

Peter Abrahams, now living in Jamaica, was the first South African Negro to write an English novel after Sol Plaatje's *Mothudi* came out in 1930. Political pamphleteering was even a violent spur by the pass laws of 1932 and the equally notorious Hertzog Bills of 1935 which reasserted white supremacy in land ownership and official representation. Abrahams's first short stories, *Dark Testament*, and his first novel, *Son of the City*, came out in the early stages of the war. They are in the Richard Wright and Countee Oulien tradition, while *Boy* follows the line of Plomer, portraying a country lad who comes to the lines\*

At St Peter's Secondary School, Johannesburg, which we both attended in 1935» Abrahams was a dreamy boy who wrote a good deal of verse inspired by Marcus Garvey's call to the American Negro to come back to Africa, and most probably by Langston Hughes' verse written in the idiom of

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave

Caesar told me to keep his doorsteps clean,

I brushed the boots of Washington\*

He left South Africa just before the outbreak of World War II and has since then revisited his people about twice for very short periods\* Although his fictional work owes everything to his life in South Africa, Abrahams's writing has been done in Britain.

He takes up Plaatje's story twenty years later and blows it up so that Mzilikazi and Gubuza attain life-size proportions. In the best-written of his novels, *Wild Conquest*, Mzilikazi's first serious reverses at the hands of the Boers make him look a most pathetic hero as he limps northward, as it were. New characters are added, like the cosmopolitan witch-doctor, Mkomoti, and Dabula the sentimentalist\* The non-white character in this novel appears as a slave, as a citizen of an ever-widening empire, and as a victim of the deadly Boer war machine\*

The first part of the novel is an episode of the Great Trek. Slaves have been freed, and feelings between Boer and master and slave are running high. Before one Boer family leaves its farm

in the Cape Province, it sets all the houses and barns on fire so that the free Africans should not use them.

In the second part, the Boer trekkers clash with Mzilikazi

Peter Abrahams has introduced 'a new will into past time', thus bending history to a point in order to tell more of the truth than the historian. This 'unhistorical will' operates within a short space of time in history, so that the characters produced short-lived unhistorical effects. For a time, we forget we are travelling a time-distance in history. Mzilikazi and his people are not the unfeeling savages who revel in beer, war and women, such as we are used to reading about.

Dabula and Gubuza, Mzilikazi's generals, defy custom. Far away from his home, Dabula is treated to one of the wives of a chief as a sign of hospitality (a most unlikely thing to happen). Contrary to custom, he has a wife, and is stricken with remorse for seducing the chief's wife. He broods over it with tedious sentimentalism, and tells his wife about it. He knows the sting of fear, before a sex experience as well as before a battle.

There is that bold speech of Gubuza's after the sack of Kunana: 'Wise men of different tribes and nationalities are agreed that cheap successes are nearly always followed by the shadow of tragedy. Wise men are agreed that nations should in their strength tread carefully.<sup>1</sup> Mzilikazi also says the 'unhistorical' thing: 'Without you (the people), I cannot be king. Without

me, you cannot be a nation.<sup>8</sup>

It is Gubuza the idealist who says to his wife: 'Perhaps, my head is turned by power. How does a man know? All I know is,

if I seek power, it is for what I can do with it, not merely that I should be powerful. But how does a man know the secret motives of his own heart?' Somewhat theatrical, as Gubuza is often inclined to be. After a witch-hunt during which forty-one innocent people have been killed, he is worried. 'Why is it so with our people?' he asks Mzilikazi and Mkomozi the witch-doctor in conversation. 'We are cursed by a bloodlust,' answers Mzilikazi. 'I'm afraid of the darkness of our people' Gubuza says.

But when the Boers have arrived, Gubuza acts with decision.

Dabula is a soldier through and through. His king sends him to go and fetch his queen, Mnandi, who fled to Basutoland to seek Moshesh's protection. He learns much from the Basotho king and comes back a changed man.

"Now life is real for you, my son," Mkomozi says to Dabula. "It will never again be just a spear and a battle cry."

"The world is so big," Dabula replies.

The much travelled and knowledgeable witch-doctor, Mkomozi, seems to know all the answers:

"'Why do you mourn for fortyone my friends?' ha asks after the witch-hunto "I will tell you. It is because r . the darkness that you cry of in these others, it is in you too.... These matters are the scheme of things. If you must mourn, mourn for our world that is in darkness,... Perhaps in the distant ages that are to be, there will be, among our descendants^ those who can answer your questions, and when they 6an- do that, perhaps the darkness will be lifted from the minds of people, and there will be only good medicine men,...,"

Here Mr. Abrahams fails to control the character of his witch-doctor because he tries to make him bigger than he really is.

This is what Mkomozi is saying in effect: when people know why there is evil in the world, perhaps they will not be ignorant

any more, and then perhaps evil will disappear. Which does not make sense. Mkomoti is credible when, instead of taking the cosmic view of life, he contemplates things within the limits of his community's experience; as when he says of Guvuza: 'He made instruments of people. And always, that is wrong.\* Our image of Mkomoti is also distorted by his psycho-analyst's explanation of the wicked Ntongolwane's spell over Ntombi, who cannot move from where she is stranding. 'Ntombi!' says the witch-doctor in an attempt to break the spell, 'Listen, child, listen! There is no spell on you. The spell is in your mind only. It is because you believe it that it is so. Do not believe it. It is not real. It is in your mind only.

In your mind only.\*

Evidently the writer is trying to break away from the Rider Haggard tradition of bloodthirsty witch-doctors (Ntongolwane in *Wild Conquest* is like Gagool the witch-doctor in *King Solomon's Mines*), A commendable effort. As is the rest of the novel the author gives the 'unhistorical will' free play. I think Peter Abrahams should have been content to make Mkomoti announce, as he later does to the spectators after he has triumphed over Ntongolwane's charms, that there are good and bad doctors, 'for the bad doctor gets drunk with power. He does not think of the comfort of the people but only how to have power over them.\*

### The Underdog

'No my friend, not mad, He's a human being now. The love that is between him and that girl has made him human. The inhibitions caused by the oppressor have left him. If it were possible he would become a complex person in a very short time, but anything might happen between IfesHxa:Â®\* now and then. The tragedy is not in Swartz and this girl. The tragedy is in this land and in our time. You must be first a Jaai native or a half-caste or a Jew or an Arab or an Englishman or a Chinaman or a Greek, that is the tragedy. You cannot be a human being first. That is the crime of our time, my -fgiraa-ri-y

friend. For that reason Swartz and the girl who have now become human beings will suffer. This love of theirs is a symbol\* of Ian's attempt to move forward beyond the chains that bind him.\*

This is Iako speaking - an African to a Jew friend - in Peter Abraham's *The Path of Thunder*. He is referring to a Coloured friend of theirs, Swartz, who is in love with an Afrikaner girl, Sarie. In

Although Iako has warned Swartz before that he is playing a dangerous game - in a society the European section of which forbids mixed marriages or discourages them - he turns his wrath on this society.

It is an underdog speaking about the underdog;. But it is just this kind of protest which limits the emotional and intellectual range of characterisation.

We are in a country where it is considered a crime for two people to love each other if one is white and the other black. The characters in such a setting must not exceed the boundaries of ready-made group attitudes and response. This pattern of response 1: Larry Swartz, a

Coloured, and Sarie Villiers, white, fifteen in love. They know the

possible consequences. The corollaries, from which they come still cling to their traditional racial prejudices. We anticipate disaster if the action of the story must be played out in South Africa\* it could not be otherwise. There is an excessive play of fate in the lives of the characters and their experience is such a minute fraction of life\*

much more interesting in this novel are Pieta, the Coloured woman who has emerged from a dissipated life and is now being steadied by her

love for the crippled Had Sane, whose own life is perpetual pain\* The image of Pieta is not limited by any impending disaster from outside herself or Had Sane; the image is capable of development. Yes, they are underdogs, and this makes them vulnerable, but there is a wide area of response open to them\*

*Wild Conquest* and *The Path of Thunder* clearly show the British influence plus Mr. Abraham's own impetuosity\* *Ins Tell Freedom* is aarfçgfattggafe



carried all the heavier things; the two fat, squat ribald yomim jor  
wosnen who spoke at the top of their voices; the little of dirty  
children of all shapes and sizes all this me elunland suddenly  
catapulted into aspiring City and Suburban.

And we\* tho aspiring, wore ashamed to see ourselves as we had once  
been, we resented being reminded of our origins\* avirj cec \ped  
the slums, we dreaded slipping back, and we resented savagely/ the  
turning of our now home into a no a slum area. All this resentment  
was slung at the new arrivals. Had they left their funk, dressed  
in the ir best and moved in with even one suite of new furniture  
bought on the instalment plan, the woman would have turned out with  
cups of ten....\*

It may be of interest to the reader here to make brief mention of  
what African version there is in South Africa which rounds the cry  
of the underdog. Of the large body of protest verse that has come  
from the South African Negro whose image of himself is that of the  
main

underdog\* much has been written in the three/Bantu languages\* Of  
course there is such standard English verse as the late Hoses  
Kphahole's which appears in lit 13S30\* iSepitig a pact\* raised by  
mounted police, he writes

Horses to right of then,

Horses to left of then,

Horses behind then!

Prancing and trampling.

On woman, man, and child,

While horse, now noble and rider wild,

Are ranged in full parade!

On then the proud Brigade!

This was his hope

As sure as dewdrop can remove  
A boulder which strong winds defies,

So sure can tears make God reprove

As to tyrants, aho our enemy; deep pit.

He was in Britain during the first World War, and later wrote

laudatory verse about the African volunteers who went down with the  
Umdiri ship.; he shows in much of his\* verse a soft spot for King