

**Peter Abrahams' *Song of the City*: Psychological Rootlessness**

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**Abstract**

Rootlessness can be recognized as an outcome of uprooting and dispossession of his kin and land. It likewise happens in view of the loss of character. When an individual becomes rootless, he begins to have a sentiment of distance in a new or old place. He moves much of the time here and there. He doesn't have solid correspondence with any network or society. It makes him offended from the social practices that he was unable to set up his own personality in that specific culture. Rootlessness is the portrayal of the individuals who are compelled to banish because of the provincial practices. Abrahams portrays the dying tribal and folk traditions in the novel as the youngsters are travelling to cities although the elders are still stick to the traditions. But the elders cannot stop their children going to the cities; instead they sit still and watch their children leaving them. The roots provide us base but the blacks leave their roots which deprives them from the emotional and psychological support.

**Key Words:** Psychological, dispossession, displacement, rootlessness, consumerism, modernization, name crisis, frustration, isolation, nostalgia, etc.

Root can be considered as an origin or a source which is the most basic and integral part of everything in this world. Roots play a significant role to frame the identity of an individual. In this regard, I. Talisenla Imsong in his article, "Tension of 'Root' and 'Rootlessness' in North- East Poetry" describes roots as

The state of having establishing and personal affinity for a particular society, culture or environment. In short, the notion of having 'root' gives one the sense of belonging to a particular place in society. It is our identity through a set of beliefs and practices that sets us apart from all others and make us unique...it is our roots and our

culture, that gives meaning to life and raises mere existence to purpose and living. (245)

Focusing on the rootlessness, which attracts the attention of literary, psychological, philosophical and sociological scholars. Rootlessness can be identified as a consequence of displacement and dispossession of his people and land. It also occurs because of the loss of identity. It also represents the people who voluntarily move from their place to an expatriate. Rootlessness severely impacts on the psychology of people. It forms nostalgia, name crisis, dreaming, frustration, isolation, disillusion, inferiority complex, lack of self-respect, etc.

Peter Abrahams is one of the earliest African novelists to write in English about the problems of black South Africans. Abrahams' realistic, sympathetic portrayal of oppressed groups has made him one of the most notable South African writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Song of the City* (1945) is Peter Abrahams' very first novel which depicts the dilemma of two different characters; one is a poor black tribal youth named Nduli later renamed as Dick and the other is Henrik van der Merve who is a Minister of Native Affairs. Hence, the novel consists of two completely different narratives. Nduli, a black man tries to cope with urban Johannesburg after leaving his rural tribal life. The narrative of Henrik van der Merve is concerned with the political crisis within White society about the Second World War whether South Africa should support Britain and enter the War. The latter narrative consists of English-speaking middle class family of Professor Ashe especially his daughter Naomi and his friends including the black professional Dr. Timbata. Dr. Timbata sympathizes about an Afrikaner Henrik van der Merve and an old coloured maid Maggie.

The novel begins with a night before Nduli's departure to the city. Nduli wants to leave his village for getting a good job in the city. He is advised and guided by the unnamed old man from his tribe. All the tribal villagers have gathered together to farewell him as this was their tribal custom. "They said the yellow gold of the white men was attracting their children and was dragging them away to the cities. " (7) All tribal People come together since the old days even before the white man, that when a man

goes into battle, or is about to die, or leaves home, when any of these things happen. There is also the telling of the tribal history so that the departing one knows the glory he is leaving behind. That is the custom which is dying now for the white man is all-powerful. The villagers watched Nduli as "the solitary figure against the skyline." (8) He reaches the first dorp where he goes straight to the police station to get the pass. The people who are moving between urban and rural areas were required to carry passes authorizing their travel. He has to wait for a long time there; however he is not allowed to sit although there are chairs in the room. At last the policeman looks up and asks him. "What is your name?" the policeman asked.

"Nduli," he said timidly.

"Heh?" (the policeman)

"Nduli, baas."

"What is your other name?" (asked the policeman) (9)

Nduli is given another name, Dick, on his pass by the policeman. He wonders about his new name but finds no answer, so thinks that it must be the law of the white people and the big cities. African people are forced to change their names unwillingly; they are given the names which they do not like. Nduli's changed name is the first stroke on his real identity. Before entering Johannesburg, he is given a passbook which does not even carries his real name and identity. It is there his journey towards feeling of rootlessness begins. The pass law is implemented to segregate the population, manage urbanization, and allocate migrant labor. It is also known as the native's law.

Pass laws severely limited the movements of black African citizens as well as other people like Indians or Chinese when outside their homelands or designated areas. The blacks are given certain identification numbers or changed their names forcefully by the officers. The blacks have to carry and protect their passes in order not to be stolen or lost with their lives. The passes made the whites and the owners to control easily the movements of the blacks. Carrying passes is mandatory in the then South African situations otherwise the person is imprisoned or banned the entry in the cities where white people live. The pass law is one of the main features of apartheid system in South Africa.

White elites consider the black people inferior to them although they are highly educated and well-mannered which also leads to an inferiority complex in blacks. Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo in her article "Detribalization and Racial Conflicts as Major Themes in Peter Abrahams' African Writing" refers: His (White man's) stern and dogmatic Calvinistic religion, with its doctrine of predestination, enabled the white man to regard the black man as inferior. (3) Richardson, a member of Parliament hates Doctor Timbata, a black educated man, friend of Mr. Ashe, for being in the house of Solomon Ashe, a white man and Professor. Richardson discusses the issue of War with Professor Ashe at that time Doctor Timbata surprises the Ashe family with his arrival which is despised by Richardson. He feels as if:

His heart hammering against his ribs. He had never met a native before. Not like this. He felt

awkward and ill at ease. He did not know what to do. How to behave. They were servants, Ricksha boys. Kaffirs. They did the work. Brought in the tea. Polished shoes. Those were natives. But this...? A terrible pain hammered at his head. His throat felt dry. (16)

Richardson did not like that a black man is at white man's table. Even he disdained "the gay talk round the table." Professor Ashe is aware about the consequences of having a black man as a guest in his house. But Ashe family does not believe in segregation which is quite an exception in the apartheid regime in South Africa when war is broken out.

Dick, formerly known as Nduli, a Zulu boy gets work in the Ashe family as a servant. He is very much afraid of Doctor Timbata's presence in his master's house. He is new in the city and all the time nervous and afraid of the city life. As he is new in Johannesburg, he lives under tension and feels nostalgic about his home and his people. Even he is afraid of his footsteps in the late night when he returns to his stable-like shack, where he lives. "the sound of his footsteps rang out loud. They frightened him. He was conscious of the loud noise. He tried to lessen it by putting his feet down lightly." (19-20) At that night, he is caught and beaten by the policeman for wandering late night. The policeman threatens him of imprisonment and breaking his neck if he sees him again late at night on the road. Black people are not allowed to walk on the streets at late night. They must carry the passes. Otherwise they are brutally beaten by the police and imprisoned for a long time.

The place where Dick stayed in Johannesburg is like a stable- like shack. Dick describes it as:

“The place was the size of a small stable. Long. On each side, lengthwise, were fifteen iron bed fittings. Down the centre of the room were three bed fittings. In all, thirty three men slept there. The hire of a bed, not including blankets, was three pence for a night.” (22)

Dick has left his tribal people and his village for getting a good job and earning some money. The white European cultures attract the tribal folk with their alien culture. They fall victim to the world of consumerism and modernization. The youth is affected by the new trends of western culture. Although the earlier generation still clings to the traditions somehow, they have become mute spectators and victims too of the new era. The fear of being homeless in their own lands takes precedence. Dick also feels nostalgic about his home and his tribal life. He feels lonely and thinks:

“of home and smiled dreamily. It would be good to be on the farms now, with no noise and no police and only the open country and cattle. And no streets to go across with motor cars trying to run over you, and there would be girls and you can drink beer without fearing the police. A heavy loneliness settled over him. He ached for something that he could not name.” (44-45)

Rootlessness is also an innermost emotion along with other emotions like love, anger, pain, passion, ambition, desperation, etc. It is not only Dick feels loneliness; Myra, also feels the same in the alien country of extreme nature. She is concerned with the thoughts about the war and the decision her husband will take as a Minister of Native Affairs. She wants South Africa to support and stand with Britain in the war as Britain is her true home. And now she feels too lonely. “She thought: Lonelier than I’ve ever been in all my life. The thought hurt her. She tried to push it out of her mind, but it would not go.” (30) Her brother, aunt and two cousins have been killed by a bomb in Poland. So, it mattered her a lot that South Africa should go to war and her husband should support it. Only homelessness does not lead to the feeling of rootlessness however, loss of meaningful relationships also causes an emotional and psychological void in life. People who have lost someone dear or a meaningful relationship feels isolated. These people are in danger condition of slipping into rootlessness. The untimely death of his dear one’s and her husband’s procrastination to stand with her and take decision about the war leads but to the despair and loneliness of Myra. Misled by his fascist cousin Wilhelm, Henrik declares his opposition to intervention. Thus, the political crisis about intervention harms their personal relationship. Myra tries to build relationship with her maid servant Maggie for the emotional stability but of no use. Patil Sucheta and Ghorpade Pradnya, in their article “Demonstration of Master-Slave Relations in Andre Brink’s *The Rights of Desire*” comment that:

The life of slaves who are used as a means of financial stability, just pivoted around money...No matter whether the relationship was rested on economics or emotions, the relationship would always be chosen by the master. (203)

Myra willingly builds good relationship with her servant Maggie in order to get a person to share herself. This is off course Myra's choice to talk with Maggie in order to pass the time and to be free of the tensions. However, later Myra sails to Britain leaving her husband in disappointment. Abrahams reveals the tragic atmosphere at the demise of liberal tradition of Afrikaners before the growth of fascism.

The novel begins in a Bantu village describing the simple but complex tribal life style which is on the verge of dying. Dick Nduli, a simple village boy leaves his home for the city and is caught between the conflict of the traditional and the western. He comes to the city to find a new identity symbolizes not only his journey from village to city but also from the primitive life to modern life. In this process of finding a new home and identity, Dick feels uprooted, trapped and estranged in the big city. Dick hears the voice of a woman singing the song of the city in the midst of the deep monotonous hum as:

It told of a young woman coming from the farms and finding work in the big city and being lonely. So lonely, that when it was day, the day would not go, and when it was night the night would not go. And during the day the lonely young

woman would work hard to forget her loneliness and during the night she would lay tossing on her bed. And then one night, when she thought she was going mad, when she was so frightened that for a minute all life was hushed, she heard the voice of the city. ...night after night she listened to the voice of the city till she understood the song of the city. And now there is a peace in the night light... for now she's a child of the city and the song is written on her heart. (74)

The odyssey of innocent young people who have come to city from a village to city has been described by Abrahams with the trapped and lost woman in the glimmer and wavering lights of the city. They come lured by the lifestyle of city. First of all, they cannot cope up with the situation which leads to the restlessness and fear in them. But, when the time is spent in city, they become the child of the city forgetting all the customs and traditions belonged to them. They forget their ancestry and feel restless among people also. Although in the end Dick returns to his village, he feels sick at home. Being with his people felt him good; it takes out all his sickness of body but he is still troubled with the question, "why was the sickness still there in his mind?" (177) Dick tells his mother that "it is good to be home and to be away from the white man, but there is no rest here... There is a sickness in my brain that will not leave me. And I long for the big city." (178) Dick is not happy and satisfied about his return to home. Dick's quest for identity, freedom

marks the feeling of rootlessness which is the very beginning of a new consciousness.

Thus, once a person becomes rootless he starts to have a feeling of alienation in an unfamiliar as well as familiar place also. He moves frequently from place to place. He doesn't have strong communication with any community or society like Dick Nduli and Myra. It makes him estranged from the social order, that he couldn't establish his own identity in that particular society. Rootlessness is the representation of the people who are forced to move between different places due to the colonial practices. The psychologically rootless people like black or white, feel the sense of isolation. They cannot communicate their feelings in a straight way which again leads to the commotion and confusion in their lives.

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Dick, Myra, Hednrik, Daisy, etc. all the major characters suffer from the psychological emptiness. Peter Abrahams has depicted the migration of tribal youngsters from the villages to big cities in a realistic manner. He focuses on the dying tribal traditions and customs with the Dick's, a Zulu boy's longing for the big cities as he feels sick at home at his return from Johannesburg. Abrahams portrays the dying tribal and folk traditions in the novel as the youngsters are travelling to cities although the elders are still stick to the traditions. But the elders cannot stop their children going to the cities; instead they sit still and watch their children leaving them. The roots provide us base but the blacks leave their roots which deprives them from the emotional and psychological support.