

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Humanism in Peter Abrahams' 'Mine Boy'

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Abstract:

Philosophical beliefs have always found expression in literature and synthesized into literary canons. The tenets of Marxism, feminism, formalism, to mention just these, have been transformed into specific literary traditions. Humanism, as a philosophical belief, has also been crystallized into a literary corpus. The general understanding of the philosophical belief called humanism started with the Greek philosopher, Protagoras, who contended that: 'man (mankind) is the measure of all things'. This idea of the primacy of man on earth, devoid of any supernatural or societal underpinnings, has influenced the philosophy of humanism from classical period through the renaissance up to modern times, irrespective of the different types of humanism that exist. Thus, Corliss Lamont, H. J. Blackham and other humanists have expressed various views of the general idea of humanism as a philosophical belief that sees man as: 'the measure of all things'. Nevertheless, humanism, as a unified literary corpus, has not been well-expressed on the African literary scene (although there has been pockets of humanistic criticism) and this tendency has led to the placement of some African writers in literary categories to which they do not truly belong. Peter Abrahams is orphaned by this misgiving, as he is usually regarded as a Pan-Africanist and a cultural nationalist rather than a humanist writer. This paper proves that Peter Abrahams is a humanist writer whose thought and artistry (as discernible in Mine Boy and his other apartheid novels) adhere to the tenets of humanism (the humanism of H.J. Blackham). The paper also, implicitly, portrays Blackham's brand of humanism as a unified corpus which can be used in the appreciation of African literature. The theoretical framework of the paper is ethical criticism or the moral approach to literature which states that literature is related to life.

Keywords: Humanism, Peter Abrahams, Mine Boy, literary criticism

1. Introduction

Philosophical beliefs have always found expression in literature and according to Welles and Warren, 'frequently literature is thought of as a form of philosophy, as ideas wrapped in form, and it is analyzed to yield leading ideas' (110). The tenets of Marxism, feminism and formalism, for instance, have been crystallized into literary canons. According to Amuta, the ideas of Karl Marx, have been transformed into a literary corpus that professes socialist tendencies and class consciousness which can be referred to as the Marxian literary tradition (37-38). Similarly, the ideas of humanism, as expressed by H.J. Blackham, have been synthesized into a literary category in his book, humanism (88-89).

1.1. What Kind of Humanism?

It is pertinent to state at the very beginning that the brand of humanism upheld in this paper is Blackham's: Harold John Blackham was the progenitor of the British Humanist Association, and he was generally referred to as the father of modern humanism. He was born in 1903 and died in 2009. Blackham was a widely respected humanist and he wrote several books that highlighted his philosophy of humanism; namely, Six Existentialist Thinkers (1951), The Human Tradition (1953) and his pelican special, Humanism (1968), to mention just these (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/atheism/people/Blackham.shtml>).

Blackham constructs a special brand of humanism that embraces all shades of the human experience. In the opening pages of his most remarkable book: humanism, he says '.... It is structured humanism I have set out to describe, the humanism which humanists share, not my humanism. At times the reader may think that I am not writing about humanism at all but about say society or Christianity. For humanism is about the world, not about humanism (1) Blackham humanism is flexible, reformist and all embracing, borrowing ideas from all sources, even from views that are opposed to humanism and he says, 'although humanism, fully orb'd can be found in Classical Greece (as well as quite different and opposed beliefs and ideas), it has to be discovered and pieced together, from several sources' (7). Blackham therefore unifies various views of humanism and creates more ideas of the subject to cope with all facets of the human condition. His 'open-minded' humanism moderates the fundamentals of humanism which are usually held rigidly by Corliss Lamont and other rigid humanists.

On reason, for instance, Blackham contends that reason is not the exclusive master but also a 'servant' and he says, reason is the final standard for the humanist but nobody, in practice, can live all the time with complete intellectual austerity (30). According to Blackham, humanism believes in the human spirit and blends materialism and idealism,

appreciating all spheres of the human experience, irrespective of race, creed or colour. His humanism can therefore be used in the appreciation of the African world view Leopold Senghor, according to Claude Wauthier, has also advocated the merging of materialism (Marxism) with African spirituality (245).

Blackham contends that humanism is centered on human interests and it seeks to foster human happiness and progress, and believes in the seed of blessing in all forms of adversity. Consequently, humanism contends that humanity should make the best out of the worst situation and focus on the best that can be made from this earth, no matter how harsh the living conditions may be (22). Other views of humanism expressed by Blackham say that humanism does not believe in segregation or grouping and sloganeering and that humanism is not a product or patron of any particular group or faction, and that the constituency of the humanist is the domain of the entirety of humanity (73).

These ideas of humanism, as expressed by Blackham, have been transformed into a literary corpus, and according to him, the following characteristics constitute the main planks of the humanist art: The humanist artist is not in his own mind and heart, a servant to any absolute order or public belief, for example, Christian myth or socialist realism; neither is the humanist artist an employee nor a surrogate of any hierarchy or society. In addition, Blackham contends that the humanist artist is independent and follows his own insight, stands by his own critical intelligence, expresses his own responses and takes responsibility for his own work.

Again, Blackham says that customary forms and subjects do not bind the humanist artist, so he can deviate from the conventional artistic norms of his epoch or period, and select from the past as he creates a future. Nevertheless, the humanist artist is open to stimulus and influences which enlarge his response and destroy pedantry and parochialism (88-89). Blackham believes that another unique characteristic of the humanist artist is the adherence to the norms of human interests and a descent from the grand, heroic and monumental and sublime to the domestic, the ordinary and the familiar (88-89). The city, as a centre for enlightenment and human development is also a prominent humanistic idea, expressed by Blackham.

On the African scene, humanism as a unified literary corpus, has not been well expressed, but the general sense of humanism linked to the re-assertion of the dignity of the African who has been dehumanized by colonialism and apartheid has been articulated. In this regard, the phrase: 'African Humanism' has been used in relation to the writings of Eskia Mphahlele, for instance, which mentions 'African Humanism' otherwise referred to as 'Ubuntu' in South Africa (<http://www.powells.com/biblio?show=TRADE%20>).

Other African writers or intellectuals have used the term, humanism, in its loose sense, to portray efforts aimed at restoring the dignity of the African who has been dehumanized by colonialism. For example, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his novel, *Weep Not Child*, has expressed an idea of humanism which seeks to restore the dignity of Ngotho (a character in the novel) who has been stripped of his humanity by colonialism. Maduka has also expressed another idea of humanism which aims at fostering symbiotic existence among the various races of the world (159). Besides, the term 'liberal humanist literature' has been used to refer to the liberal literature of some South African writers during apartheid. The writings of Sehreiner, Plomer, Pringles and Gordimer apparently fall into this category. This paper, therefore, uses Blackham's ideas of humanism (so far mentioned) as a working definition of humanism.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The dominant critical canons on the African literary scene; namely, African cultural nationalism, Marxism, feminism and formalism, to mention a few, hardly accommodate humanistic views in their critical frameworks. A juxtaposition of the kernels of these critical canons with the tenets of humanism could explain the shortcoming

1.3. Marxism

Marxism talks about 'men' (class consciousness) while humanism focuses on 'man' (the individual) Marxism partitions humanity along class lines. For instance, a bourgeois is regarded by a Marxist as a 'monster' (which should be destroyed), while the proletariat is usually glorified and guarded jealously. Works of literature that are Marxist driven, therefore, champion the interests of a group. On the other hand, literary works that are rooted in humanism (as professed in this paper) propel the interests of the individual rather than that of a particular group.

1.4. African Cultural Nationalism

African cultural nationalists mostly glorify the African culture and sometimes abhor westernization which they consider inimical to the survival of the African culture. On the contrary, humanism professes eclecticism and borrowing of ideas from all sources, and as Blackham puts it, 'humanism is about the world' (1). Critics in the literary tradition of cultural nationalism therefore do not appreciate a unified view of humanism in their analysis.

1.4.1. Formalism

Formalism is the critical view point that considers a literary work as autonomous, without any relationship to life, outside the work (art for art's sake). For the formalists, it is the beauty of the technique of a literary work that counts and not the moral message of the work. Humanism, on the other hand, is ethically based and believes in teaching the art of living. Blackham says humanism is an education in living (71). Literature therefore needs to teach humanity how to live a better life, especially in the African context where ignorance prevails and the individual needs to be taught some useful lessons about life.

1.4.2. Feminism

Humanism advocates equality of the sexes. According to Corliss Lamont, humanism speaks for the well-being of both sexes (<http://www.corlisslamont.org.ethics.htm>). Blackham also shares in this idea of the equality of the sexes. However, the pre-occupation of feminism with only feminine interests is a disaffection to the humanist because feminism hardly highlights the good side of the men folk, and humanism is not partisan to any particular grouping.

From the foregoing, it could be seen that the existing critical frameworks on the African literary scene are not tailor-made for the accommodation of a unified perception of humanism because of their strict adherence to only their selected approaches, although they could incorporate other critical methods into their critical schemes. According to Eldred Jones 'a critic of Shakespeare (for instance) needs to be able to use any selected critical methods as a useful critical tool and yet remain essentially open-minded to discovery and to other possible approaches (51).

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is rooted in ethical criticism. Abacarian and Klotz contend that literature, like any other human activity, connects the real world (1270). Maduka also believes that a work of art uses various literary devices and structural strategies to reveal different aspects of the human condition (2). Literature is therefore another means by which human experience and values are perpetuated, judged and interpreted. As Euster Palmer rightly puts it, 'every good novel, like every good work of art, is a reflection of life and human experience' (2). A literary work of art is therefore related to life and the various aspects of the human experience encapsulated in a literary work can be revealed through analysis, interpretation and evaluation. Stephen Ross acknowledges this idea that literature has a link with life when he remarks that. 'Literature has always had a fundamental moral purpose...' (20). D.H. Lawrence stresses the relationship that exists between literature and life; and according to Peter Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence places the novel at the centre of a humanistic culture, which is uniquely close to human experience and capable of revealing great truth about the human condition.

*The novels is a perfect medium
for revealing to us the changing
rainbow of our living relationship
the novel can help us to live
as nothing else can (3).*

The link between the novel (as a form of literature) and humanism is enduring. Ian Watt contends that the portrayal of individual experience is a prominent feature of the novel (12). The flexibility of the novel form and the concept of individualism in the novel constitute the benchmark of humanism. According to Peter Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence again says:

*The novel is the highest example
of subtle interrelationship that
man has discovered. Everything
is true in its own time, place and
circumstance. If you try to nail
anything down in the novel, either it kills
the novel, or the novel gets up and
runs away with the nail (3)*

Literature therefore has tremendous relationship with life (ethical criticism). Abacarian and Klotz say that the literary critic, Wayne Booth, contends that ethical criticism is the most important of all forms of criticism. Ethical criticism may range from a casual appraisal of a work's moral content to a more rigorous and systematic analysis driven by a coherent set of stated beliefs and assumptions (1270). Thus a religious critic committed to certain moral positions might attack a work regardless of its artfulness or brilliance because it does not condemn adultery, for instance. A feminist critic might focus on the way literary works devalue women, a Marxist critic on the way the proletariat is exploited by the bourgeois class, while a humanist critic focuses on human interests and the general well-being of the individual. All these constitute a variety of critical approaches in the tradition of ethical criticism.

Abacarian and Klotz, again, say: 'we do not suggest that one approach is more valid than another... many of those critics who champion a single abstract theory often draw on a variety of useful approaches when they bring about a particular work (1269). Ethical criticism is, therefore, eclectic, and like humanism, it comprises strands of all approaches that show that literature is related to life. This paper therefore interprets and analyzes Peter Abrahams Mine Boy (making passing references to his other apartheid novels) in line with the tenets of humanism (Blackham'), using the elements of prose fiction, for the analysis, with the recognition that content and form complement each other.

2.1. Peter Abrahams

2.1.1. Brief Profile/Literary Outline

Peter Abrahams was a South African writer who thrived during the erstwhile apartheid regime in South Africa. He was born on March 19, 1919 in Vrededrop (a Johannesburg slum) and died on 18th January 2017 in Kingston Jamaica. Abrahams, father traces his line to the Ethiopian Imperial Dynasty. His mother, a coloured, was the widow of Cape Malay. Peter Abrahams childhood experience which he describes in his autobiography *Tell Freedom* (1954) was a hard one. There

was the endless struggle against poverty common to so many people all over the world, but added to this was the spirit crushing atmosphere of apartheid and racism, which Abrahams and his family faced with compassion and hope. Peter Abrahams has published the following novels which deal with the South African apartheid situation. *Song of the city* (1943), *Mine Boy* (1946), *The Path of Thunder* (1948), *Wild Conquest* (1950), *Return to Goli* (1953) and *A Night of Their Own* (1965). This paper dwells on *Mine Boy*, one of Peter Abrahams' apartheid novels, and only makes passing references to his other apartheid novels. Abrahams' other novels: *This Island Now* (1966), *The View from Coyaba* (1985) and *The Black Experience in the 20th Century* (2000) are not discussed.

There has been a paucity of critical comments on Peter Abrahams in African critical circles, considering the relative volume and the pioneering significance of his writings. The reasons for this lapse are not farfetched. First, Abrahams did not properly fit into the militant protest literature against colonialism and apartheid that was prevalent at the time of his writings. The philosophy of liberalism manifested by some early white South African writers such as Schreiner, Plomer, Pringles and Gordimer was generally considered by Pan-Africanists as reactionary and therefore not worthy of frequent mention.

Abrahams' writings were also regarded by Pan-Africanists as reactionary in the tradition of white South African liberal literature and therefore not worthy of any attention. Again, Abrahams did not overtly champion the philosophy of cultural nationalism which was obtainable at the time. He therefore had a rare mention in the literary criticism on South African literature. Christopher Heywood's *Aspects of South African literature* (Ed) readily comes to mind, in which Abrahams, irrespective of his numerous novels, was hardly discussed. Although the title 'Aspects' excuses the editor (Heywood), one would naturally believe that Abrahams deserves more attention as one of the pioneering South African writers of the apartheid period.

A brief mention of some of the critical voices that have said one thing or the other about Abrahams, will buttress his humanistic inclination and debunk his assessment as a Pan-Africanist and a cultural nationalist (as usually peddled in African literary circles). Ogunbesan notes a lack of cultural nationalism in Abrahams and contends that: 'There is a curious lack of cultural nationalism in Abrahams, perhaps because of his coloured background' (12), a pigmentation which makes him neither white nor black.

Abrahams believes in the concept of 'man without colour' and examines every situation against the background of the human condition, instead of merely blaming everything on segregation and apartheid. For Abrahams, it was deceptively easy for the blacks to blame everything on the racial situation and colonialism rather than facing the challenges of life. Christopher Heywood in a brief mention of Peter Abrahams on the introductory pages of *Aspects of South African literature*, considers Abrahams alongside Dhlomo, Plaatje and Mphahlele, as the spokespersons of the middle period of South African literature, whose works demonstrated the cultural achievements of the non-white communities (13). Heywood's assessment of Abrahams as a cultural nationalist in the same tradition with Pan-Africanists like Mphahlele and others is worrisome, especially when we recognize the fact that Abrahams in line with his philosophy of humanism, does not seek to promote any particular culture or society, but writes to uphold the dignity of man generally. However, another comment by Heywood recognizes that 'Abrahams is dispassionate and does not take sides' (162). Again, Heywood notes Abrahams' neutrality and freedom of movement among various races in South Africa and remarked 'Abrahams has a freedom of movement among the social and racial groups which is without paralleled in any other novelist from South Africa' (162).

In fact, there was no unique South African culture for Abrahams to project. To use Nadine Gordimer's words, the South African culture at the time of Abrahams' writings was 'that watery substance which is the culture of South Africa' (45) neither black nor white. Again, Peter Abrahams has been regarded as a black activist and anti-colonialist who writes politically committed literature in support of the blacks against the whites in South Africa. Claude Wauthier highlights Abrahams as a politically committed South African writer determined to champion the causes of the black Africans.

*Most of Peter Abrahams other books
recreate the social climate of
this country and racial segregation.
The South African writer, with his Mine Boy,
tell freedom and The Path of Thunder
is in many ways the Richard Wright
of Southern African (159).*

Christopher Heywood, again, highlights the Eurocentric, literary ineptness of Abrahams:

*His (Abrahams) novels arise from
the novels of the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries, from prose
work by Hardy, Lawrence and Steinbeck...(158).*

Nevertheless, these numerous perceptions of Abraham, as a negritude writer, a Pan-Africanist and a Eurocentric writer, need to be re-examined, especially when we consider Abrahams' humanistic inclinations. Abrahams, himself, has stressed that he does not write exclusively for the blacks or whites in South Africa, but takes a neutral position, as an independent writer, and criticizes both black and white for their shortcomings. Ogunbesan notes this neutrality in Abrahams and highlights what can, aptly, be described as one of the most impartial comments made by Abrahams, himself.

*... In a sense, this is my declaration
of independence. My deliberate revolt
against both black and white. For years,*

*I have found the burden of oppression
by both worrisome and stifling.
Now I would be rid of it. As a writer,
my work demands this liberation
if I am to see more clearly, to
understand more wholly as a human
being, it would add a completely
new dimension of both pain and
joy to the business of living. Here then,
is my declaration. If it is a spear, let
it draw my own blood (Qtd in Ogungbesan, 5).*

Again, Maduka acknowledges Senghor's perception of Abrahams as a humanist. According to Maduka, Senghor had in the preface of the French edition of *A Wreath for Udomo*, noted that Abrahams' concern was with man (*L' Homme*) in its universal application and not with the African variant of the species. Maduka therefore contends that Senghor believes that by not confining his vision within the narrow compass of the African civilization, Abrahams achieves a symbiosis of African and, European civilizations. To amplify this humanistic perception of Abrahams, Maduka says:

*Abraham stresses the importance of mutual
understanding between the races – in this
case black and white-and champions the
cause of tearing the walls of cultural nationalism
which blind folded the individual into accepting
rigid, stifling social conventions of his people (149).*

We can also discern Abrahams' resentment of segregation and all forms of grouping which militate against his humanistic temperament, his disenchantment with Marxism, for instance, readily comes to mind. In one of Abrahams' novels, *Song of the City*, Abrahams speaks through a narrator (Naomi) as she attacks another character in the novel for his strict adherence to Marxist principles (106). Abrahams therefore centres his business as a writer (his apartheid novels) on the longings and strivings of the individual instead of ideological thrusts. Ogungbesan again notes this tendency and recalls what Abrahams himself, has said on the issue:

*... I have realized that people, individual people
would always be more important than causes
for me, my business as a writer was with people,
with human thoughts, conflicts, longings and strivings,
not with causes. Painfully, I was slowly grouping
to the view of life that transcended my
own personal problems as a member of one
oppressed group of humanity. I felt that if I
could see the whole scheme of things with
the long-eye of history, I might be able to fit
the problems of my own group into the
general human scheme and in doing so,
become a writer (Qtd in Ogungbesan, 4).*

Again, according to Maduka, Michael Wade ascribes Abraham's position to his conversion to western liberalism and certain mythical beliefs of western industrialized society which are grouped around polarities such as 'past-future', primitive-civilized, corrupt-efficient and tribal-modern (163). But this dual perception of things which Wade considers a misgiving in Abrahams, is, of course, a prominent plank of humanism, which sees the duality of things. For the humanist, reality is self-contradictory. Abrahams therefore sees in every situation an anti-thesis, which builds into a synthesis and vice versa. Heywood in an observation of Abrahams' novels captures this duality of perception of things by Abrahams' in-line with the tenets of his philosophy of humanism. Heywood likens Abrahams' duality of perception to T. S. Eliot's paradoxical perception of Baudelaire as a poet of the city. The primacy of the city, in humanistic dialectics, as a centre of both good and ugly, and a setting for enlightenment, cannot be over emphasized. Heywood amplifies this paradoxical perception of things.

*The double nature of a visionary life,
its oscillation between exaltation and
depression, between the feelings of 'salvation'
and 'damnation' carried in T.S. Eliot's paradox
about Baudelaire as a poet of the city-
damnation of salvation from the ennui
of modern life, because it – gives some
significance to living' (164).*

This dual perception of things is cardinal in the philosophy of humanism and it never left Abrahams. Charles Nnolim in a critical appraisal of Abrahams' *Wild Conquest*, strikes a humanistic chord that depicts Abrahams' dual perception of things: 'This duality is hinged upon by Abrahams in (*Wild Conquest*) through the lips of Mzilikazi (a character in the novel) in a great philosophical passage comments on the Manichean duality of things'. Nnolim continues to

broaden his appreciation of Abrahams' craft in *Wild Conquest* and makes profound statements which underscore the humanistic perception of the duality of things:

*A man has two legs that he might
walk properly. He cannot get far on
one leg only. In the same way, a man
has two hands: one to hold his spear:
one to hold his shield... likewise, a man
has two ears... without you I
cannot be king, without me you cannot
be a nation (220).*

Abrahams therefore, in consonance with his humanistic double vision of life sought to look at the two sides of the South African apartheid situation. For him, apartheid South Africa was like 'a cup with a broken handle' and to drink effectively from such a cup, both hands would be needed. Consequently, Abrahams conceives a symbiotic relationship between blacks and white South Africans. Nnolim's appraisal of the craft of Peter Abrahams in *Wild Conquest* deserves another look because of its humanistic undercurrents.

According to Nnolim, 'The major theme of *Wild Conquest* thus accretes around the idea about great currents in human existence ... its rhythms, its fears, its pains, its contradictions, and ... we learn from the Boers and the Matabele that man is selfish, man is egotistical, man is materialistic; man is war and war is vicious 'Commenting further, Nnolim throws more light on the human condition and says, 'man should realize that in love, tolerance and respect for each other's values, will mankind be happy' (7).

Abraham's perception of life seeks to reconcile the entire South African apartheid situation against the background of history and the human scheme. Ogunbesan points this out with one of Abrahams' comments:

*I felt that if I could see the whole
scheme of things with the long eye
of history I might be able to put
the problems of my own group into
the general human scheme and in
doing so, become a writer (Qtd in Ogunbesan, 4).*

In a critical comment on another of Abrahams' apartheid novels, *A Wreath for Udomo*, Maduka makes an important humanistic comment on Abrahams' view of the colonialist: that the whites are human after all capable of bad and good. He highlights this by drawing our attention to a discussion in the novel, 'They (the whites) are human, as you and I. As with us, some of them are kind and others are cruel (283) Abrahams has been regarded as an apologist of colonialism and westernization, but this is seemingly so because of the primacy humanism places on education and the art of learning from all sources.

Consequently Abrahams advocates the acceptance of westernization and the need for Africans to make the best out of the colonial situation. Ogunbesan contends that Abrahams believes that the only valid destiny for the blacks, under apartheid, was to embrace westernization:

*Abrahams sees westernization as the only
valid destiny open to the Africans, because
he believes that it is on the white man's
own ground that the black man should
stand up to him if he is to be considered
his equal and wishes to regain his self-confidence (3)*

Abrahams humanistic views permeate all his apartheid novels, as he expresses different aspects of his philosophy of humanism. In *The Path of Thunder*, for instance, the theme of interracial love and symbiotic living between both black and white is highlighted, among other views of humanism. For Abrahams, only love between black and white can conquer hatred and the harrowing conditions of apartheid. He therefore, through the literary device of characterization, creates Lanny (a coloured black man) and Sarie (a white girl) as embodiments of interracial love which is a tenet of humanism. Closely related to the idea of the love that exists between Lanny and Sarie, in the novel, is the humanistic belief that sexual intercourse nurtures love relationships and unites people.

In consonance with this view of humanism: that sexual intercourse is sublime and a necessary ingredient of life, Abrahams enacts a scene in the novel where Lanny and Sarie, after having sex together, extol the relevance and sublimity of sex.

*They got off and walked some distance
holding hands... they sank to the warm,
welcoming earth and under the stars
and the moon on the soft grass in the
open, they said with their bodies
what was too deep and strong for human
language. And as she lay spent and
uplifted in his arms she whispered:
'I feel holy, Lanny' and he whispered:
Love is holy, my dear' beautiful and holy,
She murmured and closed her eyes (246-7).*

Abrahams continues to harp on the idea that love is stronger than race or country and opines in the novel that interracial marriage is one of the surest means through which unity, happiness and freedom can be fostered in the world.

The natural inter-marriage, whether between white and black or between pink and red, is a mirror of this highest form of world nationalism when man will really be free (93).

In *Song of the City*, the humanistic view that the city is a centre of enlightenment and human development is brought to the fore. According to Blackham, 'the past, the present and the future co-exist in the city and the city has always been the focus of human aspiration and the concrete embodiment of humanism' (86). For the humanist therefore, the city is a school that moulds and advances man from ignorance to wisdom, especially the wisdom to cope with modernism.

Dick Nduli, in *Song of City*, therefore walks away from the ignorance of his tribal past (just like Xuma in *Mine Boy*) into the enlightenment of the city. For Abrahams, the black man needs to imbibe westernization and industrialization to enable him develop properly. Dick consequently settles for westernization and all the tribal advice of the elders of his village gradually disappear as they could no more cope with the complexities of city life, and Dick becomes a true son of the city. *A Night of Their Own* is another of Abrahams' apartheid novel. In this novel, Abrahams is deeply worried by the triumph of evil in apartheid South Africa and fears that the black South African can easily get contaminated by the evil of racial discrimination, if he becomes too colour conscious.

Abrahams therefore stresses in this novel, that the black population of South Africa should come out of their colour enclave and embrace racial harmony which is another cardinal view of humanism. The crucial humanistic message in *A Night of Their Own* is the clarion call that black South Africans should break the shackles of colour prejudice and live in racial harmony, irrespective of the long night of the tyranny of white minority rule. Indeed, the humanistic streak in Abraham's apartheid novels cannot be over-stretched. A brief discussion of the distinctiveness of Abrahams' apartheid writings in contrast to the protest literature of some of his peers, (during apartheid) is also worthy of mention.

Abrahams' philosophy of humanism stands him out among other South African writers during apartheid. While most South African writers such as Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, to name just these, overtly express their anger for the colonialist, and consequently write a protest literature. Abrahams held a liberal view of the South African apartheid situation in consonance with the tenets of his philosophy of humanism. This liberal humanistic view of Abrahams consequently makes him deviate from the popular method of protest literature that was prevalent at the time. The Pan-African militancy, pessimism and violence that characterize the works of Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Bessie Head, Plaatje, Mphahlele and others cannot be found in Abrahams, who portrays optimism in his apartheid novels in line with his philosophy of humanism which advocates doggedness and hope in the face of all odds. A comparison of some of the passages in the novels of Alex La Guma, and others, with that of Peter Abrahams no doubt, shows that Abrahams thought and artistry differ from that of his peers.

In Plaatje's *Mhudi*, for example, we can refer to an incident when Mhudi visits Moroka with her husband, Ra-Thaga, and watches the physical torture meted out to a black servant by an old white lady:

The old lady pulled a poker out of the fire and beat the half-naked (black) girl with the hot iron. The unfortunate maid screamed, jumped away and writhed with the pain as she tried to escape.... (116).

On the other hand, Abrahams portrays a loving and respectful relationship between a white master and his black servant and vice-versa. We notice this in Abrahams' *Mine Boy* as we see the respectful and friendly relationship that exists between Paddy (a white master) and Xuma (a black servant): 'And underground his (Xuma's) white man respected him and asked him for his opinion before they did anything....' (63). Even in Abrahams' *A Wreath for Udomo*, we can discern the respect and cordiality of Udomo (a black master) for his white servant and secretary (Tony):

.... And Tony, be a good fellow and try and razzle up some tea (Udomo talking to his white servant). Set me a cup now and then some more when Jones (another whiteman) comes (248).

A high sense of humanism is therefore manifested in the simple act of serving tea in the above passage. In La Guma's *Time of the Butcherbird*, emptiness and frustration are portrayed in the following:

On the brown pull side, the commentary rambles among the spiny thumbs, scattered milk stones, the dry undergrowth that carried like charred paper in the heat. It was a commentary because there were shallow sounds of dry earth and wrapped and broken heat boards, broken crosses, heaped stones, and empty jam jars, cracked stones, tin cans.... (65).

We can contrast the dryness in the above passage with the vibrancy portrayed in Malay Camp in Abrahams' *Mine Boy*, the harrowing conditions of apartheid notwithstanding:

*But above all, the real Malay Camp.
The warmth in the air, even on a
cold night. The warmth of living bodies,
of living, breathing, moving people. A warmth
that was richer than the air and the sun...
a warm thick, dark blanket of life.*

That was Malay Camp. Something nameless and living (77-78)

Apart from diction, La Guma uses setting to underscore the pessimism of his characters and relates physical features of the characters to the environment, showing how the people are affected emotionally. Again, in *Time of the Butcherbird*, La Guma evokes the disillusionment of his characters through the use of setting, 'this was no land for ploughing and sowing. It was not even good enough to be burned in' (1)- This drowning of characters in pessimism is unheard of in Abraham's writings. The usual police brutality and violence that are depicted in the novels of Alex La Guma and other South African black writers, during apartheid, are hardly highlighted in Abrahams' novels. Abrahams characters rather use their intelligence to handle police brutality in line with the humanist view that a powerful enemy needs to be handled with intelligence rather than confrontation and brute force.

These humanistic inclinations manifested in Abrahams thought and artistry, as distinct from the protest literature of his peers, stand him out and portray him as a humanist writer rather than a Pan-Africanist, Eurocentric writer or a cultural nationalist. In fact, Abrahams wrote candidly, even against this own black people, the reason being that he intended to teach them how to change their thinking to enable them cope with the human error that was apartheid.

3. Literary Analysis of *Mine Boy*

For purposes of clarity, we can divide our analysis into two broad segments namely: 'Themes' and 'Artistry' and discuss how both are organically advanced to achieve authorial vision. *Mine Boy* (1946) is one of Abrahams' apartheid novels. Many critical voices have made several comments, too numerous to mention here, on the novel. Some critics generally consider *Mine Boy* as the first African proletariat or revolutionary novel because of the strike by miners at the end of the novel, while others have said that the novel is a graphic representation of abject poverty and deprivation of blacks in a Johannesburg Slum. These seemingly popular perception of *Mine Boy* mostly come about because of the tendency of not placing the novel in its proper literary tradition of humanism.

As obtainable in Abrahams' other apartheid novels, the philosophy of humanism informs *Mine Boy*. We can mention the following as some of the themes expressed in the novel and discuss them in relation to the literary devices used in highlighting Abrahams' views of humanism in the novel:

'the theme of, man without colour', 'encouragement of manliness in womanhood' (recognition of both sexes); 'doggedness: making the best out of the worst situation' the understanding of the city as a centre of enlightenment and human development'; and 'the encouragement of love relationships and relaxation'. All the afore-mentioned themes conform to Blackhams' views of humanism which Abrahams professes.

3.1. Promotion of the Idea of Man without Colour

The major humanistic idea expressed by Abrahams in *Mine Boy* is the theme of 'man without colour'. Using the device of characterization, Abrahams portrays characters who are neither black nor white, but simply human beings. Xuma, the chief character of the novel, is therefore created as an embodiment of racial tolerance. It is Abrahams' view that a man has to strive to be a man first before he thinks of himself as either black or white. Thus, in the novel, Abrahams speaks through Paddy, the 'good' Whiteman, to Xuma on the need to strive to live as: 'a man without colour'.

*You must think as a man first,
you must be a man first and then
a black man. And if it so you will
understand as a black man and also
as a whiteman. That is the right way, Xuma.
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 (173).*

For Abrahams, the black man has to strive to live first as a man before he can liberate himself and his people from the shackles of apartheid and racial subjugation. When Xuma wakes up to this consciousness of being, 'a man without colour' (not black or white), he summons the courage and challenges the white racists, (at the mines) on human grounds. Paddy, the good Whiteman, also joins Xuma, on human grounds, to challenge his white colleagues for the exploitation of the black. It is this fact that:

The miners strike in the novel was ignited on human grounds, by a blackman and a whiteman, that many critics who see *Mine Boy* as a revolution of black miners against their white masters could not grasp properly. Paddy therefore announces his humanism in support of Xuma:

*I am a man first, Zuma, he (Paddy) said.
Then he turned to the other mine boys
and shouted: Zuma is right! They pay
you a little! They don't care if you risk*

*your lives! Why is it so? Is not the blood
of a Blackman red like that of a whiteman?
Does not a black love life too? I am with
you ... Xuma smiled. Now he understood.
He understood many things. One can be
a person first. A man first and then a
Blackman or a whiteman.... (181-182).*

Abrahams consequently, deliberately, moulds Xuma to portray the tendency of 'a man without colour'.

*Xuma felt good suddenly, strong and free, a man
We are men! He shouted. It does not matter
if our skins are black ... strong enough to be a
man without colour. And now suddenly, he
knew that it could be so. Man could be
without colour (181).*

Using the device of characterization again, Abrahams creates Paddy and Xuma who in their cordiality, prove that knowledge is also without colour. In other words, both black and white can possess knowledge. Xuma therefore shows great skill in the mines underground where his white master (Paddy) respects him and does nothing without his (Xuma's) involvement.

*And underground his (Xuma's) white man
respected him and asked him for his
opinion before they did anything. It was
so and he was at home at ease underground (63).*

'Underground', in the mines, therefore becomes a metaphor or symbol of (Abrahams' ideal world) where black and white should live together sharing ideas, loving and respecting each other. Another human tendency highlighted in the novel using the device of characterization, is the delineation of Paddy's wife and Xuma's girlfriend (Elisa). Abrahams sees the feminine inclination towards 'the good things of life' as a common trait of women, both black and white). The wife of Paddy therefore schools Xuma in this feminine, yet humanistic inclination.

*Listen, Zuma. I am a white and your
girl (Elisa) is black, but inside we
are the same. She wants the things
I want and I want the things she wants.
Elisa and I are the same inside, truly, Zuma (66).*

Women naturally appreciate the sweet things of life and this tendency is a reality of the human condition.

3.2. Encouragement of Manliness in Womanhood

Humanism believes in the equality of the sexes and among other things, contends that women should always stand their ground if challenged, even by the men folk. In his handling of characterization in Mine Boy, Abrahams adheres to this humanistic tenet as he creates the character, Leah, who manifests both manliness and feminine traits.

Leah performs the role of a 'father' (a bread winner for her wretched household, made up of Daddy (a drunk), Ma Plank and others) as well as acting as a 'mother' who cushions the bruises of members of her 'fragile family' when they are hurt by the harrowing conditions of apartheid. Leah's strong and manly personality consequently looms over the novel and we see in her the ideal city personality carved out to face any odd. The men in the novel fear Leah and respect her strength which proves that women can rise to any challenge in life without necessarily blaming the men folk for all their woes. Leah's strength of arms does not, however, rob her of her motherly tenderness which she manifests when the need arises. She can therefore be said to be Abrahams' idea of the real black woman, facing the complexities of life in the modern African city. Leah knows how to subdue violent men, like Dladha, in bloody duels.

*He's mine, Leah said. Johannes stepped back.
'Don't come any nearer woman! (Dladha warned)
Leah took another step. Dladha slashed out.
He missed her, she grabbed his arm and
Pushed it away. He strained to bring the knife down on her shoulder.
But Leah held him like a vice ...
There was a harsh crack and Dladha went limp
The knife shipped from his fingers.
Leah left him and he collapsed in a heap (29).*

Leah's manliness notwithstanding, she also shows motherly care when the need arises.

*Leah's face was soft and motherly
as she looked down at the little
coloured woman (Lena). Lena nodded
and pressed her arm. Good.... Now eat,
all of you (Leah said) (52).*

3.3. Making the Best Out of the Worst Situation

Using the literary devices of setting and mood, Abrahams pumps vibrancy and optimism into his characters and narrative terrain, even in the face of the harrowing conditions of apartheid. Human sufferings are not new to the humanist who believes that no matter the odds, life should go on. Abrahams takes to this tenet of humanism and creates a setting in the novel (Malay Camp) which highlights doggedness, and portrays joyous moments. It is this inherent contradiction of finding happiness in the midst of misery, that constitutes the real setting of Malay Camp in *Mine Boy*, and underscores the theme of making the best out of the worst situation in the novel.

*But above all, the real Malay Camp.
The warmth in the air even on a cold night
The warmth of living bodies, of living breathing,
moving people. A warmth that was richer
than the air and the sun. richer than all things.
The warmth of life, throbbing. Of hearts pounding.
Of silence and sound. Of movement and lack
of movement. A warm thick, dark blanket
of life. That was Malay Camp. Something
nameless and living. (77-78).*

No matter how dark and harrowing the apartheid terrain becomes, Abrahams lightens it with people making love and sex, having fun and laughter, drinking beer and listening to music.

*The pulsating motion of Malay Camp at night
was everywhere. Warm and intense and
throbbing. People sang. People cried. People
fought. People loved. People hated. Others
were sad. Others gay. Others with friends,
others lonely. Some died. Some were born (49-50).*

3.4. The City as a Centre of Enlightenment and Human Development

Symbolism is another literary device used in *Mine Boy* to advance the humanistic idea of seeing the city as a centre of enlightenment and human development. We see this during the cruel baptism of Xuma by Leah as he is received into the city (from the rural area). The light Leah focuses on Xuma symbolizes his enlightenment. Abrahams, in line with his philosophy of humanism, believes that the mind takes form in the city and in turn urban forms condition the mind. For the humanist, the city is a school and Xuma is subjected to a barrage of 'lessons' from both Leah and Daddy. Xuma's entrance into the city is therefore symbolic, as Leah has to focus the light on him to enable him to see things in the city clearly.

Abrahams highlights Xuma's entrance into the city with darkness in order to stress the importance of light in the transformation of Xuma. Thus, Leah exposes Xuma with a beam of light which can be said to be symbolic of the enlightenment that transforms Xuma from the darkness of his rural upbringing into the enlightenment of the city. Leah therefore warns Xuma as she puts the light on him, which marks his cruel baptism from the darkness of rural ignorance into the enlightened complexities of the city. Leah cautions: 'well Xuma from the North, I am going to put the light on you. I warn you for your eyes, it is sharp' (2). Leah's putting of the light on Xuma is symbolic of the enlightenment role played by Leah in the life of Xuma. Abrahams creates characters who are accompanied by the darkness of ignorance from their rural upbringing as they enter the city in search of enlightenment. According to Blackham:

*In the great epochs of civilization,
the city has been a focus of aspiration
and the concrete embodiment of
humanism of the age. As Lewis
Munford has put it: mind takes form
in the city; and in turn urban forms
condition mind ... (86).*

3.5. Encouragement of Love Relationships and Relaxation

Love relationships and the need for the individual to seek relaxation, even in bleak moments, are laudable objectives of humanism. This tendency runs through Abraham's apartheid novels. In *Mine Boy*, using the literary device of creating plots, Abrahams runs a subplot of love relationship simultaneously with the main plot which focuses on the apartheid dilemma. Xuma and Eliza's love relationship can therefore be said to be a subplot in *Mine Boy*. Xuma's awareness and development from a black man to a 'man without colour' is interwoven with his passionate desire for Eliza who is as elusive as the quest for the emancipation of the blacks. Consequently, Xuma reconciles his abortive dreams, to liberate his black people with his unattained desire to capture Eliza's love.

*.... Then how can one think
of people without colour? But it was a nice
thought. Yes, very nice. No white and
no black. Only people. And then Eliza
would have been with him (Xuma) still (173-174).*

The idea of relaxation also runs through *Mine Boy*. Malay Camp, especially on Saturdays, is a centre of attraction and a love camp where women are seen craving for the love and attention of their men.

*And on Saturdays too, the young women
from the Hill and Berea and Park Town
would be in Malay Camp ...
and in Berea and Park Town and meet
on street corners. And talk at the top
of their voices And all of them
would watch the men And this one
would say, I like that one. And another
would say, I like the one there*

Abrahams therefore encourages the blacks to make love, dance, drink beer, laugh and listen to music to enable them to cope with the harrowing apartheid situation.

*.... And with more laughter and more
loud talking a man and a girl
would go away. They would go to drink
in one of the many places. Or they
would just walk. Or they would go
to bioscope or they would go looking
for a Masaba or they would just go ...
and others would appear. And the same
thing would happen. And life would
move slowly and excitingly (15).*

4. Conclusion

Peter Abrahams did not fit into the dominant critical canons on the African literary scene at the time of his apartheid writings. The reason, as mentioned earlier, is obvious. Abrahams did not propagate the ideals of cultural nationalism and Pan-Africanism which were prevalent at the time, but rather adhered to his philosophy of humanism which made him a deviant among other South African writers such as Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Plaatje, Besie Head, to mention a few, whose protest writings were saddled with pessimism, violence and despair. For instance, the usual police brutality and violence that are depicted in the novels of other black South African writers, during apartheid, are hardly highlighted in Abrahams' novels. His characters use their intelligence to handle South African police brutality and police hunting. Xuma, for instance, in *Mine Boy*, is delineated as an intelligent and organized character: He knows when to go to work and when to relax. He freely visits his master and friend (Paddy, a whiteman) even in the restricted area meant for whites; and when he does, he is well-received by Paddy and his wife who dine with him on the same table. On the other hand, Alex La Guma's Willie Boy in *A Walk in the Night*, for example, is always on the run from the police and incapable of living a fruitful life like Xuma.

Apart from characterization, Abrahams', among other literary devices, creates vibrant settings in his novels where life is on-going and enjoyed, even in the face of the challenges of apartheid. His description of the terrains of his novels are boisterous, hopeful and not tainted with pessimism and despair as we see in the writings of other South African black writers at the time. Abrahams therefore portrays not only the disillusionment of apartheid but also its vibrancy as informed by his philosophy of humanism. This tendency falls in line with Moyana's vision of an ideal South African writer who would strike the right chord and capture the essence of the South African apartheid experience:

*Although creative literature is so clearly
being killed by the South African Government,
one should never rule out the sudden
and unexpected appearance of an exceptional
talent. Such a welcome apparition would
do well to mend the errors of contemporary,
writers by re-directing his creative vision
to the celebration of life through love
that we so often read in passages like this:
whatever else Sophia Town was, it was
home; we made the desert bloom; made
alterations, converted half-verandas
into kitchens, decorated the houses
and flitted them with music.
We were house proud. We took ugliness
of life in a slum (sic) more of a kind
of beauty; we established bonds of human
relationships with set pattering of communal
living (96).*

The above quote aptly captures the essence of Abrahams' humanistic writings on apartheid South Africa; yet there existed a paucity of critical comments on Abrahams' writings because the critical voices at the time could not say exactly the literary category to which he belongs. Abrahams was regarded as a Pan-Africanist and a cultural nationalist. However his identity, as a humanist writer is discernible in *Mine Boy* and his other apartheid novels, even in his interviews which highlight his business as a writer. Also, as mentioned earlier, another reason that led to the misgiving of putting Abrahams in the literary category of Pan-Africanism and cultural nationalism to which he does not truly belong, is that humanism, as a unified concept has not been well expressed or used as a comprehensive critical tool on the African literary scene, although there has been pockets of humanistic criticism.

It is this vacuum which this paper seeks to fill by highlighting a brand of humanism (Blackhams') which can be used as a coherent corpus for the analysis of African literature, especially those aspects of African literature that have been bruised by the painful experience of colonialism and apartheid.

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