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Loss of Identity in Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy*

Megha Balaso Mali

Research Student,
Department of English,
Shivaji University, Kolhapur.

&

Dr. Pradnya Vijay Ghorpade

Research Guide,
Head, Department of English,
K. R. P. Kanya College, Islampur.

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Abstract:

Peter Abrahams' literary work paved the way to the suppressed to search their identities. It brought awareness of self-identity among the South African people. Identity always deals with a question: Who am I? The protagonist of *Mine Boy*, Xuma is also obsessed with the same question. He comes as a stranger and an outsider in Johannesburg; lonely and ill at ease. He came from his tribe in search of job in mines. He is engaged there in search of meaning in life. Xuma is a modern man who finds himself and others too estranged from their true selves. The world of mine workers and people living in slums has shrunk in frustration, disillusionment and meaninglessness. They have lost their true identities leading them towards rootlessness.

Keywords: Loss of identity, disillusionment, rootlessness, turmoil, immigrant, humiliation.

Introduction:

Africa, a dark continent, was subjected to colonial influences of the Portuguese, Dutch, English, French and others. Its influences are found in social, cultural, political, economic and literary fields also. Africa has a long tradition of oral literature. Africa had several tribes having their own customs, religions, cultures, and code of conducts. The continent has been divided into five main regions; North Africa, South Africa, East Africa, West Africa, and Central Africa. The Congo and South Africa has found the records of oral literature. North Africa holds the earliest written literature. West African literature is region based. And East African literature was influenced by the Arabs. The African literature was

full of enigmatic mythological and historical references. Thus, the oral tradition was metamorphosed in the literary mode.

The intrusion of white culture into the dark countries affected on the culture of black people. The every first blow was on their religion and culture. The whites stamped their culture and religion on the black people. They easily succeeded to turn the blacks into their slaves in which their colour of the skin played a vital role. This led Blacks to lose their confidence and gradually loss of identity. African societal life is changed as a result of increased urbanization and oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This change led a way to loss of confidence, inferiority complex, a feeling of frustration and loss of identity in the minds of native Africans. South African literature is incredibly diverse enriched with realistic description of culture and history in Afrikaans and English languages. Alex La Guma, Athol Fugard, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Sipho Sepamla, Peter Abrahams, etc. are the well-known African writers.

Identity is a central component in the development of an individual. It asserts the role of an individual in a society. But the apartheid system, displacement, racial oppressions, hybridization and imitation of white culture have contributed to the loss of identity of black man in the society. It has brought disorder and anxiety in their lives. Peter Abrahams, a prominent Coloured writer authors *Mine Boy* which is praised for its uniqueness; raises questions of colour and identity. It is Abrahams' most popular philosophical work which reflects deeply the dark realities and struggle of the South African people to regain their identities and self-image. It describes urban African life in slums. It also exposes how African people blindly imitate European or non-African things and gradually lose their self-identity. This kind of mentality reasons to turn the native black people into mere working hands for whites.

The central figure in *Mine Boy* is Xuma who comes to Johannesburg from the countryside in search of job. The novel begins with Xuma's arrival in Malay Camp describing him as 'the big man'. Xuma is a well-built masculine figure. He introduces himself to Leah, the liquor seller, as "Xuma, I came from the north." (MB, 1) and nothing more. Peter Abrahams has not given any further details of Xuma like about his parents, family, village, etc. Maisy and Xuma give a few details of his belongings in their conversation:

...How long have you been here?asked Maisy.

I came four days ago. Said Xuma.

Where from?

From the north. Beyond Zoutpansberg...And you?

I was born here. Replied Maisy. (MB, 53)

Leah allows Xuma to live with her. She also introduces him to Daddy, Ma Plank, Eliza and Maisy as “This is Xuma from the north.” (MB, 3) He falls in love with Eliza and builds mother-son relationship with Leah. It is Leah who teaches Xuma the life in city. She tells Xuma that he is “a baby with people”. (MB, 10) He finds stark differences between rural and urban life. Xuma’s struggle to adjust in Johannesburg, the foreign land for him. He tries to accustom himself with the new atmosphere in Johannesburg as every immigrant has to do. Xuma feels lonely and displaced. All the time he feels nostalgic and wonders, “How the people at home were. What they were doing...Of course he knew what they would be doing now at home...But here (in city) it’s so different. No one trusted anyone else...the ways of the city are truly strange...” (MB, 52-53) In this connection Biljana Mistic Ilic comments:

“Identity, whether personal, group, ethnic, religious, national, professional or any other, is something that is no longer given or constant, but needs to be defined, established, maintained, constructed, or reconstructed and can be lost, searched for, questioned, reinvented in the turmoil of confusing and conflicting influences and forces.” (II, ix)

It is not only Xuma who feels strangeness about city and loses own identity gradually but almost all the people in Malay Camp have forgotten their own identities Like Leah, Ma Plank, Daddy, Johannes, Eliza, Lena, etc. Xuma knows that he would never return to his home as he thinks lying in the grass, “Pain seemed so ordinary. So much a part of life...But home was finished.” (MB, 162-163) Xuma has left his home and family. Family is a kind of axis round which the individual’s identity revolves. It is the true basis of individual’s identity. The family system which provides and signifies the stable identity has been disrupted. Fortunately, Xuma becomes a part of pseudo family of Leah comprising of people, none of whom are related by blood. Leah has provided them food and accommodation as their poor and homeless. Leah too has lost her true identity as she says, “I am here, you see, I come from my people, but I am no longer of my people. It is so in the city and I have been here many years. And the city makes you strange to the ways of your people, you see?” (MB, 10)

Xuma argues with Leah about his people but she tries to explain that when a native black man from tribes comes to city, he loses his identity.

William James describes identity as a man's character which is "discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which...he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive." (TLWJ, 25) However, In *Mine Boy*, the central figure, Xuma becomes a stranger in the city. He forgets the customs and laws of his tribal folk and struggles to his own identity as a human being. The people always drink to forget their aches and worries. South Africans are subjugated under the white rule in their own lands. The Union of South Africa, the white government, has instituted unjust laws and taxes on Africans. Hence thousands of farmers and peasants are forced off their lands into the gold mines and city slums. Xuma and many are there who left their tribal lives and came to city in search of jobs. They found city life strange and devoid of peace.

Leah said it was always fighting. Johannes was afraid of being sober. Daddy was never sober. Old Ma Plank sounded as though she was slightly crazy. And the thin one called Lena was one person when she was drunk, and another and very unhappy person when she was sober...Eliza was also strange as soon as you looked at her again. (MB, 32)

Xuma is a simple man came from tribal life on the other hand Eliza is attracted towards the western ways. Xuma falls in love with Eliza at first sight. She is a coloured teacher who is caught by the madness of the city. She is the most complex character in the novel. The attraction of Eliza for the western culture sets a conflict between them. Eliza does not understand what she wants in her life. She is caught between the two worlds. As she tells:

Inside me there is something wrong. And it is because I want the things of white. I want to be like white people and go where they go and do the things they do and I am black. I cannot help it. Inside I am not black and I do not want to be a black person. I want to be like they are. (MB, 89)

It is this blind imitation of white society and their lifestyle makes Eliza and other black characters from the novel rootless and estranged from their own people. Hence their future is tragic and uncertain. They can fit themselves neither in blacks nor in the whites. This is their dilemma of life. The novel focuses on conflict between rural and urban values, working conditions in gold mines, black's economic needs, life in slums, etc. In spite of Leah's warnings and discouraging, Xuma finds work in a gold mine. On the very first day, he

experiences the sadism when he is ordered the impossible task of pushing a sand track on his own. The task is designed purposefully to humiliate Xuma and his strength. Abrahams pictures the conditions in the mines and the work the miners have to do. The mine workers perform their duties in mines in order to survive and secure their families in the dangerous and unhealthy conditions. They are ready to sacrifice their lives in order to ensure the future of their families. They are considered as animals in cage who have never experienced freedom. They work in shifts day and night like animals. It is shown when Nana comments, “Are we not all sheep that talk.” (MB, 117) as the miners never break the rules, they are submissive and slavish. They have ended their identity and freedom in such a big mine dumps from where there is no return.

The title of the novel includes the word ‘boy’ in it which suggests that black workers in gold mines are called ‘boys’ by the white men. Even African individuals manifest the word in their speeches:

There is a new one, Johannes said.

Your gang?

No. For the Red One. Boss boy.

The Red One has not come.

My white man said so.

You mean your boss.

My white man. (MB, 63)

The use of ‘boy’ for Africans and man for whites exposes the notion of black inferiority. It is important to note that Johannes and Xuma are appointed to control the black workers. But still the word ‘boy’ is attached to their titles as “boss boys” to clarify that they are still black human beings and mine workers too for whites. The white people denied the identity of African people. They forget that the African mine workers can feel, and think as human beings. By attaching the title ‘boy’ to African mine workers they try to suggest that African people are not yet grown up; they are not mature enough. Therefore the statement by Pradnya Ghorpade becomes precise that, “Identity as a problem is implicit in the themes of history and sense of exile.” (NG, 14)

The individuality is denied to the native Africans by the white rulers. Daddy is another black character who lives with Leah. He was the man all men wished to become in

his youth, but in old age he becomes a moral lesson for all. He is representative of all black men who come to city in search of better life and money. People come to prove themselves and find freedom and identity to city; but at the end what they discover is abject poverty and squalor. The city kills their manhood. They are turned into mere alcoholics. Daddy dies as he is an incurable alcoholic. Ogunghesan truly comments in this regard:

...After his death, "Daddy" successfully obtained what he had been searching for all his life—his identity; at the head of his grave is put a little cross, with a number under which his name is written: Francis Ndabulla. Each black character in *Mine Boy* need his full name. Abrahams want to emphasize that individuality is denied the blacks in South Africa, that these characters are but representatives of millions of their race. The common factor is the pathos of their lives. (TWPA, 41)

Xuma has left his home and came to city leading him away from his own customs and traditions; gradually he lost his true identity of being a man. He was considered as an animal by the white people. He is disturbed mentally, as he loves Eliza, a blind follower of white culture and customs. He finds himself in a dilemma and takes refuge in his past memories of his homeland. He feels nostalgic on one hand and but even didn't think of leaving the city life of Johannesburg. Xuma's isolation embodies the experience of thousands of black South Africans who migrated from country to city. The novel takes place during a period of large-scale black migration to Johannesburg during and after the Second World War.

African local cultures have been severely damaged, and in some extent disfigured. Colonization disturbs relationships, destroys institutions, and corrupts men. The colonized needs to end the colonization in order to live. He must turn the colonized being within himself to become a man and assert his identity. The colonized must rise above his colonized being. Thus, Xuma, the protagonist of *Mine Boy*, travels to an unknown land in search of food, shelter, clothes and job. He meets strange people in Johannesburg like Leah, and others. He struggles to achieve his freedom as a human being in a society. But the white rulers are determined to crush the ideas of freedom and equality. Simultaneously, he finds that he is not the first person to travel so far and to feel like a stranger; the complete slum of Johannesburg feels so. Abrahams stresses the estranging and dehumanizing experience of blacks in the South African city, Johannesburg. All the other characters from the novel are in search of identity when they feel lost, they take help of liquor. Hence, the characters are pursuing bread and butter at surface level but they are in search of chance to prove themselves in reality.

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