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Forced Removal of Natives in the Novels of Peter Abrahams

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Abstract

The segregationist legislation forcefully removed blacks from work places, malls, schools, buses, white's restricted residential areas, hotels, clubs, wineries, etc. Peter Abrahams depicts the plight of black people of South Africa who suffer from segregation and oppression in their birth lands. Blacks were forced into small areas of land which became tribal reserves later. Since then, many laws, acts and legal restrictions were forced on the blacks in South Africa. Bantustans or homelands were created for the permanent removal of the blacks from the cities and urban areas. Abrahams has portrayed the living conditions of blacks in slums and settlements outside the cities, which are devoid of any facilities through his novels. In the wake of industrialization, blacks have come to cities as they have been robbed of their ancestral properties in search of work. However, they have been forcefully kept in Bantustans or homelands and compounds or settlements outside the cities away from the white residential areas in order to keep a control over their activities. They are forcefully pushed out from the hotels, bars, cafes, markets, and the white's residential areas. The novelist has depicted the true picture of homelands which is a symbol of rootlessness.

Keywords: Segregation, Legal restrictions, Bantustans or homelands, Rootlessness, Settlements,

South Africans have experienced forced removal on massive scale before and during the apartheid legislation. They are restricted to live within the specified areas and they are not allowed to move out of the designated areas except they have legal permissions. The segregationist legislation forcefully removed blacks from work places, malls, schools, buses, white's restricted residential areas, hotels, clubs, wineries, etc. Not only British settlers but

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the Afrikaner descendants of the Dutch settlers also subjugated the blacks. One of the initial oppressive instances of forced removal is the homeland policy. The homeland policy in South Africa was the outcome of the conflict between whites and native black people for more than three centuries. The blacks and whites fought for the whole control of the South Africa. Whites won the wars with new weapons and blacks were forced into small areas of land which became tribal reserves later. Since then, many laws, acts and legal restrictions were forced on the blacks in South Africa.

Bantustans or homelands were created for the permanent removal of the blacks from the cities and urban areas. Bantustans are areas where the black population is moved in order to prevent them from living in urban areas. The apartheid government has created many laws and policies for the removal of blacks from cities. This mechanism is implemented to separate blacks from the whites. With the removal of blacks from the urban areas, they are denied any kind of protection. It is an attempt to establish white South Africa with the permanent removal of the black population from it. The white people aim to have South Africa completely in their hands. Segregation and oppression are inevitable experiences of South African people throughout their history. Peter Abrahams has outlined forced removal of black people from the white's areas such as residential, and eating places. He depicts how they are forcefully removed from their ancestral homes resulting in the massive destruction of their entire villages. S. C. Saxena in the book entitled *Political Conflicts and Power in Africa* states that:

The entire African population has been relegated to areas totaling roughly 13 per cent of the total land in South Africa. It is in these semi-fertile or barren areas which are the "poorest of the poor" and therefore, economically unavailable units, that the entire African population is supposed to live, while the rest of the territory comprising of the best agricultural and mining areas belong to the whites. The policy of Bantustans is backed up by a policy of systematic and forced removals of all Blacks from white areas to their assigned homelands. The Blacks are being uprooted from areas where they have been living for generations and are being forcibly dumped into one of the 10 homelands created by the racist regime. (5)

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These black families try to find a repose in big cities. However, they are not treated well than what they have experienced in their abandoned villages. In the white restricted areas the blacks are treated as ‘foreigners’—foreigners in their land of birth! So, Abrahams has portrayed the living conditions of blacks in slums and settlements outside the cities, which are devoid of any facilities through his novels. He also shares how black people are teased by the whites. The forced removal has pervaded helpless condition of blacks who struggle to live and are almost caught in a cage like innocent birds. Peter Abrahams shows how the black people are imposed to leave their houses where they lived for generations as in *A Wreath for Udomo*, David Mhendi, a Pluralian activist, tells Lois Barlow, a good hearted English woman, that his wife and other women in his tribe are shot by white people. They are the first victims of forced removal. He tells her:

She (Mhendi’s wife) and the other women were the first victims of ‘Squatter A’...(The white settlers) told the people they had to move to Squatter A. No doubt they will, in time, mark out enough desert strips to run from A to Z. Well, my people didn’t want to move. The women didn’t want to give up the homes and lands that had been theirs as far back as our history goes. So they turned on the whites who came to supervise their removal. My wife led the stoning party. A Native Commissioner and his assistant were killed. (26)

David Mhendi is a very simple tribal man but he is made fun of by his colleagues for leading an unsuccessful march where a few people lost their lives. He is blamed for the lives of men and for that reason he lives in exile in Paris. When he gets the news of the forced removal of his people and killing of more than ten people, he cannot control himself. Lois helps him to lessen his grief. He remembers his wife as quiet and shy woman and feels raged that now she is dead because the white people and their cruel policies. The forced removal of black population is designed to seize the homes and lands of black people as well as to enforce the blacks to barren areas. Many oppressive laws are passed to control the influx of the black Africans to the cities. The cities are main centres of attraction and wealth. Therefore, the apartheid government reduce the massive influx of black population to camps, colonies and settlements outside the border of cities like Malay Camp, Vrededorp, Cape Flats, etc. These places were the black spots; communities overcrowded by the blacks. They

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had become the dumping grounds for the black elders, women, and children. The growth of industrialization and the wake of World War increased the need for African labour. However, government does not allow the blacks to mix with the so called white elites. The government implements Group Areas Act in 1950. It declares certain geographical areas to be occupied by specific racial groups, such as- whites, coloureds and natives (blacks). The Group Areas Act permits the forced removal of any person from a reserved racial area of different race people. The city of Johannesburg is made up of such slum areas described by Peter Abrahams in *Song of the City* as:

On the earth the personality of Johannesburg was expressed in a hum. Incessant. Monotonous. Wrenched from the bowels of the earth; creeping through walls and windows, invading stillness and drowning it in the oppressing monotony. That is the sole of night over Johannesburg. Over its suburbs. Over Vrededorp, slum home of the dark-skinned thousands; over Parktown, home of the wealthy Europeans; over Berea, predominantly Jewish; over Fordsburg, melting-pot of the poor whites. (23)

Johannesburg is known as the city of gold. It has attracted immigrants across the world but failed to supply their daily needs of healthy food and water. The city is divided between white and black residents – Upper Johannesburg and Lower Johannesburg. All the facilities are available for whites in the upper part of the city. It is described by Abrahams through the eyes of a child named Lee in *Tell Freedom* as:

We walked away from Vrededorp, away from the narrow, mean streets, away from the throb of the pushing crowds. We walked steadily till we got to the broad, tree-lined streets of Fordsburg. We stopped the cart on a quiet corner. The world seemed hushed and empty here. Peace hung over it. The black pavements were clean. No black water ran down the gutters of these streets. No half-naked, potbellied children fought and played in these gutters. The houses were of brick. They had curtained windows. And each house had a back and the next. And each had large windows to let in the light of day. A stranger walking here, in the shade of broad pavements, seeing the trim, fenced-off houses and the riot of flowering colour within each front garden, would find it hard to believe a place called Vrededorp was less than half an

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hour's walk away. To me the contrast was so great, I might as well have stepped into another world, on another planet. (117)

In the semi-autobiographical novel, *Tell Freedom*, Lee (Peter), the protagonist is a coloured boy who lives in Vrededorp. He finds a great contrast in the living places of whites and blacks. Vrededorp where he lives, "is made up of twenty four streets, running parallel to each other. They are known by their numbers." (62) Before coming to Vrededorp, Lee used to live with his Aunt Liza. But soon he become the "part of the flowing dark stream." He describes the place as:

I found that only the poorest Coloured people lived below Nineteenth Street. Above Nineteenth Street lived the more respectable—children who had fathers at work and who wore fine clothes all the time. Those with straight hair and fair skins lived higher up. (73)

Under the Group Areas Act, the black people are not allowed to live in Upper part of the city, where white people resided. However, they are allowed to work in such places and shade their sweat for the little money. Lee, when grows up, does not understand such a segregation among the people. He "longs for something without being able to give it a name. The horizons of Vrededorp were inadequate. Where was I to find the new horizons of my need?" (191) He wanders here and there, climbs hill from where he can look at the city from the top of the hill. From his description, Abrahams makes it clear how the group areas policy is strictly implemented which has become a reason behind the nameless longings of black folk as:

I turned and looked at the city. A sea of twinkling, multi-coloured lights leaped to the eye. They threw up the outlines of buildings. They made the wide streets shine. They spelled out advertisements. I could map the city by its lights. That was the heart of it—there, where it was almost as light as day. I could see cars and trams clearly. And the outlines of people moving. White people. To the left, and a little towards me, was Malay Camp, an inky black spot in the sea of light. Couldn't see anything there. Dark folk move in darkness: white folk move in light. Well, Malay Camp wouldn't be a slum if it were as light as the city. Slum is darkness. Dark folk live in darkness. Beyond Malay Camp, a little to the left again, was white Fordsburg. White: lights. Black: darkness. A strip of darkness ran through black Fordsburg

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and became a big black blob. Vrededorp. And to the left of it, that world of light was Mayfair. And the patch of light to the right of it was Upper, white, Vrededorp. (239)

The tribal native population turns to cities in search of job and work for their survival. However, they are not welcomed in the cities but the natives and coloureds are forced to live in the settlements and camps outside the urban areas. Abrahmas through the character of Xuma, the protagonist of *Mine Boy* depicts the wretched condition of natives who come to city. Xuma comes to Malay Camp to get work in gold mines. He describes the Malay Camp as:

A row of streets crossing another row of streets. Mostly narrow streets. Mostly dirty streets. Mostly dark streets. A row of houses crossing another row of houses. And so it went on. Streets crossing streets. Houses crossing houses. Leaning, dark houses that his life and death and love and hate and would not show anything to the passing stranger. Puddles of dirty water on the sandy pavements. Little children playing in these puddles. Group of men gambling on street corners. Group of children walking down the streets carefully studying the gutters and vying with each other to pounce upon dirty edibles, and fighting each other for them. Prostitutes on street corners and pimps calling after them... Shouts and screams and curses. Fighting and thieving and lying... That was Malay Camp. Something nameless and living. A stream of dark life. (77-78)

The conditions of the settlements outside the urban areas are very poor. The houses are divide of electricity, food, good water, etc. The streets are muddy and dirty with puddles and gutters in which the children play and fight for the edibles. The forcibly removed people from their houses live in camps or compounds and fall a prey to crimes like gambling and prostitution. Abrahams describes Hoopvlei Township as a settlement of blacks who are taken away from their ancestral places. Coloured and native people live at the opposite sides in the town. Xuma portrays it in *Mine Boy* as:

Hoopvlei was another of the white man's ventures to get the natives and coloureds out of the towns. The natives did not like the locations, and besides, they were all full, so the white man had started townships in the outlying district of Johannesburg in the hope of killing Vrededorp and Malay Camp. Many other places had been killed thus. (95)

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The novelist has depicted the true picture of homelands which is a symbol of rootlessness. The homelands are filthy with mud and puddles where the black and coloured children play. The dream of black people about the city life has been dispersed. Even they are not allowed to walk on the empty streets in the night therefore they are beaten and threatened to keep them in prison. Moreover, the conditions of eating places in these forced areas are ugly and not healthy at all. They are full of flies and smell of stale meat. The coloured and black people are not allowed to go to hotels, cafes and bars reserved for whites only. They are forcefully driven away from the places. Lee in *Tell Freedom* depicts an eating house for black men named as ‘the Burning Meat’ such as:

The market-boys went there whenever they had the price of a meal. For three pennies one got a piece of meat swilling in a thin, oily soup, and a large hunk of bread. The place itself belonged to the flies. Almost, we, the humans, were there only on sufferance. Flies walked over the resin-covered floor, copulated on the long benches and tables where the men sat, blackened the ceiling, and made the window opaque. They walked over the counter on which cooked meat was displayed. They fought and did their business on the meat. And their impudent drone filled the room and made it necessary for the humans to raise their voices when speaking. I, and all the others, often had to pick out dead and dying bodies that had fallen into our soup. Sometimes, if a person opened his mouth to put in food, a fly would shoot in. Really, the Burning Meat belonged to the flies. But we had nowhere else to eat, so the flies tolerated us. (217)

The eating places of the black people are unhygienic. Xuma in *Mine Boy* also visits such an eating house often described as, “sometimes they cooked flies with the meat but no one had yet died of eating their meat.” (177) The black people do not have clean and hygienic hotels where they can have a good food. Even, they do not afford to have good meal like whites. However, if they managed to get some money, they are banned to enter and dine side by side white men in the hotels reserved for whites only. On the contrary, they are welcome to work in bars and hotels of white men to serve them. Lee does work for white hotel owner from 5 O’ clock on the morning to midnight for a pound a month. He attends the white men’s tables

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and rooms with Jim, another black worker. Lee's poor economic condition forces him to work at the bar until his eyes grow bloodshot. His daily chore is reported as:

With buckets and mops we climbed the iron stairways that led to the forty-odd rooms to be cleaned. Jim went to one door; I went to the next...First, the slops. I cleaned the washbasin with remains of the drinking-water. I took up the bucket into which the white man had emptied his dirty water after washing. Keeping it as far from my body as possible, and without looking at it, I clattered down the stairs. Empty the bucket. Rinse it. Up again. Make the bed. Sweep the room. Dust it. Smelly room. Leave the door and window open. So to the next and the next, and the next. When all the beds were made, all the floors swept, all the slops emptied, there were the doorknobs to polish. Then there were the landings to be swept and scrubbed. Then there were the yard and the front. The fat little manager came on an inspection tour in the late afternoon. He always found something else to be done. Jim and I rarely had our lunch before five in the afternoon. We were usually too tired to do more than nibble at the food. (211-212)

Abrahams, here, affirms that a native is not allowed to sit by the side of white men but he can serve white men. In *Song of the City*, when Ernst, Lee and Roger, all journalists, are dining in a hotel, a native enters the place asking for cigarettes, but he is driven away forcefully. The incident is as described when a native asks a waitress for a cigarette:

Suddenly the proprietor of the café appeared. He walked up to the native.

“What do you want?” (asked the proprietor)

“Cigarettes baas” (replied the native)

The native offered him sixpenny piece.

“No cigarettes. Go on! Go on!” (said the proprietor)

He pushed the native towards the door. The native hurried out. The people turned back to their meals and their conversations. (63)

Under these forceful and brutal policies of government, the natives are not allowed to remain in the white residential areas late in night. If they are caught without any reason, they are sent to jail. They have to carry their passes all the time to show their identity. Dick Nduli, an Nduli tribe boy, in the city from *Song of the City* is frightened to walk down the empty streets

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at night from his work place to his room in compounds. Even the sound of his footsteps frightened him. He is caught policemen and threatened to lock him up in jail if they see him again that night in the city. Abrahams through this type of forced removal of black from urban areas and bullying of whites on blacks denotes that there are many places in South Africa where man lives and “fights for his bread and for his roof and for his children. And all over the world you have more such valleys than you have cities. And most of them, they are quiet like this...for things are bad and bad things may keep quiet and empty and desolate.” (153-154)

Abrahams suggests that the black people have accepted their faith by being quiet like the valleys, except the example of Mhendi's wife's defence against the forceful removal referred in *A Wreath for Udomo*. Other blacks have accepted the laws silently and attempt to leave it as it is without complaints. In the wake of industrialization, blacks have come to cities as they have been robbed of their ancestral properties in search of work. However, they have been forcefully kept in Bantustans or homelands and compounds or settlements outside the cities away from the white residential areas in order to keep a control over their activities. They are forcefully pushed out from the hotels, bars, cafes, markets, and the white's residential areas. Sometimes they are not only threatened but also actually kept in prisons for months for no any crime. A kind of phobia has been developed among the blacks by the white government through the implementation of brutal and forceful laws and policies. Abrahams brings out the contrast of the living conditions of whites and blacks who have been enforced to live in homelands. He enlightens that the black people are allowed to work for whites and serve them any time but they are forcefully kept under control.

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