

The Urban Image in South African Literature

Cecil Abrahams

► To cite this version:

Cecil Abrahams. The Urban Image in South African Literature. Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines (Université de La Réunion), 2007, Colloque “ Equilibres environnementaux, énergies renouvelables et développements urbains ”, pp.21-28. hal-02343093

HAL Id: hal-02343093

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02343093>

Submitted on 1 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Urban Image in South African Literature

Until the discovery of precious resources in the second half of the nineteenth century, South Africa was predominantly inhabited by people who lived in the countryside and rural areas. Indeed, since South Africa did not become a nation state until 1910, only Cape Town could seriously have been considered as resembling an urban centre. It was not surprising, therefore, that early literature about South Africa concentrated largely on non urban topics. But diamonds and gold and the resultant exodus to the places where these metals were to be found contributed not only to the origins of industrialization, but also to the establishment of commercial and financial centres. The institution of Apartheid in 1948 and removal of large numbers of Black people from their ancestral lands led to increasing migration of Blacks to the emerging cities to seek livelihoods.

Writers of the nineteenth century such as Olive Schreiner and Sarah Gertrude Macmillan and many of the well known Afrikaner writers were preoccupied with themes that related to the farms, to the people and families who lived there and to the belief in and presence of God. The stories were largely moral tales created to teach good ways of living and how to overcome the evil ways of man. But as drought and shortage of arable land started to overtake families and some of their younger male members were forced to the urban places of employment, interest in the rural areas started to wane.

South African literature started to grow and become significant after the second world war. Furthermore, since this is also the time when the severe racism of Apartheid was introduced and practiced in South Africa, the literary output of the time was heavily influenced by the all embracing aspects of racist policies. While one can find in most literatures written in various parts of the world a predominance of themes dealing with urbanism, in South Africa the themes were colored by the racial divisions and practices of Apartheid.

Early urban literature in most countries concentrate on the themes of the good of the rural area versus the evil of the city. Here we are usually introduced to naïve characters from the countryside who pine after the quietness and still beauty of their ancestral homes. In the city the characters have to cope with overcrowding, rootlessness, inhospitality and lack of faith. Crime is rife and illegal drinking and loose sexual encounters abound. Moreover, here the police roam freely and brutality and corruption are plentiful.

In the South African illustration, all of these phenomena are present, but they are further reinforced by the system of racism. Indeed, in the South African example, all the phenomena that ordinarily exist in other rural versus city cultures are directed by the racist policies of the day.

Two examples of South African literature of the time will illustrate my declaration. Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* (1946) and Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1944) deal with the stock rural versus city themes of innocence versus experience and good versus evil. What changes the dynamic of these routine themes is the backdrop of racism that colors the relationship between the individuals in the story and infuses the moral with a new perspective. *Mine Boy* depicts a story of a Black man named Xuma who hails from the rural north and who because of lack of work and land in his ancestral home is forced to move to Johannesburg to seek work as a miner. Colonial Johannesburg is entirely preoccupied with the gold being mined and the massive profits being accrued by the shareholders of the mines. The White people who live here care little about developing a humane, sophisticated city; they are interested in making money and to enjoy the comforts of their spoils. The city is divided between the Whites who are running the mines and who live in good accommodations segregated from the Black mineworkers who have left their rural areas to seek employment. These workers are separated not only from their homelands, but they arrive without families and they live in slum conditions either on the mining territory or in the inner city settlements surrounding the mines.

Cry, The Beloved Country describes the beauty of rural Natal from where some of its indigenous inhabitants are forced to leave to seek work in the same mining city of Johannesburg where Xuma finds himself. Paton decries the mines and its deleterious effects on

the people in the harshest of language. Arthur Jarvis, the White human rights advocate who is robbed and killed by Absalom Kumalo, condemns the dastardly power of the mines and the manner in which the White owners and workers exploit the rural Black workers. Jarvis paints a picture of a city that embodies massive aspects of evil.

Through characters such as Leah, the powerful but kind shebeen queen, Maisie, Eliza, Daddy and Ma Plank we are introduced to the rootlessness of the urban area in *Mine Boy*. It is here where Xuma must learn to cope with an existence that he had not experienced before. But for these characters and for Xuma who are Black their lives can only be lived in the confines of the city slums and their pleasures, such as drinking alcohol, can be carried out only in an illegal fashion. Eliza, who dreams of bettering herself and living a life free of the restrictions of Malay Camp, is forced out of hopelessness to finally desert the city. And when Xuma discovers that there is more to life than going to work, drinking illegally, and even having someone to love, he joins his mine boss to protest the unfair labour practices at work. For this act, he is jailed.

The same slum conditions of *Mine Boy* exist in the Black townships of Sophiatown, Alexandra and Orlando that we encounter in *Cry, The Beloved Country*. Here, too, life is lived in overcrowded squalor and the furthest a Black person can go is to finally own a modest brick structure in the dilapidated township. Although Apartheid had not been officially declared in 1944 when the book was written, the segregated patterns of living had already been enforced. And in these rundown and overcrowded areas crime is rife and personal safety is not guaranteed. Here, too, the shebeens, drugs and prostitution abound and the crime rate soars. It is here where Reverend Stephen Kumalo's brother John, his sister Gertrude, and his son Absalom had come to from their rural home in Natal. And it is here where the city's corruption envelopes all of them and slowly destroys them.

In both Abrahams and Paton's books there is a political message that warns of the day when the majority Blacks will rise from their humiliating position and challenge the minority Whites to ensure justice and fairness for all. In *Mine Boy*, Xuma recognizes his inferior position only when he lives in the urban environment. In the

beginning he finds it difficult to appreciate Eliza's hankering after a better life than the one offered in Leah's house. While he admires the way his mining boss Paddy and his girlfriend live, he does not see how such a life could be longed for by Eliza. But his sense of unfairness is aroused by Paddy's speech that "one is a man first" and a being of color second. His sense of justice is further aroused by the racist behaviour of some of the shift bosses at the mines and by the brutal behaviour of the police. Eventually he joins Paddy in rising up against the unfair practices of the mine and they are jailed.

Paton's cry of justice in his book is far more haunting and ominous. He foresees the day when the longsuffering oppressed Blacks will throw off the yoke of oppression and overthrow the White minority. What saddens him is articulated best by Reverend Msimang when he says the day will come when it will be too late to find a way out of the race hatred of South Africa and the country will engage in a furious race war. Meanwhile, Paton returns to the theme of innocence and good to be found in the rural areas when the Reverend Kumalo takes back to Ndotsheni Absalom's widow and their new born child to live in a healthy environment. It is also heard that God inspires Arthur Jarvis' parents to build a new church for the Reverend Kumalo.

Four and five decades later Nadine Gordimer in *July's People* (1981) and J.M. Coetzee in *Disgrace* (1999) treat the theme of urban versus rural in a radically different manner. Instead of continuing the undynamic and more romantic view that all that is innocent and good happen in the rural areas and all that is evil happens in the urban centres, the writers actually draw the two divides together making them aspects of each other. Psychologically such a merging forces the characters in the novels to consider their lives as a unit rather than two separate pieces.

In *July's People*, July's city employers, Maureen and Bam Smales, are forced to escape their home and their livelihood in the city because the long anticipated violent uprising of the oppressed Black people against the Apartheid state had begun. Their escape is to the rural village of their servant July. While much of the daily routine of the novel occurs in July's village, the battle between the government and its security forces preoccupies Maureen and Bam as they receive intermittent news bulletins on their portable radio.

For city people like the Smales' the rural areas had until now been places of distant fascination and recreation. Bram and his male friends would at the end of the work week load their *bakkies* with recreational and hunting equipment and head out into the so called wilderness to experience the "rugged and dangerous" bush of Africa. For Maureen, the rural areas were to be enjoyed as a "holiday" and not as a place where one came to stay. Finding themselves in the care of their servant July in the rural village is unlike the power that they enjoyed over him in Johannesburg. In Johannesburg White rule existed and Blacks were treated with little consideration. Although July is a loyal servant of the Smales', and even though he is an adult with a growing family in his village, he is treated as an inferior. However, in the village July is a powerful figure in his own household and because he is a worker in the city he receives a considerable amount of respect. In the city, July and other servants refer to their employers as "their people," meaning that they worked for them. In July's village, he is the head of his family and anyone who lives in his area of authority becomes "his people". While Maureen and Bam still think of two different places because they have no intimate stake in the village, July, who belongs to each area in a different way, embraces both areas as belonging to him.

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie, the protagonist and university professor, moves from the city, where he has been forced to resign from his work because of sexual indiscretions with an undergraduate student, to the farm of his daughter Lucy near Grahamstown. On Lucy's farm David becomes both a victim and witness to the horrendous crimes of rape and robbery. In what happens to David as perpetrator of crime in the city and as the double victim of crime in the rural area, the urban area and the rural world are drawn together even more intensely than in *July's People*. It is clear to Coetzee, therefore, that there is no separation in place where criminality is at work. In this unromantic vision of the rural area the sentiment from the geographical spaces is infused with the reality of the events. While David, the urban man, is outraged at what sexual crime had been perpetrated against his daughter, the outraged father of Melanie, the student who had been sexually molested by David, arrives in the city of Cape Town from rural George to seek redress for the sexual and emotional humiliation that his daughter has suffered.

Another interesting aspect represented by the image of the urban centre is how writers from the different racial communities see the city. Colonialism and Apartheid, through the rigid ways of dividing the races and the concomitant discrepancy in economic development, leave the writers of the Black and White races with different perceptions of the same cities that they inhabit. Gordimer and Coetzee are not faced with the parts of Johannesburg and Cape Town that Abrahams, Serote and La Guma lived in. Hence, while the latter three writers preoccupy themselves with descriptions of rundown communities and living areas and observe the role that racism plays in the destruction of the Black communities, for Gordimer and Coetzee the White world that they live in is free of economic want and their problems are centred around their emotional and psychological pain. While Maureen and Bam Smales and Paddy look upon the oppression of the Blacks in Johannesburg and South Africa as a political matter only, and as they easily apply theories of liberalism as solutions to the race problem of South Africa, Xuma, Elias Tekwane and Beukes concentrate on the daily struggles against racism and see solutions less in broad theories and more in daily oppressions.

The same comment holds true in regard to the meticulous observation of the urban structure and general environment that the two races inhabit. In *July's People*, Gordimer makes slight references to the mining area where Maureen had grown up. Nothing is said of Bam's childhood home. The city home and suburb where the Smales' live receive no description. The only idea the reader has of their home is through seeing July's servant's room at the back of the house. In the case of Coetzee's *Disgrace*, there is reference to David Lurie's place where Melanie and the department secretary are taken to for David's sexual pleasure. Again, the White suburb where the house is located receives no description. It is as if White South Africans lived in sterile environments and from here they applied their oppressive brutalities on the Black communities.

In Abrahams' *Mine Boy*, La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972) and Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981), there are close and graphical paintings of the rundown, slum conditions that Blacks must endure. It is in and among the dilapidated structures that crime and violence abound. It is here

where lives are destroyed and ended. The poverty and hopelessness are rendered in dramatic and painful fashion by the writers.

La Guma and Serote consider the natural consequence of such humiliation of the majority in their books. They describe the inevitable peaceful, at first, and then violent uprising of the oppressed against the minority. In this regard, the Black writers of South Africa make better use of the urban landscape than the White writers. This divide is likely to continue and all generalizations on the urban landscape must contend with the phenomena that created it in the first place. Post-Apartheid South Africa is not suddenly going to be a new structure, the old will, if ever, be replaced very slowly. Not so long ago, South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki, despairingly noted that while South Africa's cities and towns continue to be structured on Apartheid lines, racism will prevail.

Like Coetzee, La Guma and Serote join urban and rural landscapes. For them, South Africa is a cauldron of oppression regardless of where people live. The cruelties and restrictions of Apartheid are found everywhere in South Africa and the consequences of forcibly removing Blacks from their ancestral lands and homes lead to overcrowded urban centres where homelessness and criminality thrive. While Xuma might still have visions of a bucolic rural home, the South Africa that prevails is of slum living conditions where the temporary sojourners are harassed and brutalized by the police and the official state.

And even those Black South Africans, as noted by La Guma, whose heritage derived from indigenous peoples and many imported nationalities are uprooted from their homes and forcibly removed to the barren and stultifying landscape of the Cape Flats. Serote draws similar examples when he looks at the slums that Blacks must occupy in Johannesburg.

Post-Apartheid writings have predominantly been on urban themes. Not only are most of the writers city dwellers, but only a few, like Zakes Mda, have considered the many stories still to be told about South Africa's development that have and are still occurring in the rural areas. Too often writers prefer to link these stories to what is happening in the urban environment so that they tend to ignore the beauty, meaning and myth that embrace the people and world outside the urban areas. The South African countryside is, indeed, infused

with the happenings in the urban areas, but in reverse many of the issues in books on the urban landscape originate in the rural areas.

The impetus and excitement created by a “new South Africa” should now be used to learn about and to discard those aspects of the past that have retarded the country’s proper development. South Africa is well set to create a new, dynamic literature born both in the rural and urban areas: a literature that addresses South Africa’s cultural, social and psychological diversity.

Cecil Abrahams¹

¹ University Professor, Syracuse University, New York.