police whilst engaging in the illicit selling of beer to blacks. One narrative strand deals with the mysterious presence of an informer who assists the police in their attempts to catch Leah (as they finally succeed in doing, in Chapter 14). The point of the betrayal does not reside in the faithlessness of one black informant, but in the competitive individualism of a black market where operators buy and refuse to share information about police raids, quite content to watch their competitors hauled off to jail (as Leah does, before her own turn comes). Native dances preserve a ritualized acknowledgement of the need for mutual respect within sexual relationships (82-3), however, weekend life in the city customarily involves the ostentatious use of money, wearing of fashionable Western clothes, above all, the ability to outfight opponents to win or keep one's chosen girl (27-30), individualism at its crudest level.⁶

As is the case with black materialism, the heritage of power through force and violence (physical and verbal) as a principal means of expression and communication is seen to derive from the white

male-orientated society. Physical assault is the customary mode of address, not only for the police to use to address the blacks (Xuma is beaten for no reason in Chapter 2, Doctor Mini is beaten in Chapter 6), but for white bosses to use for job applications (Xuma is hit in the chest 'to see if he is a man', 59), with blacks directed to follow this approach to authority amongst themselves (as mine boy, Xuma 'will have to crush (those under you) with your fist or you are no good', 71), Worse, they try to run their personal relationships along the same lines ('Take (your woman) by force or you will be a fool', is the misplaced advice Leah gives Xuma about the confused Eliza, 51). Alex La Guma's In the Fog of the Season's End (1972) subsequently portrayed other varieties of power-relationships deriving from white male dominance while Gordimer's July's People (1981) is a recent ironic inversion of the theme.

Violence is also turned inwards within black character, and a number are shown as fractured and self-torturing, the most prominent being Eliza, a school teacher with whom Xuma falls in love and briefly lives with. She is not able to integrate her doubled colonial heritage, her pursuit of white bourgeois ideals prompts a murderous self-hatred (the 'emptiness in her breast ... the feeling that made her want to kill people', 176), locally reflected in her choice one night to read to Xuma of how the whites defeated the Zulus (123), and, more generally in her on-off, love-hate relationship with Xuma. She succeeds in getting him to share her bourgeois aims ('He could work hard and get things that would make a place where they live look like the white man's', 161). Later, she leaves (Chapter 13), and, though it causes Xuma unhappiness, this failed affair educates him and

contributes to his growth of self-understanding and his assumption of black South African identity by the close. Other characters manifesting this type of cultural schizophrenic include the old man Daddy, confused like Eliza by the power of education: he 'became like Eliza: Only he fought' (116: Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Waiyaki* is an alternative treatment of this theme of inner confusion induced by Western education, in The River Between, 1965). Daddy vicariously participates in the fights around him (in Chapter 2, watching two Coloured women fighting, he is eagerly spectating, 'dancing an old war dance and yelling ancient battle cries', 20), and otherwise dissipates his frustration in alcohol. In addition, is the sentimentally presented coloured mine boy, who, drunk, 'told the world that he was J.P. Williamson and he would crush any sonofabitch', and, sober, was 'quiet and retiring and soft-spoken. Gentle as a lamb' (52). Saving fellow workers, he is crushed deep in the white's gold mine in the final chapter, which suggests both the inner destructiveness of the impact of white materialism upon blacks, and the need to combat it with more socially and culturally responsible mores.

Since it is psychological wounds rather than oppressive social conditions that most seriously threaten the urban blacks in Mine Boy, a crucial part of reconstruction and expansion of consciousness involves whites as well as non-whites, notably, in the removal of hypocrisy and inconsistency of traditional white liberal attitudes. These idealize blacks, while failing to recognize problems and possibilities facing them as individuals (see conversation between Paddy, Xuma's boss, and his wife, 98-101: this is the theme of McKay's American poem 'The Negro's Friend' in Baptism). Factors militating against this false

liberalism are: the reliance of the national economy on black labour (symbolised by the way Xuma, whilst at work, 'did not even fear' his white boss because the latter 'depended' on him, 93), and a Marxist perception of the power of bonds between workers (the novel has been described as South Africa's 'first proletarian novel', Michael Wade). Paddy and Xuma are seen to work 'shoulder to shoulder. Two strong men. A white man and a black', 150, an image prefigured by the novel's epigraph from Kipling evoking mystic unity between strong men who stand 'face to face' with each other, even though from opposite ends of the earth. The novel ends with Xuma voluntarily going to join Paddy, jailed for supporting the rights of black workers: ideology can make a future to replace the failure of past and present.

(iii) HISTORY AS TRAGEDY

In The Path of Thunder, the movement is from city to country, from present to past (emphasized, as will be seen below, by parallelism of names and events), from complexity to a direct and basic confrontation of the roots of the failure of South Africa's multi-racial society, as we follow the move of Lanny Swartz from Cape Town back to his village in the Karroo. Brooding over the novel's events are the figures of Fieta and Mad Sam, the black girl raped by a white, and the black man who had spurned her love in favour of a white girl, his disfigured, castrated and anguished figure acting as a pervasive symbol of inter-racial violence.

Lanny is "coloured" (i.e. of mixed racial background), and a good deal of the narrative is concerned with resolving old mysteries arising out of his past and the past of individuals in his village. 'Home', the novel's first section (11-70), raises the question that faces Lanny

on his return (which he does not seem to have considered previously) of how his impoverished mother, Sister Swartz, and his community could have found the money for her son's education to degree and diploma level in Cape Town (25).⁷ The former head of local Afrikaner landowners, old Gert Villier, paid for it, with no ostensible reason except philanthropy for doing so, though Sister Schwartz's talk with the preacher about Lanny's mysterious real father (58) does not leave too much room for speculation. The second section, 'Love' (73-177) raises the enigma of a girl once associated with the Villier family, called Sarie, who died under mysterious circumstances connected with Mad Sam: apparently conversant with the details is Old Tant' Annie, sister of old Gert Villiers, who has been left to dwell separately and incommunicado. In 'Hate' (181-261), another spectre is raised, in form of the hold exercised over young Gert Villier by Fieta (185).

These questions are explained in a recurrent, thirty-years-old pattern of violence following the sequence of 'Home', 'Love', 'Hate'. As Tant' Annie reveals, thirty years before the present setting of events, Mad Sam, formerly Sam du Plessis, had returned to the village from the city with 'much money' (241) and fallen in love with Sarie, already the object of young Gert Villier's love to whom plans had made to marry her. Sam had been beaten and castrated, Sarie was mysteriously done away with and Fieta had evidently served as Gert's mistress. Lanny Swartz, illegitimate son of old Gert Villier, on his return to the village falls in love with a foundling adopted by the Villiers and called Sarie in memory of the first one. Lanny's and the new Sarie's love for each other develops through the novel, but when they recognize the need to flee and attempt to do so (with Sam tracking

them), they are attacked by young Gert and accomplices. Sam and Gert kill each other - 'the thirty-year-old tragedy ... worked itself out' (259) - with Lanny and Sarie subsequently shot by other Afrikaners. The whole incident is distorted by newspaper report into a fabrication of sexual violence and murder centring on an atavistic black and the dangers of 'educating young black people' (262).

As at the beginning of Song of the City, South African history is made to frame the events of the novel for, following an unprovoked assault on Lanny by two Afrikaners at the railway station:

Lanny saw it more vividly than he had ever seen it. South Africa. The landing of Van Rebeck. The feeble resistance of the Bushmen with their poison darts. He could see the surprise on their faces when the blunderbusses spoke and they died. And their retreat from their old playground, the beautiful, rich, food-giving Cape Valley. They had been driven to the valley by the superior Hottentots, and driven from the valley by the coming of the white man. It was easy. They went down easily. They were a weak, feeble crowd who knew only their poison darts (20).

However, the manner in which this is included is obtrusive and it appears a clumsy attempt at pathos. In Abraham's first and third novels, Jewish characters effectively call to mind the full dimensions of prejudice and diaspora: in the later novel, Jewish attitudes range from the idealistic educational visions of an old professor (47-48) to the impatience of the son of the local store keeper with his father's pacificism (see 'Love', Chapter 1). Structural symmetry is important in both these novels, but where ironic contrast and the use of black and white perspectives convey their own commentary in the early novel, the later work has to resort to devices such of the young black African Mako, as spokesman of the fact that Lanny's and Sarie's tragedy is not so much an individual as a national one, that their love 'is a symbol

of man's attempt to move forward beyond the chains that bind him', that, though their love will end in separation and probably death, 'for others there will be a lesson in it, and for some of them, the lesson will be very big' (227).

Gordimer has suggested that the 'colour question' has provided a local and self-limiting 'form of tragedy', and that, to save his soul, South African man 'must wrestle not only with the usual lust, greed and pride but also with a set of demons marked "made in South Africa"'.⁸ Abrahams' third novel relies for impact on the tragic inevitability that history will repeat itself and the insight forced on us by this, and it uses quotations from Harlem Renaissance writers (Countee Cullen's 'Tableau' is included, and provides the novel's title, also a lyric from Jean Toomer's Cane) to inject a self-evidently tragic range of feeling. This novel simply presents tragedy as history, and consequently lacks the tension generated in the others.

(iv) THE PRESENCE OF HISTORY

Use of historical reference in Wild Conquest is extensive with ambitious use of authentic historical detail, and sequence on occasion being boldly re-shaped in order to emphasise Abraham's view of parallelism between blacks and whites. The novel is divided into three sections. The first, entitled 'Bible and Rifle' (9-144), describes the experience of the Great Trek, undertaken by Afrikaner farmers in Cape Province affected by British legislation progressively suppressing slavery, culminating in the emancipation of slaves in 1834. The narrative in 'Bible and Rifle' commences in 1835 as the news of emancipation reaches the Jansen family and their slaves. With compensation hard to obtain and only payable in London (26: Abrahams'

reference is based on fact) the Jansens immediately decide to abandon their farm and head north, subsequently joining the section of the Great Trek led by Hendrick Potgieter in 1836 crossing the Orange River (the last major historical event in 'Bible and Rifle') to move into the Transvaal (others, led by Piet Retief, moved east in Zululand).

The second section, 'Bayete' (the Matabele war salute), without recognizing the fact, goes back six years to 1830, when a representative called Bhoya of the Matabele ruler Mzilikazi was executed at the order of the chief of the Barolong, Tauana. Mzilikazi, formerly a lieutenant of Chaka, had left the Zulu leader in 1822, taking a small Matabele band, and fleeing west, after a few years established his capital in Inzwinyani (near Pretoria) with a Zulu type army of five thousand and a newly-won kingdom of thirty thousand square miles. Tauana executed Bhoya in revolt against taxes he had to pay to his new master Mzilikazi, as a result of which, Mzilikazi's army ruthlessly destroyed the Barolong, in the battle of Kunana in 1832. (To accelerate pace in 'Bayete', this rout occurs almost overnight, victory celebrations back at Inzwinyani occupying Part 1, Chapter 4).

To read 'Bible and Rifle' and 'Bayete' is to compare black and white bodies of people engaged in flight which respectively turned into movements of aggressive expansion, movements which, as we know from history, were on a collision course: and this parallelism is also developed thematically. Early in 'Bible and Rifle', the son of the black chief of the Jansen slaves, called Old Johannes, is shot dead, and as the Afrikaners leave, the whites set fire to the farm they are abandoning. Perhaps the most striking moment in the early chapters, portraying the Afrikaner's birth of real race hatred against blacks,

follows the shooting of Old Johannes' son, as Johannes for the first time asserts his role as a free man and:

A feeling was born in Kasper Jansen (the head of the Jansen family) that minute. It took hold of him with the sharply painful pointedness of a needle pressed into man's most tender and sensitive organ. And the pain... spread to all parts of his body, to his brain and heart, to every sensitive little vein in him, it spread till it became part of him, part of the tissue and texture that went into the making of the man Kasper Jansen' (38).

The experience of the Great Trek is characterised by hypocrisy (the Afrikaners 'will build a new State and a new people ... dedicated to freedom', 144, though the rights of non-Afrikaners are scarcely considered), by a linking of racism, violence and sexuality (Kos Jansen rapes black and white women, yet for an Afrikaner girl to make mention of an Englishman, even, is to invite a savage beating from her father, 97) and racial phobia and hysteria (seen to be introduced to children by their parents, 23).

In addition, is a feeling of acute beleaguerment, established in 'Bible and Rifle's' opening paragraphs before the trek is commenced, as we share the experience of Kos as he warily surveys the Cape Province bush for Bushmen armed with poison arrows. This beleaguerment is heightened on the Trek itself by the loneliness and emptiness of the terrain, loss of traditional order, the trauma of abandoning home and the collapse of family relationships. The result is a coarsening of feeling, a protective dehumanisation affecting ordinary individuals, conveyed with particular vividness through the sense of desiccation and despair felt by Kasper Jansen's wife, Anna:

I am dry. Like a piece of meat that's been cut up and dried for the trek. Everything is for the trek. Biltong Anna. I was soft once, soft and round as a woman. Thighs of a woman.. Do men

sleep with Biltong? Does Kasper sleep with anyone else? No. It would be better if he did. He wouldn't kill me inside then (137-8).

'Bayete' begins with the murder of Bhoya and Bangela, the destruction of Kunana (cf. death of Johannes' son and the Jansen's gesture of firing their farm) and a loss of traditional values, trust and humanity corresponding to that of the Trekkers has arisen out of the Matebele flight from Chaka and establishment of their new state. The revenge on the Barolong by Mzilakazi's son Langa is seen as too bloody by Gazuba, the king's advisor, and the King supports Gazuba's words: Langa and the rebellious Tabata threaten a coup against Mzilakazi. Abrahams evokes an order beginning to be swallowed up in witchcraft and bloodlust (his vision seems that of an outsider: an Haggardian rendering and perspective, as has been observed) and the theme of betrayal is presented in personal terms in Dabula, by the way Mzilakazi's Captain, clandestinely breaks faith, in his monogamous relationship with his wife Ntombi.⁹ There is a close correspondence here with Kasper and Anna:

Perhaps this new-found coldness would leave (Dabula) and there would not be times when he would look at Ntombi as if she were a stranger... Not in thought but in feeling, he asked himself: How does one go back in innocence? (252).

This also calls to mind the liberal young Paul Van As's anxiety about the Trekkers' self-hardening and coarsening - 'But afterwards, would it be possible for hard hearts to turn soft again' (141) - and looks forward to the words of the Basuto leader, Moshesh, that living by the spear can make it impossible to live any other way (280).

Wild Conquest was published two years after the Nationalist

government came to power in South Africa with Apartheid' as its policy, in 1948. In the concluding section, 'New Day' (295-348), Mzilikazi's army is defeated by Potgieter's Trekkers and their allies (the Zulus have previously been defeated by fellow blacks, the Basuto, at Thaba Bosigo), and in each case, there is a lack of the necessary flexibility to adapt and survive: a pattern Achebe later develops in the Ibo context of Things Fall Apart (1951). The clash between the Matabele and Trekkers was not the same as the Zulu decimation at Blood River (of which no mention is made): and at the novel's close, we are reminded of how Mzilikazi led his people to found a greater state north of Limpopo (a source of Zimbabwe's present problem). Sol T. Plaatje's Mhudi (1930), an important source behind Abraham's novel, uses the Barolong rebellion against Matabele taxes and the subsequent overthrow of Mzilikazi, as a fable specifically warning white South Africans of the danger of their overburdening taxes on blacks from 1913 onwards (see Couzens' introduction to Mhudi, published by Three Continents Press in 1975). Abrahams, on the other hand, evokes the presence of history to try to transcend the prejudice to which non-whites were being increasingly exposed, and to prevent the vicious circle, which subsequently set in, of insecurity and harsh oppression provoking revolutionary feeling and (limited) Violence.

The energy with which Abrahams explores the implications and alternatives, the uses, of history of South African colonialism, together with the device of the characterically "doubled" structure to evolve the implicatedness of black, non-white and white, are indefatigably linked with a concern with immediate social justice and understanding. As Abrahams' next novel, A Wreath for Uthomo (1956), and

the novels of Abrahams' natural successor, Nadine Gordimer, document, if the South African situation is presently one of a kind, viewed from a broader perspective it is no more than an extreme phase in the patterns of conflict arising out of post-colonialism, where the values and concerns pursued by Abrahams continue to be pressingly relevant.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Samuel O. Asien, 'The Impact of the New World On Modern African Literature', Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 14, 74-93 (81-83).
2. Homecoming, London: Heinemann, 1972, 43.
3. Kenneth Parker discusses the over-riding importance of what he calls 'the power-relationship' in the South African novel 'The South African Novel in English', which is the first chapter of a book of the same title, edited by him, published London: Macmillan, 1978.
4. Page references to Song of the City, London: Dorothy Crisp and Co., 1945.
5. See Times Literary Supplement for August 11, 1961, 520-523 (520).
6. Page reference to Mine Boy, London: Heinemann Educational Books 1963.
7. Page reference to Path of Thunder, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1952.
8. Times Literary Supplement, August 11, 1961, 521.
9. Kolawole Ogungbesan mentions the possible connection between Wild Conquest and Rider Haggard in Chapter 6 of The Writing of Peter Abrahams, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979. See also Ngugi wa Thiong'o, op.cit.

Andrew Peek
 Tasmanian College of Advanced Education
 P.O. Box 1214
 Launceston Tasmania 7 250
 AUSTRALIA

