

## Masculinity in Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*

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In his 1946 novel *Mine Boy*, Peter Abrahams describes urban African life in South Africa in the era directly preceding the rise of the Nationalist Party's apartheid regime. Focusing on the changing dynamics of African society that came as a result of increased urbanization and oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Abrahams presents a narrative that is in accordance with Anton Lembede's belief that such shifts led to the growth of "such abnormal and pathological phenomena as loss of self-confidence, inferiority complex, a feeling of frustration, [and] the worship and idolisation of white men" amongst the African population.<sup>1</sup> For Abrahams, such an environment had an emasculating effect on African men that created dependence on things like women, alcohol, and most notably, on whites. In being stripped of their independence by things like racist pass laws and the loss of certain gender roles to women like the "Shebeen Queen" Leah, African men of this time were transformed from pastoral patriarchs to cogs in an industrialized machine. In order to rectify the regressions that Lembede noted, Abrahams uses the development of Xuma's character to show that an African man can only reassert his dominance over his destiny by rejecting the moniker of being a 'mine boy' in favor of realizing "that he is strong enough to be a man without color."<sup>2</sup>

Central to this novel are the effects of the subjugation of Africans under white rule in South Africa. While Xuma comes to Johannesburg from the countryside in search of work, the very situation that places him in this predicament is for the most part out of his control.<sup>3</sup> For decades, the white-government of what was then the Union of South Africa had instituted taxes and laws that forced African men into wage labor most notably in the gold mines of the Reef. According to Luli Callinicos, such actions were ways of "forcing thousands of subsistence farmers and peasants off the land and into the mines."<sup>4</sup> This mass reorganization of African life greatly altered the roles of men in society as it not only restricted their movement and forced them to live far from their families and homelands, but it also increased the dependence of the African on their white overlords.<sup>5</sup>

The very name of these workers, 'mine boys,' is a testament to how emasculating the urban environment was to African men. The use of the word 'boy' labeled these men as inferior to their white managers. Abrahams uses such terminology to demonstrate the level to which the repressive society reduces the African male psyche. After taking Xuma to the mines, Johannes has an argument with a white man who is supposed to admit Xuma to the mine itself:

"This is the new one," Johannes said.  
 "Your gang?" (said the white man)  
 "No. For the Red One. Boss Boy."  
 "The Red Man has not come."  
 "My white man says so."  
 "You mean your boss."  
 "My white man."<sup>6</sup>

The use of "boy" for Africans and "man" for whites reveals that the notion of African inferiority even manifested itself in the speech of individual Africans, demonstrating the extent of what Lembede diagnoses as an "inferiority complex." It is important to note that even though Johannes and Xuma are in fact "bosses," they still have the word "boy" attached to their title as to clarify that they are in fact Africans and "not a human being...just a mine boy."<sup>7</sup>

Similar to the emasculation of men in the work place, Abrahams also notes the changing roles of African men in private life. Upon his arrival at Malay Camp in Johannesburg, Xuma is taken in by a group of fellow Africans. With Leah a woman at the helm of this pseudo-family, Xuma becomes a part of a household that is strikingly different from the traditional male-dominated African family that according to Catherine Albertyn was the norm both before and after the coming of European colonization.<sup>8</sup> This traditional structure, however, seems reversed in the story of *Mine Boy*, as Leah has several men who are dependent on her for their livelihoods. Daddy, the eldest male of the group and

<sup>1</sup> Anton Lembede, "Policy of the Congress Youth League," *Inkundla Ya Bantu*, May, second fortnight, 1946.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 181.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Luli Callinicos, *A People's History of South Africa: Gold and Workers 1886-1924* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1980), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Thompson. *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Abrahams, *Mine Boy*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Albertyn. "Law, Gender and Inequality in South Africa," *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2. (June 2001): 139-162.

who would be considered the *de facto* patriarch in traditional African society, is the epitome of the emasculated man that Abrahams attempts to portray in the novel. Never sober, city-life has turned him from someone “even the white ones respected” to a drunkard with a penchant for laying “on the floor, soaked in his own piddle.”<sup>9</sup> The cause for his decline, according to Ma Plank, is that “he understood too much and it made him unhappy.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, “the feeling of frustration” about one’s own plight that Lembede speaks about became too much to bear and led Daddy to become dependent on things like alcohol and women.

Leah, on the other hand, is the head of the household and serves as the protector of all those who gravitate towards her. In supporting her compatriots through her illegal beer brewing business, Leah takes on many of the gender roles traditionally reserved for men, such as protecting them from the police and providing them food to eat. It should be noted, however, that Abrahams’s criticism of the decline of masculinity is not misogynistic in character but rather a rational realization that unless African men do not reassert their masculinity, true equality and liberation would most likely not come to fruition. While Abrahams recognizes that there are some whites who truly believe in equality, as shown by Paddy’s character, the vast majority even those who considered themselves “progressives” were more inclined to believe that they knew what was best for the “native.”<sup>11</sup>

The dichotomy between being a ‘boy’ and a ‘man’ is a distinction that shapes many of the interactions between the characters of *Mine Boy*, particularly those between blacks and whites. During Xuma’s first meeting with Chris Johannes’s “white man” Chris punches him in the chest to gauge his reaction in order “see if [he is] a man.”<sup>12</sup> Still not used to the subtleties of the accepted rules of racial interaction, Xuma “instinctively...stepped back and raised his arms, both hands bunched into great fists” as if he was ready to strike back.<sup>13</sup> This reactionary personality lays the groundwork for the ultimate climax of the novel, when Xuma leads his “boys” on strike following a mining accident that claims the lives of both Johannes and Chris. In confronting the mine’s manager, Xuma declares, “It does not matter if our skins are black! We are not cattle to throw away our lives! We are men!”<sup>14</sup> In asserting his masculinity to the white mine owners, Xuma not only creates a situation that allows for Africans to look at themselves differently, but it also helps to validate the opinions of sympathetic whites. After seeing Xuma stand up to the authorities, Paddy a white man and Xuma’s boss joins him in the strike by saying that he “is a man first” and white second.<sup>15</sup> This sentiment, which ultimately draws on Abraham’s belief in a shared class struggle, is what the author himself hopes would take hold in his native South Africa. It is important to note, however, that while he is a communist, Abrahams draws on the Africanist ideals of people like Lembede, who believed that the natives of South Africa must take the first step towards liberation.

Throughout *Mine Boy*, Xuma exemplifies his masculinity through his courage to fight back against his oppressors and supposed superiors. In doing so, Abrahams provides a model for a new African “man” that stands up for his rights and casts off the “pathological phenomena” that Anton Lembede believed was hindering natives in South Africa. By linking the decline of masculinity to continued African subjugation, Abrahams presents a story that for the most part is in agreement with Lembede’s Africanist analysis of the plight of the South African natives. Instead of promoting a solution that is limited to African solidarity, though, he instead advocates a non-racialist approach to national liberation that focuses on transcending racial divides and focusing on the commonalities of the struggles facing working class whites and blacks. In doing so, he appeals to his readers’ consciousness of the fact that ultimately, as summed up in Paddy’s declaration at the end of the novel, “is not the blood of a black man red like that of a white man? Does not black man feel too? Does not a black man love life too?”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Abrahams, *Mine Boy*, 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Abrahams, *Mine Boy*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> Abrahams, *Mine Boy*, 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>15</sup> Abrahams, *Mine Boy*, 181.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*