

Exile and Aesthetic Distance: Geographical Influences on Political Commitment in the Works of Peter Abrahams

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In *Return to Goli* (1953), an autobiographical account of his first visit to his native land after fourteen years spent in voluntary exile, Peter Abrahams wrote: "In 1939 I had signed on a ship as stoker and left South Africa. I had come away charged with bitterness against the whites of that land in particular and all whites in general. Life there had allowed me no self-respect, no dignity . . . The need to be psychologically free of the colour bar had, over the years, grown into a kind of obsession . . . I had escaped and reached England at the end of 1941 after two years at sea . . . England had been kind to me . . . [But] I am [still] a child of the plural societies."¹ At the time he made this statement, Abrahams, though only thirty-four years old, had already earned an international reputation as a writer, having published a volume of short stories and four novels since his arrival in England. All these works—*Dark Testament* (1942), *Song of the City* (1945), *Mine Boy* (1946), *The Path of Thunder* (1948), and *Wild Conquest* (1950)—focused entirely on problems in South Africa. Not one dealt with experiences elsewhere in the world, even though Abrahams by the end of the Second World War had lived most of his adult life abroad. England may have been his adopted haven, the place where he felt free enough emotionally to pursue his ambition to write, but South Africa remained his true home, dominating his imagination and channelling his creative energy toward expressions of protest in fiction. Geographically he was in exile, but spiritually he was still a child of his motherland, a sad, moody, sentimental lad lost in homesick reveries.

Perhaps it was his emotional ambivalence toward South Africa, his confused feelings of love and hate, that led to some of the failures in his early fiction. He seemed so determined to prove that sensitive human beings could transcend ethnic differences and effect a meaningful union that he could not refrain from orchestrating mawkish love affairs and resorting to clichés of class struggle. He dealt too readily in stereotypes, giving characters quasi-allegorical dimensions as cardboard embodiments of abstract ideas. He blended violence with sentiment, producing overblown melodrama laced with bathos. Plot gave way to undisciplined passion, narrative development to didacticism. Yet amid the untidiest clutter of unhappy incidents and ugly denouements Abrahams somehow always managed to maintain a serene optimism about the future. His fiction seemed to promise that in the end, things would turn out all right. The world would someday be a better place. Progress, real human progress, would ultimately be made. Even his darkest tragic stories had this kind of subliminal silver lining. Love and hate. Hate yet redemptive love.

Abrahams himself was conscious that he might be living in a dreamworld and wondered whether the "tolerant and humanistic view of life" he had developed in

¹ *Return to Goli* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), pp. 13-15, 27, 29.

the tranquillity of exile was "a true view." "Was it really mine? Could it stand the strains and stresses of life in South Africa, or, indeed, in any of the other plural societies of East and Central Africa? There was no way of knowing except by going there. My faith had to be tested on the battlefield of race hatred. Only thus could I be certain."² So in 1952, four years after the Nationalist Party had come to power in South Africa and five years before the Gold Coast became independent Ghana, Abrahams returned to South Africa for six weeks as a reporter for the *London Observer*. He also visited Kenya for a week before going back to London. *Return to Goli* records his impressions of what was happening at that time in two corners of white-ruled Africa.

Abrahams's fact-finding mission had an immediate impact on his imaginative writing. After completing the book of reportage, he went on to write *Tell Freedom* (1954), an autobiography recounting his youth and adolescence in South Africa up to the very day he boarded the stoker and started his life in exile. Obviously the trip home had brought back a flood of memories, and these he set down with a novelist's flair for telling detail. The first half of *Tell Freedom* contains some of Abrahams's finest writing—vivid vignettes of slum life seen from the perspective of a child growing up and learning the lessons such an environment has to teach. More evocative than any other book he has written, it focuses on the deprivations that are part of the daily life of "non-whites" in a racially divided society. Even today, over thirty years later, it remains a very moving book and one of the best examples of nostalgic autobiographical writing by a South African in exile. Abrahams's homecoming, by putting him back in direct contact with his roots, had a very beneficial effect on his art. It enabled him to rediscover the stark realities of the landscape he had left behind. He was no longer adrift in the shadows of an alien dreamworld.

His next book was also a stunner, but its power derived not from a fidelity to the texture of South-African experience but rather from an agility at placing South-African problems in a larger continental context. It was as if Abrahams, after looking at his world through a microscope, had drawn back to view it through a different set of lenses that permitted him to perceive its relationship to the rest of the globe. *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956) was a novel set mainly in tropical Africa, most of the action taking place in a country called Panafrica, where an archetypal nationalist, Michael Udomo, was leading the struggle for political independence. Udomo, clearly modeled on Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and other prominent nationalist politicians in West and East Africa, managed to win self-determination for Panafrica by marshaling mass support for his cause, but on becoming head of state, he began to alienate some of his followers by making decisions they found objectionable. His ambition was to hurry his people into the twentieth century by industrializing and Westernizing Panafrica as quickly as possible so that it would be transformed into a modern, self-sufficient nation-state that could serve as a model of progress for all of Africa. To have a chance of attaining this goal, Udomo found it necessary to betray one of his best friends, David Mhendi, who was engaged in a guerrilla war to liberate white-ruled Pluralia, Panafrica's neighbor to the south. In other words, Udomo, when faced with the choice between developing his own newly independent country or assisting in the struggle for political freedom elsewhere in the continent, elected to put his own people and his own goals first. And by doing so, he stirred up the kind of internal opposition in Panafrica that soon led to his downfall. At the end of the novel he is massacred in a bloody ritual by reactionary comrades who had earlier supported him, but Abrahams suggests that the social revolution Udomo had set in motion could not now be halted. Udomo's

² *Return to Goli*, pp. 27-28.

death was only a temporary setback; his visionary ambitions for Panafrica were destined to be realized.

What made *A Wreath for Udomo* controversial was its topicality in 1956, only a year before the Gold Coast was to become the first tropical African nation to complete the process of decolonization. The first half of the novel could be recognized as a transcription of the nationalist era, when charismatic African leaders gained popular backing and successfully challenged colonial regimes, forcing them to yield political power. But the second half of the novel, the part set in independent Panafrica, was a projection into the future, and African readers were shocked to find Abrahams predicting doom for the nationalists after independence. Wasn't this a rather gloomy view of what the next few years would bring? Yet Abrahams had constructed his scenario carefully, basing the final conflicts in the novel on the tensions he perceived between new nation-building aspirations in the tropics and continuing revolutionary struggles in the south. Would Africa's first Prime Ministers and Presidents sell out someone else's revolution in order to attempt to work economic miracles at home? Abrahams evidently felt they would, and he applauded both their courage and their convictions. In his view material prosperity was more valuable to Africa than political solidarity, for the real revolution would be brought about by modernization and Westernization. Udomo, he hinted, did not die in vain, for others would surely carry on the transformational mission that had earned him martyrdom. This ambitious nation-builder was the kind of visionary leader who had charted a new direction for Africa by leading it away from the indigenous evils of its past. Udomo was a fallen hero who deserved a wreath.

This was a strange story for a South-African writer to tell, but perhaps it is not so surprising that Peter Abrahams told it, for by this time he must have been acutely aware that he could no longer claim to be a South-African writer. He was from that place, but he was no longer of that place. His seventeen years in exile had made him a different person, and South Africa itself had changed. His visit in 1952 had refreshed his memory of his early years there, but he must have felt out of his element in a political environment he could no longer recognize or embrace as home. By now he was a citizen of a much larger world, and the attitudes expressed in his writing reflected an awareness of international dimensions of human conflict. He was writing not just about Johannesburg, Cape Town, Natal, or the northern Karroo but about a wider arena of experience in which South Africa figured somewhere out at the periphery, not right at the center. His homecoming may have made him realize how far he had grown away from the land that previously had been his single source of creative inspiration. He may have seen that he was now distanced from South Africa by more than geography. Indeed, he was detached from it intellectually, emotionally, and therefore also aesthetically. He could be more objective about his homeland because he had been away from it so long that he had developed a wider network of allegiances. South Africa had become only one of his many concerns. He was now committed to the whole of Africa, not merely to its southernmost extremity.

And soon his commitment was to extend even farther. In 1955 he traveled to Jamaica to write a book about that island for the Corona Library, "a series of illustrated volumes under the sponsorship of the Colonial Office dealing with the United Kingdom's dependent territories, the way their peoples live, and how they are governed."⁵ But no sooner had he delivered the manuscript of *Jamaica: An Island Mosaic* (1957) to the Colonial Office than he "felt the pull of this sunny island

⁵ *Jamaica: An Island Mosaic* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957), p.v.

once more” and decided to return there to live.⁴ Abrahams still resides in Kingston today, having remained there longer than he had lived in either South Africa or England. What attracted him most to this new environment can be found in the last pages of his book about Jamaica:

I had been born and brought up in a multi-racial society where the present was ugly and the future promised to be uglier. There the problems of race and colour, perhaps the key problems of our century, were so riddled with fear and hate that they seemed beyond any but the most terrible and bloody solution.

In Jamaica, and in my exploring of its past and its problems, I had seen the solution of that problem. The Jamaicans had lived out the multi-racial problem and were now reaching a stage where race and colour did not matter, only a person’s worth as a person. In this they are far ahead of most of the rest of the world; have much to teach the rest of the world.⁵

So Abrahams chose to relocate himself and his family in a multiracial society as different from South Africa as possible. He was seeking a color-blind exile.

Following the move, Abrahams was silent for some time. When his next novel, *A Night of Their Own*, surfaced in 1965, it seemed to mark a regression to an earlier phase in his writing career, for it dealt exclusively with South Africa and told an improbable story overwrought with melodrama, clichés, and stereotypes. This time the focus was on the involvement of Indians in Natal in an underground movement threatened by internecine racial frictions but simultaneously raised to new heights of social awareness via interracial love affairs. It was the old love/hate dichotomy again, played out against a backdrop of oppression, attempted subversion, and heavy-breathing romance. But the artificiality of the drama, exacerbated by unrelenting emblematic use of character and incident, showed just how far out of touch Abrahams was with real events in post-Sharpeville South Africa. The novel may be read as a simple adventure story or as a moral fable but not as a convincing slice of revolutionary life, which may be what it was meant to have been.

The next year Abrahams’s first novel about his new environment was published. In *This Island Now* (1966) Abrahams transferred his preoccupation with political and racial themes to the Caribbean, where a power struggle was shown to be in progress. A popular politician, on assuming the presidency of an independent island state, tried to give the poor, downtrodden black masses a greater say in government, but in order to do this, he had to take away some of the advantages that privileged whites, foreign and indigenous, continued to enjoy. The major conflicts in the novel were in fact based mainly on color and class, which seems more than a little surprising considering Abrahams’s earlier effusions about colorblindness in Jamaica. Had his experiences living in the Caribbean changed his perspective on racial realities there, or was he, as a transplanted South African with a lifetime of practice in viewing the world in black and white terms, predisposed to discover color prejudice as the root of all evil wherever he went? Was he genuinely disillusioned or was he destined to grow disgruntled as a result of always wearing race-tinted glasses? In any case, the novel was an artistic failure because it exhibited the same excesses as his earlier explorations of racial politics in his native land. Was South Africa, even at this temporal, geographical and aesthetic distance, still ruining his art?⁶

⁴ *Jamaica*, p. xiii.

⁵ *Jamaica*, pp. 260-61.

⁶ For fuller discussions of Abrahams’s career up to this point, see Michael Wade, *Peter Abrahams* (London: Evans, 1972) and Kolawole Ogungbesan, *The Writings of Peter Abrahams* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1979).

Unfortunately, these questions must be raised again when we examine his latest and longest novel, *The View from Coyaba* (1985), published nearly two decades after *This Island Now*. One has the feeling that Abrahams tried to distil in this novel a lifetime of thinking about what has often been termed "the black experience." The book attempts a kaleidoscopic view of about 150 years of black history in the Caribbean, North America, and tropical Africa, following the fortunes of successive generations in a single family who are exposed to archetypal as well as actual historical happenings in their quest for a better life. The time scheme is broad enough to cover everything from early nineteenth-century slave revolts in the Caribbean to the atrocities of Idi Amin in Uganda, and there is even a brief prelude depicting Arawak resistance to the Spaniards in sixteenth-century Jamaica, an episode that sets the tone for the saga of collective racial struggle that follows. Some isolated moments in this vast sweep of experience are captured memorably, but because Abrahams must strain to provide credible continuity between events located in distant pockets of space and time, he cannot wholly resist the temptation to bend his characters into awkward rhetorical postures so that they can be used to ventilate all the important ideological issues of their day and at the same time advance the plot to the next family crisis occasioned by documented racial calamity. As a strategy of narration this was a juggling act of heroic proportions—indeed, of hubristic proportions, for some of the many weighty spheres placed in motion were bound to fall flat, bounce wildly, and spoil the effect of this grand spectacle. The novel was simply too ambitious for its own good.

But the biggest disappointment derived not from the novel's structure or design but from its message, which was one of black separatism, of black withdrawal from engagement with the West. To survive as a people, blacks, it was maintained, must rely solely on themselves. Abrahams had his major surviving character state in the closing pages of the novel that

One of the most terrible things about the Westernism from which we must withdraw to find ourselves is its loss of faith and direction, of the capacity to know, instinctively, the true imperatives for historical survival. To be of any use to ourselves . . . we must separate ourselves from this destructive Westernism . . . If we succeed we may free ourselves in time to point to a new way of seeing our world, a new way of living with each other and understanding each other; we may all learn to co-operate instead of compete, to share instead of grab . . . A healed people, a whole people, freed of the bitter historical scars, may have something rich to offer the world.⁷

The black utopia toward which this character was groping, the paradise of health and wholesomeness that Abrahams was advocating through him, would require not just withdrawal from the West but also the establishment of a form of global apartheid. One is forced to conclude that close to half a century of exile had finally turned Abrahams's thought in an unambiguously racist direction. South Africa apparently exacts a very heavy toll on some of its expatriated artists, a few of whom wind up infected with the very disease that caused them to quit that country. Abrahams's view from Coyaba, a place high in the Red Hills of Jamaica, was blinded by blatant xenophobia.

What I have been trying to do here is to trace in the career of one exiled South-African author a pattern that reveals how changes in the relationship between a writer and his native land can bring about changes in his art, both for better and for worse. With another writer the pattern might be altogether different, though it seems likely that a brief visit to the homeland would generate a flurry of creative

⁷ *The View from Coyaba* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 437, 439-40.

energy, as it did in Abrahams's case. For exile is not just a geographical dislocation; it is a state of mind as well, a state as balanced or unbalanced as personal circumstances permit. Some writers will go on reliving memories in book after book; others will move on to fresh imaginative terrain and seek fulfillment in new experiences and new commitments. But for most, the tug of the motherland, like that of an unsevered umbilical cord, will probably be sharp enough to produce strong emotions and a desire to cry out, if only to express pain or pleasure at being reminded so forcefully of the lingering hold of a vestigial attachment. For writers in exile, as for writers anywhere else, there may well be no place like home.