

Social Stratification and the Quest for Freedom in Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom*

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Abstract: The study focuses on how social stratification influences characters and their quest for freedom, using Peter Abrahams' novels to illustrate this impact in the context of South Africa during the Apartheid era. The author highlights the social inequalities that existed before 1994, emphasising the role of literature in reflecting on and questioning these issues. This highlights the urgent need to restore the image and affirm the humanity of marginalised groups. *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom* embody this responsibility beyond South Africa. Written from a marxist perspective, the novels criticise the social stratification rooted in unequal access to the means of production and racial discrimination .

Key words: Social stratification- Freedom –impacts- social inequalities-Humanity- discrimination

Resume : L'étude se concentre sur la manière dont la stratification sociale influence les personnages et leur quête de liberté, en utilisant les roman de Peter Abrahams pour illustrer cet impact dans le contexte de l'Afrique du Sud à l'époque de l'Apartheid. L'auteur met en évidence les inégalités sociales qui existaient avant 1994, soulignant le rôle de la littérature dans la réflexion et la remise en question de ces problemes., Il ressort ainsi l'imperieuse necessiité de restaurer l'image et d'affirmer l'humanité des groupes marginalisés.*Mine Boy* et *Tell Freedom* incarnent cette responsabilité au-delà de l'Afrique du sud. Ecrits dans une perspective marxiste les romans, critiquent la stratification sociale enracinée dans l'accès inégal aux moyens de production et la discrimination raciale.

Key words : Stratification sociale-Liberté- impacts- Inegalités sociales- Humanité- Discrimination

Peter Barry (2009, p. 65) asserts that “while other philosophies seek to understand the world, Marxism seeks to change it.” For this author, marxism appears as a theory that works for change in any society plagued by injustice and inequality. Karl Marx (1988, p. 152) also reinforced the definition of marxism by stating that:

Modern society has only two classes of individuals: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie owns the means of production, the factories, the goods and the equipment necessary for the production of wealth. The proletariat is made up of workers. In capitalist society, the bourgeoisie exploits the workers.

The second theory used in this article is postcolonial criticism, which also aims to bring about change. It is defined by William Bouguereau (1993, p. 9) as “the study of the effects of colonialism on culture and societies, an academic discipline that analyses, explains and responds to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism.” Social stratification can be defined as a form of inequality that leads to the categorisation of individuals into hierarchies based on wealth and status, resulting in the formation of distinct social groups. In South Africa, prior to 1994, social stratification gave rise to significant challenges, including gender inequality, disparities within the educational system, and racial disparities. With regard to freedom, Scott Hughes (2005, p. 20) stated that “freedom begins with a principle of self-control known as personal property. In a free society, each person has legal control over their own body and mind.”

This article aims to demonstrate, through the analysis of *Mine Boy* (1946) and *Tell Freedom* (1981), how social stratification has hindered the quest for freedom among non-whites. The study focuses on the opportunities available to South Africans based on their social position or hierarchy. In this study, two concepts deserve to be defined: freedom and social stratification. As David B. Grusky (2004, p. 34) states:

The notion of social stratification refers to the complex network of social institutions that give the fundamental components of this system include the institutional processes that determine the nature and distribution of desirable goods, and the distributional rules that allocate these goods to different positions in the division of labour. Inequality can be attributed to two distinct matching processes. Firstly, it is clear that social position in society is predetermined, leading to inequitable values.

In *Tell Freedom* and *Mine Boy*, Africans are confined to their place of residence and do not have freedom to act like their white counterparts. As the publisher’s note in *Tell Freedom* points out: “The place was reserved for Europeans, and he met them in various places. This

encounter helped him become an eloquent advocate for the disadvantaged.” The theme “Social Stratification and the Quest for Freedom” draws our attention on the impact of social stratification on the characters and their quest for freedom in Peter Abrahams’ *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom*. The question to be addressed is how the quest for freedom can be realised in a stratified society that breeds inequality. The study is divided into three parts. The first one is entitled “Scrutiny of a Society in Crisis” and the second one is “The Impacts of Social Stratification.”

I/ Scrutiny of a Society in Crisis

The South African society, before the abolition of Apartheid, appears as a stratified country, where numerous social parameters were taken into account to determine social position. Skin colour, race, gender and the environment in which one lived were all important factors in social classification.

I.1. Space as a Representation of Social Division

In this section, Peter Abrahams shows, through his two novels, that the environment or place where one lives or works is a determining factor in one’s position in South African society during the Apartheid period. According to the *Oxford Advanced Dictionary*, “space can be defined as the area, surface, or space available for use” (p. 402). South Africa, as it is presented in Peter Abrahams’ novels, is stratified. Some places are off-limits to non-whites. Although individuals may support or fight against inequality, social stratification is created and sustained by society as a whole. The stories of Xuma and Lee, the main characters in *Tell Freedom* and *Mine Boy*, speak volume. The novel *Mine Boy* explores the life of Xuma, a man born in a rural area who left the north to seek wealth and success as a miner in the big city of Johannesburg. For him, there should be no difference between the north and the south, and society should be egalitarian, with all individuals having the same importance and opportunities in life. Xuma finds himself in this place (the Malay Camp, a suburb for Black people), characterised by filth and violence.

This area is a symbol of poverty and it is specifically reserved for non-White people. Social division has an impact on the lives of a category of people who flee certain places in search of well-being. Leah in (*Mine Boy*) and Aunt Mattie in (*Tell Freedom*), who sells traditional beer, is arrested in their neighbourhood and imprisoned. Needless to say, this activity was not prohibited for white women, who are free to engage in it. Abrahams uses a

product that was forbidden to non-Blacks to highlight the injustice. As Frantz Fanon argues (1986, p. 23), “the process of colonisation involved not only the physical occupation of territory and the imposition of a government on the colonised people, but also mental colonisation.”

1-2. The Policy of Domination through Inequality

The colonisers, symbolised by white people, succeeded in imposing their domination in all spheres of society by putting in place all kinds of obstacles to prevent non-white people from prospering in any way. The question is: how did the colonisers establish their supremacy in South Africa? On this point, Innes.C.L (2007, p.88) states that “the colonisers only complete their work of integrating the indigenous people when the latter loudly and clearly recognise the supremacy of white values”. Indeed, white men consider themselves superior to black men, who deny this and want to prove to them wrong at all costs. In his novels, Peter Abrahams depicts South Africa as a stratified society offering few opportunities to people of colour.

The population was divided along racial lines. In fact, they were confined to poor neighbourhoods, deprived of luxury and essential amenities. In the context of Peter Abrahams’ novels, the South African society is described as a system characterised by injustice. This practice was mainly aimed at favouring whites over people of African origin. The tool in question was used to enslave, control and oppress people of African, Asian and indigenous origin, with the aim of favouring people of Caucasian origin. The power to enforce laws, demand obedience, command, determine or judge was entrusted to white people. The aforementioned parties had the power to increase penalties against those who opposed the repeal of a particular law or supported it. The penalties imposed included financial fines and imprisonment. In the literary works *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom*, non-white characters are the victims of pervasive injustice and legal discrimination, with the law requiring them to carry a pass for all their actions. In this case, he received a pass from Trek. The aforementioned permit authorised the subject to undertake the journey to Johannesburg. Upon arrival in the city, the subject was issued with an identity card and a special six-day pass (*Tell Freedom*, p. 143) .

The division of the South African population led to an unequal distribution of privileges. The use of the pass constitutes an infringement on freedom of movement, which is an inherent right of all individuals, as stipulated in the Declaration of Human Rights. However, Peter

Abrahams offers another interpretation of the pass, arguing that its design was motivated by white people's fear of non-white people.

The Impacts of Social Stratification on Characters

Social stratification in South African society has had numerous impacts on characters, mainly on the proletariat, the working class. These impacts can be observed on the economic, educational, social, and psychological levels. Frantz Fanon (1986, p. 87) stated: "What is South Africa? A cauldron in which thirteen million Blacks are locked up by two and a half million Whites." Thus, although the majority of the population is Black, it is governed and ruled by a minority of Whites. In South Africa, it was proposed to separate the indigenous people from the Europeans, territorially, economically and politically, in order to allow Black people to build their own civilisation under the leadership and authority of White people. Contact between the races was strictly limited. It was therefore understood that territorial reserves such as Malay Camp and Vrededorp would be created for Black people and that most of them would have to live there. This has an economic impact on society as a whole.

The economic impact manifests itself on two levels. In terms of economic impact, there is a lack of jobs for non-whites. They are forced to perform hard labour such as mining. The racial hierarchy that places whites at the top, followed by Indians, mixed-race people and blacks, does not help non-whites achieve good economic living conditions. As a result, they live in incredible poverty. In both novels, unemployment is very high, which interacted with the economic problem, as the system prevented Blacks from achieving economic emancipation. There were restrictions that reduced the ability of Blacks to fully establish themselves in the capitalist economy and thus compete on equal terms with white workers. They work for the upper class, which owns all the means of production and exploits the working class represented by Xuma, Lee and their peers, who are economically dependent on white people. Money is scarce for this community due to the low incomes they earn. This

situation widens the gap between increasingly wealthy white people and increasingly poor non-white people. Leah emphasises the importance of financial issues for the non-white community: 'Money is your best friend. With money, you can buy a policeman. With money, you can buy someone to go to prison for you.' (A. Peter, 194, p. 34)

II-1. Economic Impacts

Social stratification and the inequalities it engendered affects the lives of the characters in the novels. South African society is divided into three social classes: the upper class, the middle class and the working class. Frantz Fanon describes this situation in these terms: 'What is South Africa? A boiler in which thirteen million Blacks are locked up and held by two and a half million Whites' (M. Karl, 1963, p. 87). To paraphrase Karl Marx, all known human societies have been fundamentally divided into two groups: those who own and control the material resources necessary for social existence, and those who own only their ability to work in exchange for a wage. This capitalist system implies the need to make profits by exploiting others. Being a capitalist means both exploiting others and keeping the profits for oneself. In short, Marx argued that capitalism as an economic system cannot survive without exploitation. Although the majority of the population is black, it is governed and ruled by a white minority. In South Africa, the proposal is to separate the indigenous populations from the Europeans territorially, economically and politically, in order to allow the black population to develop its own civilisation under the leadership and authority of the white population.

Contact between the races is strictly limited. It is, therefore, understood that territorial reserves such as Malay Camp and Vrededorp would be created for black people, and that most of them would have to live there. This situation has an economic impact on society as a whole. The economic impact is felt on two levels. Firstly, on black people, and secondly, on the white ruling class. We use the term more narrowly to refer to situations in which such

discriminatory action is directly backed by the legal powers of the state. In the South African society, social stratification implies the legitimisation of ranking people and the unequal distribution of valuable goods, services and prestige. In terms of the economic impact, there is a lack of jobs for non-white people. They are forced to do laborious jobs such as working in mines. The racial hierarchy, which places whites firmly at the top, followed by Indians, coloured people and then blacks, does not help non-whites achieve good economic living conditions. Consequently, they live in extreme poverty. In the two novels, the unemployment rate is extremely high, which exacerbates economic problems, as the system prevents black people from achieving economic empowerment. Each restriction undermined the ability of black people to establish themselves fully in the capitalist economy and, therefore, to compete with white workers on equal terms.

Confined to temporary status, blacks are robbed of any realistic chance of building up the human capital to challenge their white bosses directly. They work for the upper class, which controls all the means of production. This class exploits the working class, represented by Xuma, Lee and their colleagues, who are economically dependent on whites. This community has little money due to the low wages they are paid. This situation widens the gap between the whites, who are getting richer and richer, and the non-whites, who are getting poorer and poorer. It is no exaggeration to say that the majority of South Africans feel an almost physical revulsion against anything that puts a native or a person of colour on their level. Economic exclusion results from, among other things, a fear of competition and a desire to protect the small, poor white population, which makes up half of the European population, and prevent it from sinking any lower. Leah emphasises the importance of financial matters for the non-white community, saying:

When you are asleep and when you are awake, look after yourself. If you don't, you are finished; they will rob you and spit in your face. So, to live here, you must be tough. Money is your best friend. With money, you can buy a

policeman. You can even buy someone to go to jail for you. (A.Peter,1946,p. 24).

Financial needs are particularly relevant for non-whites, as there are restrictions on the activities of black and coloured people. This means that there are many activities that black people cannot afford to do without risking arrest and imprisonment. Lea and Aunt Mattie are examples of this idea. The two women were selling beer, which was illegal for black people but not white people.

II.2. From an educational perspective

Social stratification has not only economic repercussions, but also educational ones on individuals. The educational impacts concern education and schools. Education in the broad sense refers to having attended school and received an education. Education plays a key role in all areas of life; it enables individuals to acquire knowledge. A higher level of education is associated with a better economic situation and the possibility of employment. This knowledge plays a key role in determining outcomes. Education provides the skills necessary to obtain employment, as well as specific qualities associated with a higher socio-economic status. In *Tell Freedom*, the main character, Lee, faces a serious education problem. He is forced to work to pay for his studies. In *Mine Boy*, society is stratified; we have the bourgeoisie, the white people who own the means of production and the mines. They represent the upper class, educated and skilled. Then there is the middle class, represented by Mine Boy supervisors such as Paddy. Even the main character, Xuma, is illiterate and naive; nevertheless, he fought hard and became the leader of his own group of miners. Schools were a privilege. For a privileged class, the whites.

The only reference to school is found in the character of Eliza. As she says about her aunt Leah: “She is my mother’s sister. When my mother died, she took care of me and sent me to school, and now I am a teacher”(A. Peter, 1946, p. 96).

Eliza is the only character who has been to school. She was helped by her aunt, who sells illegal beer. This activity allows Leah to provide for her friends and family. Despite this effort, Eliza has become a symbol of alienation and acculturation. The other Blacks and Coloureds were illiterate. Social stratification breeds poverty and a lack of financial means to attend school. Even schools are stratified. Blacks and Whites do not attend the same schools. Many have never been to school, as free and compulsory education was reserved for Europeans under apartheid. In *Mine Boy*, we see that some characters, such as Johannes and Dladla, abuse alcohol to forget their problems. As a result, South African society is full of drunkards, desperate and rejected by both whites and the black community. Another social impact of social stratification is physical health. There are disparities between different social classes.

III: THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM

. III.1 Trends towards freedom.

Social inequalities and injustice caused by racial discrimination in South African society prompted Black and mixed-race people to fight for their freedom. They therefore decided to embark on the path to freedom by changing their behaviour. This chapter focuses on two aspects: revolutionary consciousness and the emergence of African solidarity.

III-1.1. Revolutionary consciousness

According to Kwame N'krumah (1969, p. 32), “every true revolution is a programme that stems from a new positive and organic general principle”.

The word “revolutionary” comes from the verb “to revolt”, which means to oppose something or someone. In any society, the economic sphere (the production process) is always the most fundamental, the most important and, ultimately, the most significant, because it is only through economic activity that people can produce what they need for their physical survival. Marx was aware that there could be an individual movement called social mobility between

the two main classes. Capitalists could be driven out of business and plunged into poverty. Just as members of the working class could raise capital (funding), start their own successful businesses and become rich. Capitalism, as an economic system of production, distribution and exchange, needs to make profits. It must exploit others to make profits.

In this regard, being a capitalist implies, by definition, both the exploitation of others and the retention of profits for personal gain or free disposal. For Marx, capitalism as an economic system cannot exist or survive without this profit motive and exploitation. This means that a capitalist who does not make profits will not remain a capitalist for long. Marx's analysis of social stratification is that all societies are characterised by the struggle between social classes, on the one hand, those who own and control the means of economic production and those who do not. The relationship between them is that of an employee and an employer. Capitalists need people to work for them in order to generate profits. Workers also need capitalists in order to earn money for their physical survival. This is also a conflictual relationship because, according to Marx, each class has fundamentally different interests. It is in the interest of the capitalist class to retain ownership of the means of production (in short, to try to extract maximum profits from its relationship with the proletariat it exploits). It is also in the interest of the working class to seize ownership of the means of production in order to replace the capitalist class with a dictatorship of the proletariat. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (p. 32) symbolises this through struggle, saying: "Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. It is in struggle that our history, our language and our being reside. The case of the main characters, Xuma and Lee, is revealing. Their first struggle was a demonstration of determination and maturity. It was a kind of positive revolt that they had decided to undertake to overturn the unjust laws that had been established and break all the traps that allowed white people to enslave them.

Xuma and his friends refused to let white people think for them and always depend on them. They wanted to think for themselves and choose what was good for them. They simply wanted freedom, something truly important and valuable for all of South African society. When Xuma first arrived at the Malay camp, he was greeted by Leah, who offered him a job working with her, but he declined the offer and preferred to work in the mines, even though it was considered men's work. By doing so, Xuma wanted to assert his masculinity. With Johannes' help, he eventually found a job in the mines, where he worked so hard that he became the boys' leader (in charge of his own group). In *Tell Freedom*, Lee decided to fight against all prejudice and even continued his studies, ignoring all the obstacles that could prevent him from achieving his goal. He succeeded, and the same white people wanted him to forget his people and work with them. He refused and went abroad to gain more knowledge.

. III.1.2. Humanitarian act of defiance

When a society is marked by widespread inequality and persistent injustice, those who suffer from this situation try to change things. They do everything they can to resist encroachment.

III.2. A challenge to the oppressors

A challenge can be defined as an invitation to someone to participate in a competitive situation or a contest to determine who is the strongest or most competent. It can also be seen as a call to participate in a competition or contest. In other words, it involves questioning established rules or beliefs. Here, the challenge pits two opposing groups against each other: the oppressors and the oppressed. The power of the oppressors lies in their control, domination or exploitation **of** the weak, who do not have enough power to prevent this domination or exploitation. When reading *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom* by Peter Abrahams, certain actions and words of non-white people seem to constitute a challenge to the oppressors. The question is whether these acts can truly be described as acts of defiance

against the so-called masters. Xuma, a villager in search of a better life, arrived in town and was warmly welcomed by Leah and her friends. He was offered accommodation. Leah even offered him a job in her own company. Xuma refused this offer and decided to work in the mines with the white people, where working conditions are very difficult. This decision to work in the mines marks the beginning of a challenge in the face of the difficulties imposed by the white people.

The main character, Xuma, wanted to prove his masculinity, courage and determination. Through his decision, the courage of the entire community is also expressed. In other words, what is considered frightening by white people can be endured by non-white people, thus proving their skills and ability to excel. Eventually, Xuma became the best of the boys in the mines. He was therefore appointed leader of the boys. In *Tell Freedom*, some passages seem to convey an idea of defiance. Lee, the main character, was orphaned at a very young age and had no financial means because his mother was ill, so they lived in extreme poverty. Lee decided to work hard to help his family. He was seven years old at the time and worked many jobs, such as washing cars, selling wood, and selling newspapers. He decided to do whatever it took to succeed. He could have given up, but he wanted to succeed. His decision was a challenge to himself and also to his oppressors. Lee wanted to refute the claim that 'black is black' (A. Peter, 1946, p. 157).

III.2.1. The beginning of an egalitarian society.

. South African society as depicted in Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom* is a society marked by inequalities exacerbated by the apartheid system. However, certain facts and elements in the books are significant and point to an egalitarian society. An egalitarian society promotes social equality, a classless society. It is a society where people should have the same rights or be treated as equals, enjoying equal social status; egalitarian doctrines tend to be based on the idea that all human beings are equal in terms of fundamental value and

moral status. In *Mine Boy*, Xuma's reaction to various attacks or threats is proof and an affirmation of black identity. In fact, Xuma and his friends refused to be treated as mere animals. They decided to face the harsh realities of urban life. Unlike Eliza, who left the city because she saw it as such and realised that there were many things she wanted but could not have. Unable to physically escape its impositions, her only solution is to physically leave her family and friends. Xuma, Paddy, and the others resisted and tried to show white people that black and white people can have the same rights. Xuma's pessimistic view of resistance changed thanks to his relationship with Paddy or 'the Red,' an Irish foreman in the mines. (A. Peter, 181 p. 172)

III.2.2. The influence of education

Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), depicts the concrete reality of African intellectuals faced with the challenges of postcolonial society and the expectations of their people. Fanon believes that the educated classes are not sufficiently prepared to assume their role after independence. They have become selfish. This inability manifests itself at all levels: political, social and cultural. The image of white people, previously valued and considered the most intelligent by those around them, has been overturned. If, in this context, the coloniser presented himself as possessing the highest wisdom, culture and civilisation, with an image of greatness, it was thanks to his education. Education and knowledge brought Lee respect. Education had a positive impact on Lee or Peter Abrahams, who gradually became a new person respected and valued by the society that had previously rejected him. Lee was the symbol of non-whites who had achieved social mobility. His life changed. As the novel says: "With Shakespeare and poetry, a new world was born. New dreams, new desires, a new self-awareness were born. I desire to know myself according to the new standards established by books." (A. Peter, 1981, p. 168)

The knowledge acquired by the character gives him the strength to overcome all the obstacles that slow down the march towards equality among all peoples and to achieve the freedom he so desires. The freedom to go anywhere, to escape the trap of prison. The change was so great that even Maggie, his daughter, said to him: “You are no longer the same”. (A. Peter, 1981, p. 175) and he was forced to admit that his manners and habits had changed, to the point that he could even compare himself to white men. (A. Peter, 1981, p. 129) Peter was not the only educated Black man to break the rule. Other Black people frequented luxurious places without fear. Educated Black men and even some mixed-race people ate there without shame (A. Peter, 181, p. 148). It was truly the beginning of an egalitarian society, for not everything was yet perfect, which is why Lee wanted to know more, even though he acknowledged that he had ‘ceased to be a “greenhorn,” a “thing,” a “new mute” (A. Peter, 1981, p. 168).

Conclusion

The study focuses on how social stratification influences characters and their quest for freedom, using Peter Abrahams’ novel to illustrate this impact in the context of apartheid-era South Africa. The author, who is South African, highlights the social inequalities that existed before 1994, emphasising the role of literature in reflecting on and questioning these issues. Through his stories, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need to restore the image and affirm the humanity of marginalised groups, with Abrahams’ works embodying this responsibility beyond his own country. Abrahams adopts a Marxist perspective in his novels, criticising social stratification rooted in unequal access to the means of production and racial discrimination. The novels depict resistance movements against oppressive systems, envisioning a revolutionary change towards a more egalitarian communist society where all individuals share ownership of the means of production. Abrahams’ writings thus constitute a powerful commentary on social hierarchies and the quest for liberation.

Peter Abrahams' novels, *Mine Boy* and *Tell Freedom*, illustrate Marxist theory by addressing themes of social stratification and oppression in postcolonial South Africa. These stories highlight the impact of colonialism and apartheid, shedding light on the inequalities and struggles faced by Black, mixed-race, and Indian communities. Characters such as Xuma in *Mine Boy* and Peter Abrahams himself in *Tell Freedom* suffer exploitation and discrimination under the oppressive apartheid regime. The stories highlight the harsh realities of racial segregation, economic exploitation, and the denial of basic human rights in a society where non-whites were enslaved and dehumanised. Despite the difficulties described, both novels end on a triumphant note for the protagonists, highlighting the intelligence and resilience of Black people in the face of adversity. The quest for freedom in South Africa during the apartheid era was a very difficult task, especially for non-whites who faced numerous difficulties and obstacles tailored specifically for them. Apartheid, designed to stifle the development of black people, worked for a long time to hinder their social, economic, psychological and even intellectual progress through its policy of separation. However, Peter Abrahams, in his two works, seems to offer a glimmer of hope to the oppressed and neglected people through his characters.

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