

**THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY  
SELF, COMMUNITY AND NATION  
AUTOBIOGRAPHIES BY THREE  
SOUTH AFRICANS**

**By**

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## **DECLARATION**

This dissertation, unless specifically indicated to the contrary, is my own original work.

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to:

- my late father, Mlamli “Kuku”
- my Mother, Nokhaya “Manci”
- and last, but not least in love, to my brothers and sisters.

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## INTRODUCTION

“If my kings were blacks, why am I Coloured?” - Peter Abrahams; Tell Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

“In their (Afrikaners) view there was only one thing for the Afrikaner to do, and that was to use franchise and their numerical superiority over the English speaking to capture parliament, and then to entrench white superiority and black subordination” - Alan Paton, Towards the Mountain : An Autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

“I was rejected by the world, the white world rejected me, I was appalled to find the Black middle class as snobbish and as sectionary as the world of the whites” - Bloke Modisane, Blame Me on History.<sup>3</sup>

The exploration of the elusive question of Race, Identity and Nationhood which the above quotations highlight is at the heart of my dissertation. Also of importance is the way in which the question of nation intersects with and in some instances bypasses the issue of identity. The study will look at the problems that concern identity, especially the different ways in which individuals interpret it. I will explore the tensions inherent in a single subject.

Subsequently, the study will focus on the period 1930 to late 1950 (as presented by the three autobiographies in question) and the way in which three South African writers illustrate these issues in their autobiographies.

The study will also explore how individuals negotiate levels of identity as well as communal and possibly national identity. I will select instances that are relevant to our thesis from the life-stories of Peter Abrahams, Alan Paton and Bloke Modisane in their respective autobiographies - Tell Freedom, Towards the Mountain and Blame Me on History. My point of entry will be to look at the divergent ways in which they address these levels of identity.

The study will focus particularly on the period from the 1930's to the late 1950's because the issues that will be dealt with here, namely race, identity and nationhood, were becoming contentious as race group alignment was intensifying amid the rise of black and white nationalisms. I will pursue the question of self identity (i.e. as an individual and as the self within a wider community) with the view to highlighting and understanding the hierarchical composition of the South African community. This will inevitably usher in the race issue.

Race is of particular interest here since the South African community was forcibly and legally categorised into White, Coloured and Black by 1948. The three autobiographies have been chosen precisely for this reason. It is the brief of this study to explore the ways in which race impacted on individuals and groups with dire consequences. In this sense the political dimension is crucial to the study of the politics of race and how the state constructed identities for whole communities. The dissertation will also examine the

difficulties inherent in state-constructed identities, especially for Abrahams and Modisane.

Through the three autobiographies in question, I will explore the possibility of the (non) existence or possible submerged presence of a South African national identity, especially in the 1930's to the 1950's. In other words I will investigate whether the authors show local/national or international loyalty in their texts, and to what extent they identify with a broader South African nation as both individuals and as members of a particular racial group.

The core of the discussion will be an analysis of the manner in which the three authors try to come to terms with the question of 'self', 'community' 'race' and 'nation' as far as their identities are concerned. As will be seen in the discussion of the three autobiographies, the question of identity runs through the notions of community, nation and race. In other words one can identify oneself both as an individual and as a member of a community, a nation or a race group. By identifying oneself with any or all of the notions one does not necessarily lose one's individuality since all three concepts comprise of distinct individuals. The interface between sameness and distinctiveness does not only render the question of identity elusive but also problematic too. In the introduction of Identity: Personal and Socio-Cultural Jacobson-Widding alludes to the elusive nature of identity. She writes:

One of the difficulties in identifying the elephant (identity) may be the fact that the word 'identity' has two basically different meanings. One is sameness, the other distinctiveness. On a superficial level, distinctiveness is rather connected with a sense of commonality between several persons who constituted a group. But the matter is not simple. Firstly, it is obvious that distinctiveness may also apply to a group, as compared to other groups. Secondly, the "founding father" of contemporary theories of personal identity Erik H. Erikson, has identified "personal identity" in terms of continuity, which, in essence, refers to sameness within a person. This "persistent sameness within oneself" is designated by Erikson as self sameness (13).

I cannot agree more with Jacobson-Widding. In our discussion of the concept of identity in the three texts I will attempt to look at how the authors construct their identities as individuals and the manner in which they deal with the existing constructed identity. Furthermore I will look at how they treat themselves as regards racial categorisation and the different communities (whether existent or idealized). The study will also examine the manner in which the authors transcend the racially constructed identities and how they place themselves in broader, all-inclusive identification the world, without losing their individuality. In other words, a conclusion would be reached that the three authors (Paton to a lesser extent) seem to transcend the outward manifestations of constructed identity and embrace international identification, both physically and intellectually.

All three texts are illustrative of the impact of racial categorisation on individuals and groups. Racial categorisation was notoriously hierarchical, steeped in oppressing blacks and Coloureds. English speaking whites were not the primary targets although they

were pushed to the political sidelines by the Afrikaners. With the coming to power of the National Party in 1948 these racial categories became entrenched in the constitution of the country as Modisane points out in Chapter four. The study will explore how the three authors construct their individual and by extension their communities' identity outside the confines of racial categorisation.

The dissertation will be divided into four chapters:

I. Race, community and autobiography. This chapter will explore truth - telling in autobiography as well as the part played by race and community in both black and white autobiographies.

II. "Between the Wire and the Wall" - Peter Abrahams' case. In this chapter I will discuss Abrahams' autobiography and how it shows his struggle with the questions of identity, community and nation.

III. South Africans are my people too - Alan Paton's case. This chapter will follow Paton's reluctant and gradual identification with South Africa.

IV. The home that never was - Bloke Modisane's case. This chapter examines the parallel that exists between Bloke Modisane's life and the destruction of Sophiatown. At the base of the discussion is the manner in which Modisane tried to construct his identity in South Africa and the problems that faced black intellectuals. The chapter also explores the text as both a political and literary autobiography and how Modisane used these two features to negotiate different levels of identity and why he finally left the country.

Thus the dissertation will examine how the three authors negotiate their shifting levels of identity and will explore the manner in which the three authors wrestle with the questions of self, community and nation in their texts.

## CHAPTER I

### RACE. COMMUNITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The South African community is a problematic one as far as racial categorisation is concerned. This categorisation is evident in all walks of life, not least of all in autobiographies, both black and white. As much as one may attempt not to polarise the communities into race binaries, it is interesting to note that these binaries are articulated, consciously or unconsciously, by autobiographers. This is evident in various ways in Bloke Modisane's Blame Me on History and Alan Paton's Towards The Mountain. Among other things, the dissertation will argue that race is inherent in South African autobiographical accounts. As I have stated, the focus will be the 1930's to the late 1950's time frame, a period that is encompassed by the autobiographies in question and which saw the rise of Afrikaner and Black Nationalisms.<sup>4</sup> One of the entry points of the dissertation will be an attempt to explore the commonalities/differences that may exist between black and white autobiographies, in terms of self identification, community and nationhood.

A close scrutiny of South African autobiography reveals that black and white autobiographers operate from distinctly different communities. The dissertation will argue that , on the one hand, the subject position of black and white autobiographers is problematic in that the narrating subject 'I' is both the community and the imagined 'I'.

Furthermore, it will be argued that the community that black and white autobiographers operate from is not an already-formed entity but is constructed by the Afrikaner regimes as well as imagined. On the other hand, it will be argued that white (English) South African autobiography does not seem to be rooted in or stem from an immediate physical community but rather from a remembered or imagined community - notably, the colonial past. In other words, it will be argued that the autobiographers do not necessarily engage in the autobiographical act from a vacuum but from a distant community, though in varying degrees. The problematics that go with this in Paton's case will be investigated. Not least important, the dissertation will comment on the choice of narrative structure and the question of truth in the autobiographies.

## **TRUTH-TELLING IN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

An autobiographical act, like any written text, is dependent on the authority of the author. In other words, it is open to his/her unlimited mediation. The benefit of hindsight cannot be ruled out in the text. The question perhaps is, how much of that impact influences the finished text and to an extent, the reader. In their mediation and selectivity, what "truths" do the authors choose to tell and how do they validate their texts? How does the present influence and reorganise the recovered past, and possibly vice versa? To quote Johan Jacobs in the preface to Current Writing, "... it is, after all, the needs of the present consciousness that the autobiographical act serves: in autobiography the past is mediated by the present in an ongoing search for identity. Our

recognition of such a process of self-discovery, individual as well as communal, is what draws us as South African readers, especially, to the life stories of other South Africans”<sup>5</sup>

The question of truth-telling in autobiography is a crucial one. Without this element autobiographies would lose their import and validity in the eyes of the readers. It is not surprising then to note that the autobiographies dealt with here entrench this element. All three accounts, for instance, are placed within historical-political events which inevitably validate them. The authors seem to consciously select events that would explain their lives. The known events and historical figures seem to influence their lives and inform their choices in their becoming. Perhaps it would be appropriate at this point to make a random selection of extracts that display the manner in which the authors intertwine their life-stories and the known political events they choose to place their stories in. One would notice how intricate these linkages seem to be.

By 1939 Peter Abrahams had decided to leave the country due to a lack of possibilities for Coloureds in South Africa. He writes:

With my eyes on the stars, I took stock and searched for the meaning of life in terms of the life I had known in this land for nearly twenty one years. All my life had been dominated by a sign, often invisible but no less real for that, which said:

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For me personally, life in South Africa had come to an end I had been lucky in some of the whites I had met. Meeting them had made a straight 'all-blacks-are good - all-whites-are-bad' attitude impossible. But I reached a point where the gestures of even my

friends among the whites were suspect, so I had to go or be forever lost. I needed, not friends, not gestures, but my manhood. And the need was desperate.<sup>6</sup>

Modisane, on the implications of the Immorality Act, says:

The recognition that the moment the white woman is involved with a black man she immediately assumes all the problems of the blacks - the discrimination, the insults and humiliation - became a restraint on our relationship; I could not commit Ruth into this world, so we lived in a silent world aware of the tensions of loving against the odds of South Africa. I was suffocating with it, I wanted to tell it to her, to unburden myself to a friend, but like the anger and humiliation, I pushed it down into my system; there was pleasure in the knowledge that I could love, that such a woman is real and breathes, even though she was in another galaxy.<sup>7</sup>

While Paton comments about the ascension of the National Party to power.

On April 3, 1948, I resigned my principalship (at Diepkloof Reformatory) with the firm intention of devoting the rest of my life to writing. But the event of May 26, brought my attention to nothing, and condemned me to a struggle between literature and politics that lasted until now.<sup>8</sup>

From the three accounts it would seem that, in the South African context at least, it is near impossible not to interface one's life-story and the events that happen in the socio-political sphere. Whether the integration is conscious or not is difficult to tell, but it does seem to make the text believable. However, I think the transformative aspect of a text is more valuable than truth. Furthermore, the integration of the life-stories and the political events brings the notion of fiction in autobiography to a critical but interesting stage. Does the integration, for instance, make the text more believable to the reader? Is

what is recovered of the life-stories real or just a work of the imagination? Does the choice of structure make any difference as to the value given to the text?

It would be unrealistic even to suggest that there are cut and dried answers to these questions. The structure of any text, I want to argue, is chosen by the author for a purpose. For instance, some autobiographies would be chronological, meditative and learned like that of Alan Paton, while others would be self-centred and fragmented, like Modisane's. Some would be glamorous in the Hollywood style as Coullie suggests of Godfrey Moloï's autobiography, My Life. In her rather sceptical reading of Moloï's text she says:

Godfrey Moloï's autobiography, My Life: Volume I, for example, reads like a '30s' or '40s' Hollywood gangster movie script, and while we might applaud the hero's exploits as framed by a sympathetic and encouraging narrator, on deeper reflection we cannot but wonder whether this amusing and glamorous framing device is not somewhat less marginal than a term such as 'frame' would imply. Has the event been selected and shaped according to the movie style, rather than the other way round? Has the frame not only influenced our perception of the events (as it undoubtedly does: Godfrey is the hero even if Coullie's analysis insists that his behaviour is at times brutal) but also influenced, structured, the entire narrative? Is the narrative more fictive, more the result of artistic form-imposition, than factual? Is Godfrey Moloï, the living man, quite the hero that the protagonist of My Life: Volume I is?<sup>9</sup>

What perhaps is being maintained here is that the narrative structure of the text in itself does not or should not hamper the self exposition the author attempts to make. Nonetheless the narrative structure will of necessity determine where the author positions himself or herself in the text. It is also true that the structure he or she chooses

will well be suited for his or her own project. In turn what he/she selects to tell would fit in well with the narrative structure he/she chooses. An author, for instance, may decide to use the first, second or third person as a narrating voice. By collapsing the self, the protagonist, the community and the world around the author does favour to both the individual and the community, no matter what structure is employed. It is such sentiments maybe that make Gitahi Gititi say that, “autobiography in South Africa has emerged as a non-fiction form allowing space for the expression of individual and collective suffering”<sup>10</sup>. It follows that truth-telling and narrative structure go hand in hand in autobiography although that truth may be challengeable. More than anything else the fact that truth and narrative structure are present in autobiographies evidence the authors’ attempt to make their accounts, not only believable, but transformative as well. In a sense they imagine that natural events help shape their lives, and that of the reader.

However, the question of truth-telling in autobiography is contested and even disputed by some critics. These critics are of the opinion that, despite the naming and dating, autobiographical texts are not necessarily truthful. They argue that one cannot divorce autobiography from the realm of fiction since even the narrating subject in the text is fictitious. Eakin, for instance, says:

Autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and further, that the self as the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure<sup>11</sup>

Maybe Eakin's assertion is best illustrated by Modisane and his adoption of different names, attitudes and actions. The adoption of different masks in Modisane, I want to argue, should be understood on two levels. On one level he experiments with identity (and this will be dealt with in chapter 4). On another level he adopts these fictive selves in order to survive in the oppressive environment he finds himself in. It should be appreciated that these different masks carried social imperatives with them, which the narrator lived. For instance, Modisane was 'Blokie' to his wife (47); 'son' to his mother-in-law; 'Willie' to his girlfriend (56); 'Kaffir' to the policeman (58); 'Bloke' to his friends; 'William' in the workplace (84); and 'I' as the narrating voice. In fact, the idea of the mask in itself is fictive and is only appropriate in specific social moments.

As Rosenblatt contends (with African-American autobiography in mind):

The sense of circus or madhouse that controls much black autobiography inevitably controls the decisions of the main characters themselves. Recognising an elusive and unpredictable situation, they adapt to it for survival, becoming masters of both physical and psychological disguise, in part to avoid their hunters .... In ... black autobiography the final discarding of masks is a character's primary goal because such an act is a demonstration of selfhood and freedom.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, Eakin believes that there is a fine line between art and memory. He believes that in the act of writing the autobiography, the past is modified and redesigned to fit the present consciousness. Eakin says that autobiography "expresses the play of

the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present-consciousness".<sup>13</sup>

One can add that 'present consciousness' is also problematic in that, like the past, it is not fixed. So one deals with the past and the present that never converge - hence that never unify. Furthermore, what comes to mind is how much mediation and violation of that past occurs in the lapsed time between the lived past and the autobiographical act.

For instance, it is unthinkable that Peter Abrahams' recollection of past experiences had been fossilised in an unmediated state in the unconscious mind for 13 years: He was "Commissioned by the London Observer to visit South Africa and publish a series of articles reflecting his impressions of the racial situation."<sup>14</sup> He returned to South Africa to write for the "Observer" newspaper and wrote the autobiography as a result. One wonders what influences, both conscious and unconscious, informed the autobiography he produced. This tension-filled relationship between memory and art makes Eakin ask:

... Are we then prepared to accept fiction as an inevitable and even essential ingredient of autobiography, generated as much by the unconscious workings of the imagination? Yet so far as we do accept the presence of fiction in autobiography, are we blurring by just so much the fundamental working distinction between autobiography and other forms of writing?<sup>15</sup>

## **RACE AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

As I have argued earlier, binaries of race cannot be extricated from autobiographical accounts in South Africa in the period under discussion, namely 1930 to the late 1950's.

Nevertheless, black and white autobiographers approach this contentious issue from different angles. The different approaches exist because the authors operate from a legally structured socio-political space which by its nature is divisive (i.e. apartheid). As Dubow points out, the racial policies of the apartheid regime began as early as the 1930's when the 'poor white' problem came to the fore. From then on there was a concerted and conscious effort to segregate blacks and whites leading to the socio-political repressive policies that were later effected when the National Party came to power in 1948. These policies were 'scientifically' investigated and sanctioned by the church and political leaders. According to Dubow:

A host of ... resolutions ... were passed recommending specific economic, social and political policies with regard to Africans, Coloureds and Indians ... (The Volkskongres) confidently asserted that its policy was based upon the holy scripture, which taught that God willed the pluriformity rather than uniformity of nations. Reinforced by age-long experience in which the Afrikaner had, through close contact with the non-white races, come to understand them intimately; and founded upon sound scientific knowledge. These three claims, namely, that racial separation was based on scriptural injunction, the historical experience of Afrikanerdom, and the findings of science, lie at the heart of apartheid ideology.<sup>16</sup>

It is within this South African socio-political boiling pot that each of the autobiographers in question negotiate the meaning of their being - their self-identity. It is also within this politically charged space that the authors position themselves, whether they be black or white. Maybe it would be correct to suggest that the situation that the authors found themselves in further manifests their multiple selves. In fact, while engaged in reading the text, the reader encounters an ever changing subject and not a fixed individual.

The ever-changing nature of the subject (notably in Modisane) in the text on the other hand, makes some demands on the reader.<sup>17</sup> Soon the reader realises that the 'I' of the text is identical to neither the author of the text nor the biographical individual who is its subject.<sup>18</sup> The reader then should be aware of the disjunctive selves that he/she negotiates with in the text and not attempt to unite them into a single self - the author. In fact, by the time the reader makes a conscious decision to read the text, the living author has undergone fundamental shifts and changes. It is appropriate then to talk about the implied author, the author, the interlocutor, the 'I' who narrates, the reader and the implied reader. This complexity of subject positions brings up another important aspect in our study, the influences, attitudes and perceptions that the (implied) reader brings with him/her to the negotiation. These attributes, which he/she cannot part with, contribute to the manner in which he/she will read the text and subsequently how they contribute to the shifting of the layers of identity of the subject. No doubt one of the major attributes the subjects share is race-consciousness. According to Coullie:

The author can no longer be conceived of as the autonomous creator of his own identity or text, but as someone who is interpellated into available subject position.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, what takes place within the text is not the only part of the autobiographical act that needs to be taken into account. Instead, language and culture and other determinants like history and the reader himself/herself play a pivotal role in the author's self-definition both inside and outside text. According to Eakin, "self-invention refers not only to the creation of self in autobiography but also to the idea that the self or selves they

seek to reconstruct in art are not given out but made in the course of human development.”<sup>20</sup>

All the features mentioned play a crucial role in the creation and reading of autobiography. Nonetheless, race occupies the centre-stage in the South African context. As much as one cannot solely interpret and attempt to understand an autobiographical act on the basis of race only, equally, race and racism cannot be ignored. So, even if race is omitted (consciously or unconsciously) in the text, it nonetheless comes to the fore, ironically by its omission. Arguably, Alan Paton’s autobiography, Towards The Mountain, is a case in point, as the following extract shows:

On Tuesday the seventeenth of June my father’s body was found ‘lying half immersed’ in a pool of a stream in the Town Bush Valley. It was stripped of all possessions and was identified by Atholl and myself, a task that I have never forgotten. The police searched the whole terrain, including all African huts.<sup>21</sup>

What one establishes here is the fact that the body had been ‘stripped of all possessions’ which points to foul play, hence the thorough search. What is viewed as racism though is Paton’s loaded qualification - “including all African huts.” Whether Paton is stating a fact or not is not an issue here. What is an issue is what the reader is meant to make of the qualification. Is one, for instance, not meant to understand this phrase in the context of race relations of the time? As it can be seen then, the question of race is intricate and intrinsic in South African autobiography.

The obsession with race in South African autobiography is also evident in Peter Abrahams' Tell Freedom. In his loneliness and sense of dependence in Vrededorp, Abrahams would climb a green hill at night to escape reality and to reflect on his life. Unfailingly, his attention would be drawn by the lights of the 'White City' (white because it was electrified and was a 'white' area). The nightscape that so fascinated him though, highlighted the disparity that existed between 'black spots' and white residential areas - a racial construction. From the two cases cited here, it becomes clear that in South Africa one cannot collapse autobiography into a single entity - South African autobiography. The broad racial divides that polarise the community into black and white in the time span under discussion cannot be overlooked. This assertion means that there is no convergence between the autobiographies of the black and white authors concerned except on the race issue, the negotiation of levels of identity and the convergence over how they relate to a possible national identity.

## **COMMUNITY AND BLACK AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Although it is generally agreed that an autobiography is someone's life-story, this claim becomes problematic when one scrutinises black autobiography. Black autobiography is preoccupied not only with an individual's life-story but also with the community's life and experiences.<sup>22</sup> In black autobiography one can detect a sense of community, as is the case in Abrahams' and Modisane's works. Although they both use the singular 'I', this narrating subject should be understood to be representative of the whole

community since they are tied together by oppression. This interface is despite the fact that Modisane appears to be more preoccupied with himself than with the community he comes from at times. In fact, Modisane is mostly representative of young men and women in his community who find it impossible to lead normal lives under the conditions that prevailed. It would be beside the point to suggest that the prevalent situation targeted him alone. Rosenblatt puts it well when he says that, “there is social protest, of course (in black autobiography); but it does not rely on an abstract ‘victim’ for its medium. When the central character is black, the abuses are authentic. No black (South African) author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make his point”.<sup>23</sup>

The same can be said of Peter Abrahams’ Tell Freedom. For instance, when Peter Abrahams went home after the end of the college term he took stock of his home town from a tram, saying:

The tram rattled past Fordsburg, down towards the Vrededorp subway. It emerged on the other side. There was the stall on which I had led my gang on that first thieving raid. I could have been any one of those scruffy boys scrapping down there on the pavement. Nothing had changed there.<sup>24</sup>

What can be noticed from this extract is that Peter Abrahams sees himself in the ‘scruffy boys’. Although he recognised that he is different from them, that difference makes him identify with them. At the same time his observation that “nothing had changed here” was his way of acknowledging that he had changed. He, in a way, was making a social comment about the lack of opportunities for Coloured people in his home area. By the same token, though, by identifying himself with the ‘scruffy boys’ he managed to narrow or even eliminate the gap between himself and his community and yet was aware of the

distance he had travelled since - and his separation from that world. Olney alludes to this interface of the multiple selves in black autobiography generally when he points out that:

Black studies' courses and programs have been organised around autobiographies - in part, no doubt, because ... black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than standard histories and because black writers entered into the house of literature through autobiography.<sup>25</sup>

Olney's assertion again foregrounds the tension that exists between fiction (art) and truth in autobiography (memory). It would seem then, that the community is an integral part of black autobiography.

## **COMMUNITY AND WHITE AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

However, what has been said above about black autobiography, as represented by Abrahams and Modisane, can hardly be said about white autobiography as represented by Alan Paton. To repeat an earlier claim, in his liberal autobiography, Towards The Mountain Paton does not seem to attach himself to a particular physical community. This lack of physical community in itself is not an inadequacy. Nonetheless it highlights the differences between black and white autobiographies. As much as it is appreciated that autobiography is selective, Paton's silence earlier on in the text about the South African community he may have emerged from, leaves one with a temptation to claim that his autobiography shows his gradual but reluctant identification with the South African community, especially the black community.

Ironically the absence of physical community in the text does not mean that Paton chooses not to attach himself to any community. In fact he was in constant search for a community to integrate himself into or, to use Gordimer's phrase, 'to accommodate' himself in<sup>26</sup>. His sympathy for the Afrikaners for instance, was both out of curiosity and an attempt to achieve the elusive goal of belonging to a community. This concerted effort to be accepted into the Afrikaner community was also evidenced by his eagerness to learn to speak Afrikaans. His Afrikanerisation reached the highest point in 1938 when he wore a beard and attended an exclusive centenary celebration of the Great Trek which, notably, was convened to mobilize Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>27</sup> Although Paton's infatuation came to an abrupt end at this celebration, due to the Afrikaners growing separatism, the fact of his infinite search for a sense of community was established.

After his disillusionment at the celebration he turned to his mother country, Britain. He recalls that at his home the love of Scotland was inculcated into them as children, although this attachment remained superfluous. In a sense Scotland was just a distant idealised community to him. Talking about this inculcation he says, "my father and Aunt Elizabeth Paton, instilled in us children a deep love of Scotland" (61). On the same page he says: "our love for England was also deep, but not so much a tie of blood." Judging from this seeming contradiction then, one can justifiably suggest that his love or identification with the tangible South Africa was almost non-existent or he had to find a way of fixing it. On the next page, for instance, he writes "when I first saw London

in 1924, at the age of 21, I knew more about it than I knew Cape Town or Johannesburg' (62). Earlier on Paton's fluctuating national allegiance is aptly illustrated by his confessional outburst that:

This feeling, of what I can only call British nationalism, declined in strength as one became more and more of a South African, but burst into new life on such occasions as the Declaration of War in 1939, and the speeches of Churchill, and the visit of the Royal Family to South Africa in 1947. It was the coming into being of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 ... that heralded the end of this deep attachment to another country, an attachment which irritated and even incensed the Afrikaner nationalist.<sup>28</sup>

From the above account it is evident then that, unlike Abrahams and Modisane, Paton did not (from the beginning of his life at least) operate from a physical South African community but from an idealized one. The least that can be said about his 'community' is that it is imaginary or distant. Actually, it is his immediate family that he was pre-occupied with in South Africa in his early life. The Afrikaner community disappointed him and the black community was non-existent to him at first. In fact, to him, black people only needed taking care of rather than belonging to. It was his work at Diepkloof which brought him closer to the black people. Subsequently the formation of the Liberal Party in 1953 marked his active and open participation in South African politics.

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to explore the constraints of race and community in the South African society. It has been argued using the three texts under consideration as paradigms, that race is central to autobiography and that on the one

hand in black autobiography, the individual and the community are closely related. On the other hand in white autobiography, the community is mainly imagined. The claims made in this chapter will be explored in the following three chapters.

## CHAPTER II

### BETWEEN THE WIRE AND THE WALL

#### PETER ABRAHAMS' CASE

##### ABRAHAMS' SELF-AWARENESS

The identity of the Coloured people in South Africa has been a topical one for decades, and by the 1930's to the 1950's their identity crisis had reached a critical point. This is the case because, like other race groups in South Africa, their racial or ethnic identity was constructed by the Afrikaner regimes. Over the years it has become accepted that blacks and whites (especially Afrikaners) are the dominant race groups with the Coloureds squeezed between them. The irony is that the majority of Coloureds spoke Afrikaans like Afrikaners while at the same time they were oppressed like blacks. On top of this dichotomy was the fact that they (or most of them) were neither white enough (e.g. Abrahams) to pass as whites, nor could they be classified as blacks. In fact the label 'Coloured' was designed to make the Coloureds feel inferior, inadequate and therefore dependent on the Afrikaners. What made the labelling of different race groups more severe in the country was the fact that it was sanctioned by the most powerful and influential institutions in South Africa - the government and the church.<sup>29</sup> Commenting on this labelling, Van Der Ross concludes, "thus we have been variously described as unintelligent, irresponsible, slovenly and thriftless. We are accused of being heavy on

drink, light on work and careless of firm family ties. The list of negative characteristics attributed to us is long, so long and impressive that the authority of the Bible is often invoked to account for our shortcomings.”<sup>30</sup> Van Der Ross goes on and lists a plethora of myths about Coloureds which he carefully examines and refutes. Because of the lack of space I will sample only three myths which explicitly mention identity:

1. It is right and good that Coloured people should have their own identity.
2. Unless this identity is accepted, protected and developed, Coloured people will not be fully developed or gain their rightful place in South Africa.
3. The alternative to the theory of Coloured is integration with either whites or blacks, and both these alternatives are unacceptable.<sup>31</sup>

Peter Abrahams was born within such myths on March 19, 1919 at Vrededorp. At a very young age he removed himself from the real world of Vrededorp and saw himself in a raindrop-his world.<sup>32</sup> His daydreaming, as it will be seen below, persists throughout the book. By daydreaming, I want to argue, Abrahams tried to know and understand himself, ‘his people; and South Africa as a whole. In the first ten pages for instance, he comes to understand what he was called and also established who his mother, father, brother and sisters were, and concluded that, “these were my people.”<sup>33</sup> What became clear though was that as young as he was he did not enjoy the real world, even the very room he was in with his parents was ‘damp’ and as such, unhealthy. In these early pages Abrahams sets the atmosphere and direction of the text. The fact that he was looking

longingly outside the window, into the dream world in the raindrop, gives one an impression that he was trapped and wanted to break free.

After he was yanked back to reality, Abrahams noticed his parents as if for the first time. In the text he goes into length in looking at the origin of his parents and by extension the origin of the Coloured people in South Africa. In a rather pointed manner he says that, “Coloured is a South African word for the half-caste community that was a by-product of the early contact between black and white.” He goes on to say that, “the results were neither black nor white.”<sup>34</sup> So he notes that his mother was a Cape Coloured while his father was Ethiopian.<sup>35</sup> The confusing and complex origin of his parents and the unappealing ‘cold, damp room’ sets the tone of the book and gives the reader a glimpse of the young boy’s dilemma. Nevertheless, while young Abrahams mentioned the people around him and the damp room, he was mostly preoccupied by himself. As Wade asserts, the first half of the book is dominated by the pole of similarities. The emphasis is on the identity of the objective experience between the boy who is the focus of attention, and the remaining members of his group.<sup>36</sup> I cannot agree more with Wade’s assertion because it seems as though in the first half of the book Abrahams seeks for his individuality while in the second he sought for a community to fit in. In a sense the book is one long journey from the cold damp room to the raindrop and ultimately to the world as he strove for the ‘self’ and a community to belong to.

While Abrahams was very young, his father died. The death of his father, I want to argue was the beginning of his lifelong journey to self-awareness. So when his Ethiopian father died, he had to leave Vrededorp, his home. for Elsburg which was strange to him.<sup>37</sup> While this first train journey was exciting it was also his first physical removal from his familiar surrounding. It was while he was in Elsburg that the complexity of his colouredness hit him. While there, he met and made friends with a Zulu boy, Joseph. Interestingly Joseph introduced himself by saying, “Joseph! Zulu!”, saying this with gusto and pride. The manner in which Joseph introduced himself was not only shocking but also confusing and shocking to Abrahams. Here was a boy his age who knew who and what he was. It would seem that this show of pride and self-knowledge by Joseph was a wake-up call for young Abrahams. In an attempt not to be outdone by Joseph he too pushed out his chest, smacked it, but only managed to say, “Lee...”. He sadly puts it thus: “But I didn’t know what I was apart from that.”<sup>38</sup> From this little episode it dawned on him that he could not identify himself. To find out more about his true identity he asked his aunt Elsa about himself and his colouredness but he was not satisfied by her responses.<sup>39</sup> Although he accepted that he was coloured it seemed as though he wanted to identify more with the Zulus. For instance during his stay in Elsburg he did not make any coloured friends, instead he was fascinated by Joseph and the Zulu woman he met at Joseph’s home.<sup>40</sup> In fact he became more a Zulu than a Coloured, although inside he knew he was not entirely Zulu. For example, he did not like it when Coloured children called Joseph kaffir. He also saw his brother Harry

and sister Maggie, as strangers when they came to fetch him from Elsburg, “even though they were Coloured like him.”

There is no doubt that what Abrahams experienced at this stage was the dilemma that the Coloureds were experiencing; namely trying to decide whether to associate themselves with blacks or whites (i.e. the Afrikaners). Nevertheless, his understanding of his situation was still unconscious and childish. In discussing the coloured crisis after 1948, Philips puts it well when he points out that, “The Coloureds constitute a strange problem for the apartheid policy since they are partly or even mainly white themselves they have no ancestral “homelands” to return to.” He continues to say that, “because many Coloureds still identify with whites, they present another problem for those who attempt to organise all “non-white” in the struggle against apartheid.”<sup>41</sup> Abrahams’ particular identity crisis was complicated by the proximity of Elsburg to a Zulu village. While he was there, he learned that his friend Joseph, was both circumcised and regarded as a man of the house.<sup>42</sup> Even then, Joseph did not look down on him. He played with him and taught him Zulu ways of living. In a sense, Abrahams felt accepted in the village, but still the sense that he did not belong with them persisted. One of the most important things that distinguished him from Joseph (and the Zulus in general) was the fact that the Zulus had chiefs while the Coloureds did not have any. To him kings represented a community, and a community gave a sense of belonging. After enquiring about his own kings from his mother, he was proud when he was told that he had

Abyssinian kings who were black.<sup>43</sup> The knowledge that he had about black Abyssinian kings transported him to his daydreaming. He records:

I lay on the soft grass. The sun shone from a clear sky that was far away. The noise of Vrededorp drifted up as an echo. I plucked a tall blade of grass and chewed it. And I was far, far away, in the merry land of Abyssinia. There, black kings strode the earth in all their majesty. And I was a great warrior of Abyssinia, serving my kings. I was the strongest, the bravest, the most daring, of all the warriors in that glorious land called Abyssinia.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, Abrahams' pride about his 'blackness' and the fact that he had kings was short lived. He had to leave Elsburg which had offered him a new self-realisation. Back in Vrededorp, he was reclaimed by the Coloured community he had forgotten. He soon joined a gang, of which he became a leader. It was in Vrededorp that he came to know people who were seen as symbols of the Coloured people. His own Oupa Kuiters was more than just an old man. He was a symbol of something important to all the citizens of Vrededorp.<sup>45</sup> Another figure, whose description by Abrahams reminds one of Saartjie Baartman who was shipped to Europe for research purposes. This figure in Abrahams' text:

...Was a bumpy pale yellow little woman. She was not taller than I (Abrahams) was, and her behind stuck out like a huge alien bump, separate from her body though attached to it. Her cheek bones were two bumps that stood out largest in face. She had hardly any nose, just two holes on an almost flat surface. She was called hotnot Annie and claimed to be pure Hottentot. Whenever she got excited, she spoke the clicking Hottentot language. Her hair, when she took off her kerchief was a series of tightly curled little balls, each separated from the other by a slight spacing of yellow flesh.<sup>46</sup>

Even though he was in the midst of the Coloured community in Vrededorp, Abrahams' thoughts were still in Elsburg where his 'true self' seemed important. When asked by his mother to tell her about Elsburg, for instance, he did not talk about the Coloured people, even about Aunt Elsa, but about Joseph and the little Zulu mother. At first, he was not at ease among the other children in Vrededorp since he was afraid to be called kaffir. For such labelling, he was not afraid for himself only but for Joseph and the 'little mother' too, although he was separated from them.<sup>47</sup> As much as Abrahams liked Joseph, the reality of his colouredness in Vrededorp (and elsewhere) would not allow him to live like a Zulu. This does not mean that he wanted to emulate him per se, rather to say that he yearned to belong to a community that would recognise him as an individual, or as a man like Joseph. Ironically, the harsh life in Vrededorp forced young boys to work since their fathers were either dead or in jail. But this adult occupation did not translate to manhood in the Zulu sense. The only level Abrahams could rise to was to become a gang leader. Even his mother accepted this elevation and told him that his (Abrahams') father had dreams to become a gang leader.<sup>48</sup> So it would seem as though Abrahams had fulfilled his father's death-wish by becoming a gang leader, a rather shallow identification with his father, and a far cry from being a brave servant of Abyssinian kings. Abrahams' identity-shift continued until he escaped from South Africa. At the base of this shift was the repressive regime. It would seem that at Elsburg his identity was offered a fairly free space to develop, but in Vrededorp he had to fall into the mould constructed by the regime. As Baubar puts it, the very labels, like

the 'coloureds' or 'gangs', which are given to people, have the force of law and have very specific consequences for individuals.<sup>49</sup>

To claim that Abrahams became part and parcel of Vrededorp is accurate, but he was also different from others. As the time went, he began to drift away from everybody, including his gang and family. This drift, I want to argue, was parallel to his internal development. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Abrahams lived in two worlds as he grew, the real and dream worlds. It was in this dream world that his slow self-realisation awakened. Most of these dreams happened when he was solitary, and it is this solitude which gives the reader the impression that he wanted to leave the country. To illustrate this, on one occasion he went to the valley together with his mother and sister. While there he left them and climbed to a hill-top and a:

Strong sense of grandeur overwhelmed me. I longed suddenly for Nondi to be on this hill with me... I opened my arms wide and it was as if I embraced all the land I looked upon, and all the people who lived in the land. An irresistible shout swelled up in me and I let it out with all the power of my lungs. 'Y-a-h-o-o!'

My mother and Maggie drew near.

"What is the matter with you?" my mother called.

I looked at them and they seemed strangers:

Suddenly... I turned my back on them and ran to a solitary tree, far to the left.<sup>50</sup>

That Tell Freedom is highly selective cannot be denied. It would seem that Abrahams selected those incidents that showed how he gradually came to be aware of himself. In his wakening self-awareness, it seems, he began to strive for self-development. The

selection of these events together with the wording, I want to argue, is that of the older Abrahams. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the events did not happen in the manner recorded. Although Abrahams recorded these events years after he left the country, I want to believe that what he recorded had been lodged in his mind because of its severity. Notwithstanding the seeming accuracy of the events though, the benefit of hindsight cannot be ruled out as far as details are concerned. In this regard I would like to echo Ogunbesan who eloquently points out:

However, even if we can be sure that the incidents happened exactly as Abrahams has recorded them - it requires an extraordinary feat of memory to recall details of conversations at such a distance of time - we soon become suspicious that this is the adult Abrahams looking back on the incidents and recognising with hindsight what important landmarks they were in his life. Too often, casual words would later assume the importance which they could not have had at the time. Tell Freedom is overtly selective, an incident is selected because it has contributed to the making of the arts, and is recorded in such a fashion as to invest the most mundane words and occasions with the most far-reaching import.<sup>51</sup>

An occasion of the kind Ogunbesan writes about, happened when Abrahams was eleven years old and working for a tin smith. While he was at work he was asked by a Jewish girl who worked at the same place why he did not go to school. His responses showed his naivete and youth but after the girl read to him from Lamb's Tale from Shakespeare, he was changed forever. What surprises the reader is not Abrahams' instant identification with Othello but his instant grasp of Shakespeare, together with the speed at which he climbed standards when he started schooling. His identification with Othello is not surprising because Abrahams was in constant search for a black man who

could rise above all others, even the white people. After the story was read he confessed that:

The story of Othello jumped at me and invaded my heart as the young woman read. I was transported to the land where the brave Moor lived and loved and destroyed his love.<sup>52</sup>

His schooling is a story of dedication and hard work. The drive behind his dedication was the search for a platform on which he could write stories like that of Othello. So, the inspiration he got from Othello triggered a strong need in him to become a writer. As part of his growing self-awareness he realised that at school he was good at literature as compared to arithmetic. It would seem that as time went on Abrahams created his own world of books and discarded the real world around him, Vrededorp or even Johannesburg. The freedom he enjoyed when he was reading was like that of the eagle he saw when he went to see his brother Harry, at Diepkloof Reformatory.

While he was at Diepkloof Reformatory he observed:

A lone eagle circled overhead. Once, it spread its great wings and swooped down low. No doubt to see what manner of men these striped beings were. Then with movement of great power and grace it climbed. It made an almost straight line up. I watched it grow smaller, hazy and then merge into the blue sky that had suddenly grown infinitely far removed from the world of men. I longed, suddenly, to be like that eagle, able to fly right out of range of this place.<sup>53</sup>

When he had to leave school due to the 1930 depression, big things were still awaiting him. For instance, while working at a market place he was given a job at the Bantu Men's Social Centre.<sup>54</sup> The job he got at the Centre marked a turning point in his life.

At the Centre he was not only exposed to successful black people with whom he identified but also to a vast world of books. The library at the Centre became his companion, home and world. He soon came to a realisation that his life was full and Vrededorp, the market place, the tin smith, all belonged to another lifetime, in another world. His family too, was becoming estranged from him, the more he read Negro literature. He confessed that:

I realised, quite suddenly, that I was rapidly moving out of this coloured world of mine, out of reach of even my dear mother and sister. I saw them with the objective eye of a stranger.<sup>55</sup>

Responsible for his metamorphosis was literature by great Negro writers like Du Bois, Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Stirling Brown, Claude McKay, George Douglas and others. On top of this he was fascinated to learn that there were countries like Britain and America in which colour did not count. His fascination and obsession with these countries was so strong that he yearned to leave South Africa. In a word Abrahams became a nationalist who could neither identify with a Coloured community as a separate group nor with South Africa at the state in which it was, but with the entire free world. It would be in line to suggest that after Abrahams' involvement with the Centre, "every incident (pointed) out his yearning to break away from his surrounding and achieve his dream outside his country."<sup>56</sup> However, it must be pointed out that there was a conflict between Abrahams' interiority and exteriority about leaving the country. While his exteriority wanted to leave the country so as to break free from the socio-political constraints of South Africa, his interiority was attached to the land and its people. But there is no doubt that he hated the way South Africa was ruled as well as

its rulers. To evidence his love of the country and its people, when he finally got to Britain, he wrote about South Africa. Having been given a key to the understanding of his world he would not discard it when he got to Britain.<sup>57</sup> The Negro literature, I want to argue, both gave him a key to the understanding of his own worth as a non-European and also brought him closer to South Africans as part of the world community. His drift to the international arena was a strong statement to the Afrikaner regime that he could not accept confinement into a small 'coloured world'. One of the ills he discovered about the South African society was that non-Europeans could not hope to develop, both as individuals and as groups. Even the Centre which had a major impact on his self-realisation had some disturbing imperfections. While there for instance, Abrahams noted that:

In South Africa even this international organisation for cooperation, manliness and understanding (i.e. Boy Scouts movement), was run on segregation lines. The white scouts had one organisation, the black another, and the coloured yet another. As in all other spheres, there was no intermingling between black and white.<sup>58</sup>

What I want to assert here is that Abrahams' dilemma was not only the question of colouredness but the plight of all non-Europeans in South Africa. By concerning himself with the oppressed as a whole, he was showing how far-sighted he was and also how he loathed categorisation on race lines. Nevertheless, as he strove to integrate with the world community, the drift-away from the Coloured community and by extension from his family, was inevitable. Abrahams was aware of this dichotomy but he consciously chose the world community.<sup>59</sup>

From the black men and the Negro literature at the Centre, Abrahams did not only get mentors and role models but also a sense of pride for being black. An important lesson he learned was that it was possible for a black man to achieve as much as any white man, and on top of that make a contribution to society, but not in South Africa under the circumstances that prevailed. Forced by the lack of means to achieve his goal as a writer, Abrahams went to the Diocesan Training College to train as a teacher. To show that his heart was not in the profession, while he was at the college he wrote and sent some poems to “The Bantu World”, whose editor was Dhlomo at the time, also a poet.<sup>60</sup> The fact that the poems were accepted and that Dhlomo encouraged him to write more identified Abrahams as a writer. But things would not go as smoothly as he wished them to go. While he realised that he could not be a teacher, he also could not be an instant writer. What was most disturbing was that his family and Dhlomo’s successor, Mr Teka, did not approve of his choice of becoming a writer. On the one hand his family was worried that he would not get a job, while on the other, Mr Teka was not impressed by the poems. In his criticism Mr Teka pointed out that Abrahams wrote in English and already he was touching things that should not be mentioned.<sup>61</sup>

Such views alienated Abrahams further, and this was worse when his girlfriend Anne, disappeared. In his words he says that, “Except for Maggie’s home and the Bantu Men’s Social Centre, I had felt out of place in Johannesburg. I had been outside of things...an outcast.”<sup>62</sup> It is clear that things were not going well for him. He had no friends, and he was moving away from his family. To a great extent he was being rejected by his

own people, the Coloureds. To complicate matters, except for Joseph, the little mother and Jonathan, there is no evidence in the text which shows that he was fully integrated with the black community despite his enthusiasm for blackness. As if to counter his alienation, at age 19 he negotiated a new form of identity, Marxism. More than any thing Marxism gave him an exceptional chance to learn to know white people. In the text he records that:

Marxism had the impact of a miraculous revelation. I had explored this new creed with delicate care. I had measured its adherents by their creed. A profound revolution had taken place in my heart and mind.<sup>63</sup>

If anything, Marxism (had) helped him look beyond the whiteness of a white man's skin and (saw) and comprehend his humanity.<sup>64</sup> However, this new found 'home' was discovered too late when Abrahams had decided to leave Johannesburg, and subsequently South Africa. By this time he was aware that South Africa was suffocating his creativity as a writer, so he had to leave. Perhaps Ogungbesan puts this well when he says that, "awareness, coming with age and education merely alienated the black youth further from the reality that it reveals to him with increasing clarity."<sup>65</sup> In his desperate moment Abrahams wrote, "I want to get out of here. I want to go down to the Cape. I'm feeling choked."<sup>66</sup> Abrahams' desperation (and perhaps that of other black intellectuals in the period in question) is summed up well by Mphahlele who writes:

There is everything human about whites when you feel them physically, and you see them as human beings, that is reality. Your reaction to their brutality is mostly that of distrust, fear and anger. There is something about that act and fact of communal survival inside a situation of racism that either tones down, or lands another complexion to the hate that is mixed with anger. Outside the

situation, you are on your own, you have little communal support: at best it is intellectual. So you hate the whites you left behind with scalding intensity. Could it be that distance creates a void and that the burning lava of hate must fill it?<sup>67</sup>

As much as Abrahams cannot be accused of hating white people in general, it is true that he felt that South Africa was claustrophobic to him. Even his movement to the Cape was not a simple change of atmosphere, it was a step towards freedom - and escape from South Africa. Although there was a coloured vote at the Cape and the chance for him to enter politics, he was not deterred from his goal of leaving the country. At the Cape he rubbed shoulders with prominent Coloured politicians like Abduraman and Dr Gool who wanted him to join their political organisations. He was even active in the protest against the repeal of the Cape Coloured vote in 1938, but still he decided not to join any of the groups. What was uppermost in his mind was to write books in which he would express himself and tell the story of South Africa.<sup>68</sup> The fact that Abrahams did not want to take part in active politics, but instead to leave the country should not be construed as cowardice. Like Modisane he believed that there were other forms of expression and exile offered an excellent platform for such expressions. Expressing this conviction, Abrahams writes:

Perhaps life had a meaning that transcends race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa. Also there was a need to write, to tell freedom, and for this I needed to be personally free.<sup>69</sup>

From the Cape, Abrahams travelled to Durban where he was employed as a stoker on the ship. His passage to England was a passage to the freedom Mphahlele, Modisane and others were later to escape to. However, Abrahams' departure from South Africa was unlike that of Modisane and others. His departure denoted a renewal. The ritualistic washing in the ocean and the dawn of his departure points to this fact.<sup>70</sup>

Like other exiles Abrahams left the country in search of a community and nation to belong to, as well as to pursue his goal, mostly an intellectual goal. Throughout the text one can see how Abrahams was pushed out by South Africa. By leaving the country, I want to argue, he was not in anyway showing a lack of national pride but rather it showed that South Africa was not a nation to belong to due to oppression. What made life more unbearable for him was the fact that Acts of Parliament were passed to effect those hardships. The Immorality<sup>71</sup> and Mixed-Marriages Acts are just two of the Acts that impacted on him. Commenting about the Mixed-Marriages Act, Dubow points out that the regime's:

Central theme was racial 'degeneration' that invariably resulted from intermarriage between blacks and whites. (It) was particularly exercised by Coloured people who, as a 'hybrid race', were said to be inherently unstable and less intelligent than whites. They lacked the latter's energy and persistence and, unlike Africans, who remained bound by tribal connections, suffered from a lack of social controls. As a group Coloureds were said to be despised by both blacks and whites alike.<sup>72</sup>

Many incidents that happened to him belied the fact that he was a part of South Africa. To isolate a few incidents that support the last assertion I would like to point out the following. From an early age Abrahams was made to feel not only inferior to whites, but also unwanted in South Africa. On his first encounter with an Afrikaner (on a pig farm) he was forced to call him Baas. As if this humiliation was not enough, on his way home from the farm he encountered three white boys. The boys started to taunt him and his friend Jonathan, calling their fathers baboons. This angered him and a fight ensued. Although he was defeated he got punished for fighting with a white boy.<sup>73</sup> Although the ill-treatment of the Coloureds was often punctuated by some sinister concessions like not carrying passes,<sup>74</sup> Abrahams' lot (and that of the Coloureds generally) did not become any easier. If anything the Coloured people in general were alienated from both blacks and whites. The social construct they found themselves in, did not give them a meaningful identification with the country because of their 'race hybridity'.

Another incident that illustrated Abrahams' 'homelessness' in South Africa also involved three white boys (a different threesome). The fact that it was boys who bullied him around just because he was black (coloured) indicated the enormity of race prejudice in the country. The boys wanted to fight with him but he refused. His refusal to fight with the white boys did not help, they assaulted him until he was unconscious. About this incident he observed that "... I saw the three of them briefly. There was no excitement about them. They were more like grownups than boys. This was a calm, quiet, methodical business."<sup>75</sup> Such attitudes impacted on him throughout his stay in

South Africa. In fact the treatment he got from whites was a reflection of the national policy which pushed all non-whites to the periphery of the South African society. The attitudes of the white people, I want to argue were the main factor that made other race groups identify with the outside world and not with South Africa. After he left South Africa in 1939, Abrahams integrated well with the international community. Although many of his works deal with race issues in South Africa they have been translated into many languages, a step that showed that he had become an internationalist. From England he, together with his family, settled in the Caribbean. Judging by the number of works he wrote which include Dark Testament, Song of the City, Wild Conquest, This Island Now, Mine Boy and so forth, one can say without any hesitation that Abrahams pursued and achieved his goal of becoming a writer.

In this chapter I have attempted to follow Abrahams' gradual self-awareness, his alienation from the Coloured community, family and the entire country. At the base of his drift-away from South Africa, it has been argued, was his search for identity both as writer and as a part of the international community. During his negotiations for identity he came to realise that he was more interested in writing than becoming a teacher or a politician. To achieve his goal of, firstly finding a community to belong to, and secondly realising his true potential as part of humanity, he had to go overseas - turning his back on his mother country. The following chapter will examine Alan Paton's autobiography, Towards the Mountain. The thrust of the chapter will be the manner in which Paton gradually identified with South Africa and the black community in

particular. The discussion will touch on the way and reason why Paton detached himself from both the British community and the Afrikaner community.

## CHAPTER III

### SOUTH AFRICANS ARE MY PEOPLE TOO -

#### ALAN PATON'S CASE

#### PATON'S GRADUAL IDENTIFICATION WITH SOUTH AFRICA

The relationship that has existed between white English speaking South Africans (WESSAs) and South Africa has been contradictory and problematic. After the severance of political and ideological ties between Britain and South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century the WESSAs had to redefine their identities. As the sovereign status of South Africa took root, a growing number of WESSAs began to identify more with her and the number of those who still had memories about Britain, their mother country, was dwindling. The younger generation either never went to Britain or they just went there for a very short spell of time. According to Garson:

The establishment of the Republic has been accepted if not welcomed and the British connection, drained of all political content, survives only as a historical oddity and a symbol of cultural and economic content.<sup>76</sup>

As much as the early and mid twentieth century generations of WESSAs identified more with South Africa as the century progressed, the concept of 'REPUBLIC' must have caught them off guard. It is my belief that the new status of the country did not mean

the same thing to everyone. To some, especially the Afrikaners, it had the connotation of a national revival, while to others, the WESSAs, it may have sowed a sense of alienation and loss. Politically, the Afrikaners worked ruthlessly and efficiently to secure the political upper hand. It was only once the Afrikaners had consolidated enough power that the reality of the situation dawned on the WESSAs. They came to the realisation that they either should try to accommodate themselves into the new dispensation or endure further alienation. Some WESSAs began to agitate for unity between the white groups (English and Afrikaner) while others put themselves in precarious situations by joining the South African Community Party. The communists were not liked by both the South African and British regimes and as such they were persecuted. Braam Fisher and others had to endure hardships and humiliation at the hands of the South African regime. At the same time those who advocated unity between the two white groups were viewed as collaborators. The association between the Afrikaners and the English was not comfortable because, despite the WESSAs hope for unity, they (WESSAs) were against some actions by the government. A case in point was their vehement opposition to the separate representation of the Voters Act of 1951.<sup>77</sup>

The WESSAs seeming political impotence until the 1950's is often highly criticised. One accusation that is levelled against them is that they were enjoying and gaining by the system of separation put in place by Afrikaners. So these critics saw the WESSAs as:

...a people without any National Heritage of their own, whose attitudes and actions (overtly or covertly; deliberate or not) sustains and maintains an unjust and vicious political system from which they derive considerable material benefit.<sup>78</sup>

Whether this view is correct or not is disputable. Nonetheless, what I want to argue here is that those who are sceptical of the WESSAs fail to understand their cultural insecurity. What one should understand is that, once the British influence was curtailed in the country, the WESSAs felt culturally threatened, if not dispossessed. Talking about cultural conquest, Chris Jenks quotes Freire as having said that:

Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards and the goals of the invaders... Cultural invasion is on the one hand, an instrument of domination, and on the other hand, the results of domination. Thus, cultural action of a dominating character, in addition to being deliberate and planned, is in another sense simply a product of oppressive reality.<sup>79</sup>

With their culture uprooted then it was not easy for the WESSAs to automatically involve themselves in any socio-political activities that would expose their weakness. What they could involve themselves in, were societies which in many respects were English, both in composition and character (e.g. Toc H, org. for the needy and sick). These societies, I want to argue, helped WESSAs to keep a semblance of unity or group. The WESSAs political uncertainties, though, were mainly self-inflicted. For a long time before the severance of ties with Britain they had been under the protective wing of the mother country. Tied to this situation, their ideological and political development was stunted. What they concentrated on was a development in the administrative and

professional sphere. Furthermore, they failed to work towards unification among themselves. This lack of urgency for group identification led to some of them assimilating into the Afrikaner society, especially in the Transvaal. The lack of group cohesion had another impact on them; they could not speak with one voice to effect or influence any changes in the running of the country. In fact what they hoped for was a constitutional change which would come in a constitutional manner. Even in that change they saw their role as conciliators only thus effectively sitting on the sidelines of political activity in the country. However the impression that all WESSAs were apathetic is wrong. There were many who strove to enter the political fray, some actively as politicians and others as political novelists. An interesting tone was developing among the writers who included Pauline Smith, Schreiner and Gordimer. These writers were urging other WESSAs to get involved in the activities in the country.

According to Wagner:

In novel after novel (Gordimer) has charted the struggle of her protagonist (who are always WESSAs). To shape a viable identity for themselves, despite, and because of the history they are caught up in, and to escape the determining political imperatives of the time. She has in the past typically resolved the struggle by bringing each protagonist to understand by the novel's end that the only route to salvation - to finding a way out to 'fit in' in Africa - is through some form of responsible commitment to the process of bringing about change.<sup>80</sup>

It would seem that such urgings found place in some WESSAs' hearts or consciences. By the 1930's -1950's a number of WESSAs outside the Communist Party were beginning to make inroads and valid contributions in the socio-political setting of the

country. One such person was Alan Paton whose work in the social, political and literary spheres is in a class of its own.

## **PLACE AND IDENTITY : PATON'S BELOVED COUNTRY**

Alan Paton was born on 11 January 1903 in Pietermaritzburg. His father was of Scottish descent and his mother was born of British parents. By the time he died on 12 April 1988 he had become one of the country's most distinguished literary, academic and political figures. Among his literary achievements we can mention the world-acclaimed novel, Cry, the Beloved Country, an autobiography Towards the Mountain, several poems and articles. This section focuses on Paton's gradual; if not hesitant self-realisation. As will be revealed, Paton was an atypical English speaker who was different from other WESSAs in many respects. This difference, I think, reinforces the assertion that, unlike black autobiography, white autobiography is individualistic. This individualism is present even when the autobiographer talks about a community. In the case of Paton, on the one hand the white community was non-existent but imagined, on the other, the black community was seen as a world apart. By the end of the chapter, I hope to have reached a conclusion that Paton had undergone a lasting transformation although it may have not been complete. Also I will make the assertion that by the 1950's WESSAs were beginning to ease into political activity, which translated into their growing identification with South Africa.

In 1930 Paton was a teacher at Maritzburg College and a family man. As an individual he was successful although the year saw the death of his father, whom he did not like, and the birth of his first child, David. For the purpose of this dissertation I would like to draw a striking difference between Paton and Modisane in the way they reacted to the death of their fathers and the birth of their children in South Africa. On the one hand the death of Paton's father did not affect him much. By his admission his father was abusive to his wife and children. On the other hand, the death of Modisane's father was Modisane's symbolic death. On the coffin of his father as mentioned, there was Modisane's name not that of his father. For Modisane the death of his father meant that there was no breadwinner in their home. On the birth of their children, Paton treats the event with calmness. Modisane is panicky and after the baby is born, a train of thought seized him. One of the things that troubled him was the wisdom of bringing a child to South Africa where there was malnutrition and state violence. This small but important illustration highlights the different ways in which blacks and whites experienced the same events in South Africa. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to even suggest that these two events passed without notice by Paton. According to Alexander:

The death of his father, and the birth of his son seem to have made Paton re-evaluate his life, and there are several signs that he was taking stock of his life and considering which direction he should move. One such sign was his religious commitment.<sup>81</sup>

His self re-evaluation and church commitments led to his confirmation in the Anglican church, his wife Dorrie's denomination. In many ways he was moving away from his family towards his wife, to the dissatisfaction of his mother and sisters. Although his

alienation from his mother and sisters was permanent, his decision was influenced by a deep desire to be close to Dorrie. According to him, “this reason (to join the Anglican church) was that I did not want our children to grow up in a divided home.” So, by this time Paton was trying to be a family man rather than being a national hero who was preoccupied by national issues. His world was confined to the work of Toc H and the Anglican church. If anything, these occupations gave him a limited exposure to what was happening in the country. Both occupations were far removed from the active public politics of the country. Paton, then comes across as someone who was preoccupied by himself and immediate surroundings. However, there is no doubt that his charity involvement in the Toc H was important.

But there is also himself known only to himself, himself seen from the inside of his own existence. This inside self has a history that may have no significance in any objective “history of the time”. It is the history of himself observing the observer, not the history of himself being observed.<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the text, Paton is mostly preoccupied by this inside looking. Interestingly though, despite his involvement with Toc H and his church commitments, Paton found time to put his thoughts on paper. It is in his early writings that one comes to realise his lack of knowledge of black people at the early stages of his life. So, one can argue that if there is no mention of black people in his autobiography and by extension in his lived life it is not that he despised them, but that he did not know them well enough. His lack of knowledge about black people gives evidence to the assertion that WESSAs, in Natal in particular, were conservative and somewhat kept to themselves. To them the Zulus

were a world apart. By his own admission, Paton only had a meaningful contact with blacks when he got to Diepkloof when he was 32 years old. By meaningful contact, it is not meant that he was not aware of the discrepancies that existed between blacks and whites, rather that he lacked a deep understanding of them before he went to Diepkloof. In one of his early stories Paton wrestled with the tension that characterised the relationship between blacks and whites. What the short stories “The Secret of Seven” revealed was the inevitability of direct contact between blacks and whites. The contact that Paton dealt with was that which was later prevented by the Immorality Act. In the story a child is born of a white man and a black woman. The child, to the horror of white people, including the midwife, was black. The only solution to the problem that was presented by the child was to hand her over to Catholic nuns for adoption.<sup>83</sup>

However, as time went Paton became politically conscious, seemingly not due to external pressure but due to his internal development. At the base of his political awareness was his personal ambition and strong desire to see unity among the Afrikaner and the English speakers. This double-pronged passion, I want to argue, was in turn, informed by his search for a community and identity in South Africa. The fact that the WESSAs saw and thought themselves South Africans by the period in question does not mean that they had forgotten about their British connection. While subconsciously that Britishness was kept alive, it is also true that many were increasingly identifying with South Africa. Nonetheless this growing national identification posed another danger to them - assimilation. While in places like the Transvaal assimilation happened, in others

like Natal, it did not. Although there was resistance towards assimilation in some quarters, for those who wanted to enter mainstream politics a working relationship with the ruling Afrikaner was attractive. In Paton's case it would seem that his friendship with Hofmeyr was appropriate for this political prominence. On numerous occasions Paton made it clear to Hofmeyr that unity between the two white groups was possible but only through working together. It was only unfortunate that Hofmeyr would not honour Paton's need. In his autobiography, a disappointed Paton would say, "I have been called an intimate friend of Hofmeyr, but I was not. I would, however, claim to have known him as well as any other man did."<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, his autobiographer quotes Paton's letter to Hofmeyr in which he pleads with him to consider him for a government post. In one of the letters Paton writes:

I don't mind telling you now that the possibility seems remote that at the end of five years (you once asked me how long I wanted) you might have elevated me to some place from which I could step off into politics... Something tells me that I could move men, administrate effectively, command respect, face danger, retreat in good order. Something tells me that I shall never be readier for it than now. But now no J.H. Hofmeyr stands behind good - I've accepted that.<sup>85</sup>

It goes without saying that Paton's awakening interest in South African mainstream politics set him apart from some WESSAs, at least before the early 50's. Before the early 50's in Natal, Paton's home province, WESSAs were mostly tied to their professional and administrative occupations. The main body of politics was entrusted in the hands of the Afrikaners who were busy tightening their iron fist control all over the country. Black people all over the country were beginning to register their frustration and anger.

Defiance campaigns and organised protests became the order of the day. These incidents in Natal reminded Paton and others of the Bambata Rebellion early in the century. However, it would take the scrapping of the coloured vote in 1951 to shake the WESSAs out of their reverie. It is such gradualist tendencies by the WESSAs that made people of colour view them not only as self-sufficient but also as unaffected by the state racial policies. As pointed out though, Paton could be taken both as an exception and as a pioneer in shaking off conservatism. If anything, Paton was a pragmatist whose energy was devoted to working hard, writing, and generally in meeting challenges head-on. His pragmatism and courage were demonstrated in 1938 at the Afrikaner Great Trek Centenary Celebrations. The celebrations were conducted with fanfare and heightened nationalism by the Afrikaners. In Paton's words, "These symbolic treks evoked indescribable emotions. There was an upswelling of Afrikaner pride and sentiment such as South Africa had never known." Further he quotes Malan as having said during the celebrations:

Afrikanerdom has found itself again in this year of commemoration. Risen out of the dust of humiliation and self-contempt it now demands full recognition of itself, for its noble ancestry, and their descendants... Afrikanerdom is calling again.<sup>86</sup>

There is no doubt that the tone and character of the celebrations were exclusively Afrikaner. Nevertheless this truth was not evident to Paton at the outset of the celebrations. The rhetoric of Afrikaner exclusivism preached so disappointed him that he decided there and then to have nothing to do with it. He realised that the unity he believed in would never be achievable under the situation that was being created by

Malan. Afrikaner Nationalism just ran counter to the community he foresaw for South Africa. His dream of an inter-racial society where everyone would be treated as equal and with respect was dashed by the spirit of the festival. Having stood against the Native Representation Act of 1936, Paton realised that South Africa was headed for even far more pronounced and dangerous polarisation. If anything, South Africa was divided into broad camps of blacks and Afrikaner Nationalisms. In such a set-up, the WESSAs were either squeezed in the middle or alienated from South African politics. This sense of loss is evident in Paton's words after the disappointing experience at the celebrations. He says that, "It is an irony that it was my sympathy for the renaissance of Afrikanerdom that enabled me to escape from the narrow British Nationalism of God, King and Empire, only to find that Afrikaner Nationalism was just as narrow."<sup>87</sup>

Ironically, at the end of World War Two Paton recalled that he was awarded the Africa service medal and ribbon for his efforts in the war in which he did not fight. As he recalls, "this was not in recognition of military service, but was awarded to those civilians who rendered valuable service to the king, country and commonwealth." (233). The war meant different things to the different race groups in the country. To blacks this was a white man's war. Deep down in their hearts they knew that even if they enlisted to fight for their country they would be treated as inferior. Those who took part were not even issued with guns. This, maybe, is the reason why both Abrahams and Modisane do not talk about it (the war) in their texts. To Afrikaners, the war came as

a rallying cry. Smuts and Hertzog were divided on whether to join the war or not.

According to Paton:

All were aware of the grave cleavage in the house. Those who supported Hertzog were overwhelmingly Afrikaans-speaking and those who supported Smuts were overwhelmingly English-speaking.<sup>88</sup>

For Hertzog's supporters, the war was an instance of asserting their independence from Britain once and for all. For Smuts' supporters, Britain and South Africa needed each other. As for the WESSAs in Smuts' camp, I want to argue that their allegiance was split between their mother country and their country of birth. Whether this was a conscious or subconscious decision on their part is irrelevant here. What was clear was the fact that, "South Africa was in a terrible dilemma, her white population was divided between British loyalists who wished to come to the aid of the mother country without question, and a sizeable portion of the population which was fiercely opposed to joining in a war on the side of the power which had defeated them in 1902 and dominated them ever since."<sup>89</sup> Paton was among those who were eager to fight alongside Britain. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether he could be seen as a 'British Loyalist' at the time. That he loved South Africa cannot be disputed, but after the 1938 experience his group identification hung in the balance. On the one hand he had decided to distance himself from the English conservatism, while on the other hand he was disappointed by the attitude of the Afrikaners. He sums his dilemma well when he says:

Now having rejected Afrikaner Nationalism, I went in quest of a new nationalism that would be based on the love of one's land, though many would argue, and without foundation, that a common

land cannot compete with a common language, a common culture, a common history, as a binding force.<sup>90</sup>

It is unfortunate that Paton was denied a chance to fight for South Africa. To make matters worse for him, three years after the war an event that would force him to resign from Diepkloof took place. The ascension of the (Nationalistic) National Party to power was one event that Paton could have fought against with all his might. He was not only sceptical of the National Party, but also knew that a period of segregation had set in. As a result, his dilemma between writing and politics was pronounced by this event. In his words, "...The event of May 26, 1948 brought my intentions to nothing, and condemned me to a struggle between literature and politics..."<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, the autobiography ends with the ascension of the National Party to power. What is striking about this ending is that it seems as though it marked Paton's complete awakening. After 1948, it seemed as though there was an urgency on his part to articulate his views on the political forum, and not only in literature. To prove this, he helped found the Liberal Party in 1953, of which he became president. One of the Party's objectives was to fight for equality, thus placing itself opposite the National Party. To prove its intentions, the Liberal Party was opened to all race groups. In contempt of this inter-racialism of the Liberal Party, the National Party prohibited any racial mix by an act of law. Rather than playing the regime's exclusive game, the Liberal party decided to disband in 1968.

Without doubt the Paton one confronts in the 50's-60's is a far cry from the earlier Paton who had an attitude against blacks. By 1924 Paton is quoted to have said at an imperial

conference in Britain that, “the native (black) question also came up, but of course it is not so urgent.” Peter Alexander, Paton’s biographer goes on to say that “the fact that Paton could in 1924 raise and dismiss the ‘Black Question’ in a single sentence shows the extent to which he still remained unconscious of his country’s central dilemma.”<sup>92</sup> By 1936 though, he was to oppose the Native Representation Bill which was meant to remove the blacks from the common voters roll. Other bills that were instituted to put the ‘kaffir in his place’ included the Native and Trust Act, Native Laws Amendment Act etc and Paton was opposed to them as well.<sup>93</sup> In his text Paton puts his gradual development to full self-realisation in these words, “Once you get the idea that your life is not altogether your property, and once you realise that love isn’t much use without justice, you are likely to keep on travelling.”<sup>94</sup> The turning point of that travel, I want to maintain, was his 13 years at Diepkloof Reformatory.

To Paton, Diepkloof was a microcosm of South Africa. Even before he arrived at the Reformatory he knew very well that there were challenges he had to overcome. Two of those challenges had to do with removing barriers and seeing to it that there was harmony between the race groups at the Reformatory. Paton was conscious of the parallels between the reformatory and South Africa and he made this point known to Hofmeyr on several occasions. What attracted him the most to Hofmeyr was the belief that they were like minded. In one of the letters to Hofmeyr he says:

Someday an Afrikaner who speaks English like an English man (Hofmeyr), and an English man who speaks Afrikaans like an Afrikaner (he doesn’t yet) - someday, well, it might be vainglorious

to finish the sentence. But one cannot escape the fact that such a combination is long overdue, and I believe would be invincible.<sup>95</sup>

Life at Diepkloof was not unlike that which was evolving outside its confines. The racial tensions and hostilities that were the order of the day outside the reformatory's borders were replicated inside. Like the WESSAs outside, Paton found himself being sidelined by both the Afrikaners and the blacks in his staff. The fact that he was English and mostly playing a reconciliatory role did not make things any easier for him. The political erosion that was taking place all over South Africa was finding its way into the reformatory, with some of his white staff following Smuts while others were following Hertzog. On the other hand the black staff mistrusted him. Paton remembered one incident that happened between himself and Gubevu, a black staff member. An altercation developed between him and Gubevu and the latter called him a racist. Paton was shocked and infuriated by this charge but decided not to take it further. On the following day, he called Gubevu and told him that he had looked inside himself and did not like what he saw there. Then he asked him to help him plant a tree. "This tree, he told Gubevu, would stand to mark the most important turning point in his life. And according to Gubevu, Paton's attitude to the black staff really was different thereafter."<sup>96</sup>

Contacts like these would make a lasting impression on Paton. His achievements at Diepkloof, which were a national duty to him, opened up his mental and emotional horizons; he was able to accommodate both blacks and whites in his heart. Parallel to his achievement in changing the face and the character of Diepkloof was his writing.

Interestingly, his writings were becoming more racially inclusive, and even more interesting was the fact that Diepkloof became his inspiration. For instance a short story Happeney was about a young boy who died in the reformatory. The theme that went throughout his writings at this time was that of racism and how the racial tensions could be harmonised.

Each passing day Paton made it his duty to learn more about the boys under his care and about the people who visited them. It was no wonder then that the characters in his fictions were created around Diepkloof and the boys. As Alexander aptly puts it, “His experiences at Deipkloof had given him an urgency to say something about social and moral disintegration in South African society.”<sup>97</sup> One of his greatest achievements in this direction was the novel, Cry, the Beloved Country. The characters in the novel were picked from Diepkloof and the plot involved the story of Diepkloof. Nonetheless, one of the criticisms of Cry the Beloved Country has been that it is unrealistic, that Paton never came to know black people, a point that is also made by Mphahlele.<sup>98</sup> But Paton has his defenders in people like Callan who say that Paton, draws on incidents and persons from actual life for fictional material - a method that adds to the element of authenticity in the novel’s social record.

As much as Paton emerged as a changed man by the mid-40's there can be no doubt that he never resolved these internal conflicts about politics and literature.<sup>99</sup> As Alexander puts it, “Intellectual life, worldly ambition, and the desire to serve his fellow human

beings: These were three forces which tugged at him at this time (i.e. 1932) and the struggle would be long.”<sup>100</sup> The struggle was indeed long and by 1948 when the National Party came to power, this conflict was not yet put to rest. The 1948 event caused a huge strife in the WESSA community, especially in Natal. When the National Party among other Acts, passed the Voters’ Act (1951) which removed the Cape Coloureds from the common voters’ roll, WESSAs rose to the occasion. They viewed the government’s action as unconstitutional and vowed to defend the constitution, in what became known as “The Natal stand”. At the base of the stand was a threat for Natal to secede from South Africa if the Afrikaners forced their unconstitutional changes through and formed such a union. Through organisations like the Torch Commando (1951) it seemed as though the WESSAs had, at last woken up from their reverie. Nonetheless, in the end their internal squabbles and perhaps political immaturity led to their early exit from South African politics.

It is curious that Paton did not feature in the activities in Natal, which could have launched his political career earlier than later. But as we have seen, he was either gradual or patient in taking his leap. Instead of joining the Torch Commando (1951) he helped found the Liberal Party in 1953. As indicated, the initiative (Liberal Party) by a small group of WESSAs was short-lived as well. These initiatives by the WESSAs, I want to argue, indicated the gradual development of their political awareness and their integration into the politics of the country. Their direct involvement in politics is one of the indicators that they were beginning to accept their integration in the South African

community. What Paton's autobiography illustrates is that some WESSA's discarded their Britishness in favour of an emergent South Africanness - a national identification with South Africa.

In this chapter we have looked at the issue of WESSAs in the period 1930's to the 1940's, using Alan Paton's autobiography Towards the Mountain. What transpired during the discussion is that Paton was an atypical WESSA. We have also come to a conclusion that over the years he had been undergoing a steady transformation - from an unaffected WESSA to a practically and actively involved South African. It has been established too that as much as Paton was somewhat different from other WESSAs, by the 1950's it was clear that WESSAs were identifying more with South Africa. In the next chapter, I will examine the manner in which Modisane attempted to come to terms with his multiple selves, and the implication of the destruction of Sophiatown on him and black people in general. I will also look at the structure, literariness and political nature of the text and also explore the fact of being a black intellectual in the period in question.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HOME THAT NEVER WAS

#### BLOKE MODISANE'S CASE

#### BLACK HOMOGENEITY

The 1930's-1950's period was very volatile in the history of black South Africans. Through a variety of acts like the Urban Areas Act, Suppression of Communism Act, Immorality Acts, Mixed Marriages Act and a host of others apartheid was conceived and consolidated. In this well calculated set-up blacks found themselves on the receiving end, both politically and socially. The Sharpville and Soweto Massacres of subsequent years (i.e. 1960 and 1976) were a direct result of this period. In retrospect this was the time when race relations were decidedly sour and when racial hatred soared. As much as black nationalism can be dated to this period, it proved a disappointing exercise at the period in question. At the beginning of the period only the communists seemed to stand fast against the repression that was grinding the black community each day. The African National Congress, Indian Congress, African People Organisation were still sectional and as such not an effective force against the regime.<sup>101</sup> As a result of the opposition's failure to engage the regime, by the 1940's there was no stopping the introduction of apartheid.

As time went, a growing number of people began to agitate against the repression. To compensate the disenfranchised and angry blacks the regime instituted the Native Representative Council (NRC), a white body which was to speak on behalf of blacks in parliament. Nevertheless the NRC was neither effective nor in touch with blacks' aspirations.<sup>102</sup> Stating this misrepresentation Mandela quotes Mrs Margaret Ballinger, a member of the NRC as having said that:

The Africans have given their answer to this apartheid proposition but of course no one ever listens to them. They have said, "If you want separation then let us have it. Give us half of South Africa. Give us the eastern half of South Africa. Give us the developed resources because we have helped develop them."<sup>103</sup>

There is no doubt that Ballinger was not mandated by black people to say this. However, with no constitutional rights, there was little hope that blacks could challenge the Afrikaners constitutionally. As time went though, leaders of substance emerged within the ranks of the African National Congress. Some of these leaders advocated an alliance with progressive whites, especially the Communists, a step which further delivered a painful blow to African unity. Some members of the African National Congress broke away to form the Pan African Congress which did not want collaboration with whites. This split, I want to argue, is one among many stumbling blocks on the way of black unity and freedom. (In fact it would take about five decades to realise those goals). Having missed a golden opportunity during the bus boycott of 1943 and the mine-workers strike of 1946, black aspirations would take about five decades to be realised.<sup>104</sup>

The trial and error of the period was indicative of the re-awakening of black political organisations. According to Karis “The years 1935-1937 mark a major turning point in African politics in South Africa.”<sup>105</sup> In the midst of all that was taking place people in Sophiatown and elsewhere were getting on with their lives. Ethnic groups were cohabiting in many places, united against a common enemy - the regime. The collapsing of ethnic groups inevitably created a semblance of homogeneity among blacks. Echoing this sentiment Karis puts his finger on the spot by saying:

Africans of differing political convictions, from tribal conservatism to urban radicalism, united to protest against the renewed threat to the real though limited rights of enfranchised Africans in the Cape Province and to the symbolic importance of these rights for all Africans. At the same time they renewed their demands for greater participation in the government of South Africa. Their protests and demands were in vain, but the heightened political agitation of 1936-1937 shaped the organisational and tactical issues of subsequent African politics.<sup>106</sup>

The operative term in this excerpt is ‘united’ - blacks were united against repression and the oppression they were suffocating under. It would be later that the regime managed to set blacks against one another along ethnic lines through the ethnic homeland system. The cross-border attacks between the Transkei and the Ciskei, as well as the ethnic clashes on the mines are good examples of the antagonism that took root among blacks. However, those ethnic tensions largely remained subsumed due to the overriding repression which bonded Africans together.

This brief history of black people serves to explain the notion that blacks constitute a homogenous group, in the political sense at least. But it must be noted that the notion of black homogeneity only holds for the convenience of this study only. In fact it is acknowledged that during the 1930s-1950s there were huge internal social dynamics within the black community. Tensions, disagreements and differences existed between different social classes, intellectuals, professionals, traditionalists, urban elites etc. In other words, the dissertation does not refute the fact that blacks, like all race groups, are multi-ethnic and comprise of different classes and other stratifications. What I argue is that the repression that was meted against black people only achieved the opposite effect. It consolidated rather than fragmented black opposition, notwithstanding the internal political disputes that existed, say between Luthuli and Dube or the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress. The divide and rule strategy of the regime did not only fail but it also made black people realise the importance of speaking in a unified voice in order to be heard. In the end the regime could not use ethnicity to realise its sinister objectives. Both blacks and the regime knew the vital role that ethnicity could play for their different political and social ends.

As Maré puts it, “Ethnic identities... are frequently manipulated and mobilised in the service of class and political interests.”<sup>107</sup> It must be made clear here that one does not call for the destruction of ethnicity or for ethnic differences because there is no guarantee or evidence that a mono-ethnic society would lead to more stable or utopian situation. On the contrary, ethnic differences should enhance cultural richness, and not

lead to clashes or disunity. The spin-off of such regional South African ethnic unity would feed onto continental unity. Commenting on the same Olney puts it thus:

...Africans come from many different cultural backgrounds and if they are to (form) a Pan-African literature or political unity they must be aware of the diverse strands that are woven together to form the African experience, and autobiography... is the way Africans can become aware of their differences and similarities.<sup>108</sup>

It is within this broad understanding that the claim of black homogeneity should be viewed.

This chapter on Modisane focuses on the text Blame Me On History, firstly as a political autobiography. I will argue that Modisane's self-revelation is at the same time a social and historical documentation of black South Africans. In this regard the first part of the chapter will explore the interdependence between the individual (Modisane) and the community as is the case in most black autobiographies, for example Naboth Mokgatle's and Mphahlele's autobiographies. This interdependence is best illustrated in the opening of chapter two of Modisane's text. It goes:

Whatever else Sophiatown was, it was home, we made the desert bloom, made alterations... We established bonds of human relationships which set a pattern of communal living, far richer and satisfying - materially and spiritually - than modern could substitute. The dying of a slum is a community tragedy, anywhere.<sup>109</sup>

Secondly, the chapter will examine the literariness of the text, concentrating on structure, language and the fate that befell black literary intellectuals. Although political and literary tend to overlap in Modisane's text the two concepts can be differentiated. For the convenience of this study political autobiography refers to the nuanced political and

social documentation in the text. In other words the text goes beyond the individual's life story and encompasses that of the community at large. What is noticeable in the text is that Modisane does not only document the hard political facts but he analysed them and also lays bare the manner in which they affect black life.

Literary autobiography on the other hand refers to the literariness of the text. Blame Me on History is, no doubt, a literary text whose strength lies in the literary devices Modisane employs which include a complex tight structure, diction which creates the required mood and atmosphere, symbolism, a powerful dialogue, and so on. It must be remembered here that Modisane like his contemporaries, had a flair for writing, despite the intellectual suffocation in the country. On top of that he was an avid reader whose literary knowledge was widespread. It is within this context that the text will be looked at as both a political and a literary text.

## **BLAME ME ON HISTORY AS A POLITICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Much has been written about the organic relationship that exists between an individual (author/narrator) and the community in black writing. That relationship, I want to argue, obtains more vividly in black autobiography. According to Gwala "... the chief South African theme has always been that of SOCIAL CONFLICT. For literature cannot be divorced from the life of a people... the black writer thus assumes a role in the social conflict, he cannot step out of it."<sup>110</sup> In other words the life as revealed by the

autobiographer is, in most respects, a *social* comment about the experiences of the community, good or bad. I think that is the light in which Blame Me On History should be viewed. In fact, the title of the text is suggestive of the relationship and is indicated by the terms 'me' and 'history'. To take an example at random, Modisane among other things complained about the low wages that the blacks got. Wages that were designed to make black people slaves forever while whites, especially Afrikaners, benefited. After listing a number of shocking statistics which showed the hardship blacks endured, Modisane says:

I do not claim to understand statistics, but I do know that in my family there were six children, two of whom died from malnutrition; I am not asking for charity, but I demand that the fruits of my labour shall not be taken from out of my mouth.<sup>111</sup>

Further on he laments:

And yet all too frequently I am forced to realise that behind the structure of the native wages, the discriminatory poll tax, is the arrogant dirty joke that Africans should be taught correct dieting habits, and over this I am confronted with the Christian charity of a Christian government which exposes people to starvation and then boasts a million pound hospital to treat malnutrition cases.<sup>112</sup>

It would be grossly inaccurate to even suggest that what Modisane points out was his individual experience only, rather it was the experience of the wider black society of which he was an integral part.

Having said that though, Modisane's relationship with the community was not an easy one. Unlike other autobiographers like Mphahlele (Down Second Avenue) whose individual identities seemed to fit neatly with the community, Modisane attempted to

reconcile his individuality with the society. The struggle in this regard created a tension which remained unresolved by the end of the book. In other words the text revolves around the narrator, 'I', who attempted to fit in the black community but found that a mammoth task to accomplish. In his words:

There is a resentment - almost as deep-rooted as the prejudice itself - against the educated African, not so much because he is allegedly cheeky, but that he fails to conform to the stereotype image of the black sanctified and cherished with jealous intensity by the white man; such a native must - as desperate necessity - be humiliated into submission. The educated black is resented equally by the blacks because he speaks English, which is one of the symbols of white supremacy, he is resentfully called a situation, something between white supremacy and black rebellion.<sup>113</sup>

It is this tension between 'individuality' and the 'community' that gives strength to Modisane's text. Modisane's identity, it would seem, was located between that individuality and community. This constant shift was informed by Modisane's conscious attempt to tell the story of black people through his life story. At the core of the text Modisane was attempting to convey a transformative message to the reader. If the text is self-absorbed, as I think it is, it was only designed so in order to engage and communicate with the reader on a personal, individual level. There is a sense that Modisane confided to the reader, with a view to transforming him or her. Izenburg makes the same point about the tension that exists between the author and the community. He asserts that:

On the one hand each person desires to be an individuated being, separated from everything (and everyone) else and unique, on the other, each desires to lose his or her individuality and be absorbed into everything else.<sup>114</sup>

As the text opens both Modisane and Sophiatown are in a state of chaos. On the one hand, Modisane has lost his job and his marriage to Fiki is in tatters. On the other, Sophiatown has just been bulldozed by the government. The parallel between the two incidents is striking. Modisane's loss of his job surely affected his family but seemed minor to the effect of the destruction of the people of Sophiatown. Families were destroyed and friends separated.<sup>115</sup> Sophiatown had become a hub of activities where everyone lived in harmony with everybody else, despite the activities of the tsotsis and gangs who were given a free hand in Sophiatown. In fact the tsotsis and gangsters had become a characteristic of Sophiatown and they were shaped around Hollywood stars. In Modisane's words, "We produced men and boys with long records of murder and names picked up from the Gallery of Hollywood films: Boston Blackie, Durago Kid, Lefty, Stiles, Gunner Martin."<sup>116</sup> Amidst the murders and robberies that happened people still felt that Sophiatown was home. If anything, the destruction of the town had become a symbol of struggle against a stubborn regime. Although it is true that the state brutalities were not exclusive to Sophiatown only, the town had become a model to other parts of the country. Resistance to repression was registered in a multi-dimensional manner including literature, strikes, boycotts, theatre, music and so forth. Incorporating all these facets of struggle and hard historical facts gives Modisane's text a human element - the agony of 'self' and community.

It is within this political context that the text makes its point - the point that it is a political autobiography. As much as the text seems to be self-centred, I want to argue,

Modisane was not distanced from his community. Nonetheless this assertion should be placed against the fact that the text is contradictory in nature, which is its strength not weakness. The contradiction that comes out here is Modisane's attempt not to compromise the community or the individual by allowing one story to be absorbed by the other. In a sense, while he was a product of history, he was also an active agent in the production of that history. In the course of his life in the country it is clear that Modisane was trapped between two impulses; firstly to enter politics so that he could effect changes. After the ANC failed to stop the destruction of Sophiatown, Modisane was so devastated that he burned his youth league membership card and retreated into a political wilderness. In the text he records that:

I was disillusioned beyond reconciliation, and decided to separate my life and interests from politics, until there shall rise from out of the slum of African politics a new and more professional liberation movement.<sup>117</sup>

The second impulse was that of a strong desire to leave the country, especially after the birth of his child. This strong desire was not fed by disaffection or apathy but by the difficulty of coping with the injustices of the country. At the base of this impulse was the safety of his child. In his confused state he took the decision that:

South Africa shall not have her; I will take my family out of Sophiatown, out of South Africa, to a place where Chris shall start out as a human being. I refused to commit her to slavery. Chris made me realise more sharply how urgently I hated South Africa, I saw us all, black and white, entrapped in this disgusting putridity.<sup>118</sup>

What these two extracts illustrate is the extent to which Modisane was confused. His internal conflict can be likened to that of Shakespeare's Hamlet. However, his indecision

to take a pro-active role in South African politics should not be construed as apathy. His indecision stemmed from his distaste for violence which, like Hamlet, made him appear a coward. For instance, although he seemed pretty certain about what should be done, by the end of the book no action had been taken. To illustrate this indecision, Modisane writes:

I am disgusted by the men who have left me no choice than to kill. I am not even sure that I sincerely want to kill them... I would accept to destroy (the white man) rather than accommodate the murder of children of whatever colour.<sup>119</sup>

Six chapters later the feeling of vexation overflows again. By this stage he was so convinced about the urgency to act that he likened himself to Brutus:

Like Brutus I am haunted by the immediacy, the direct presence of blood between oppression and the freedom which I must snatch. I stand against the power complex of the white man, I hate and intend to destroy white domination, determined to explore the myth of superiority.<sup>120</sup>

The operative words in the second quotation are 'intend' and 'determination'. Although Modisane's intentions seem clear enough, his determination seems lacking. Nevertheless, at the expense of being seen as defending Modisane, I want to argue that his inaction should not be put on his shoulders but on black political parties of the time. As suggested before, black political parties failed to rise to the occasion, they failed to pool and redirect people's energies in the right direction. What the text illustrates is that black people were already politicised but lacked a strong leadership. So, Modisane's interface of individuality and community - a preoccupation with politics - should not be seen as a weakness in black autobiography. A close study of black autobiography should

be seen as anthropological material from which one can learn among other things, black political development.

As mentioned above one of the distinguishing features of Blame Me On History is the use of contradiction. One of these contradictions is that Modisane seemed to have been preoccupied with whiteness. Recording his attitude towards blackness he put it thus: “I was helpless in the coffin of my skin and began to resent the black of my skin.”<sup>121</sup> This self-loathing was not Modisane’s sole preserve but that of all blacks, irrespective of social status. This was best shown during the May Day Strike (1951) where blacks were brutalised by police whether they were part of the strike or not. The strike was planned by the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress at Thabanchu on 21 May 1950.<sup>122</sup> To Modisane the day, among other things, was a clear sign that to be black was enough to be treated as a criminal by the state. The first paragraph of Chapter Ten deserves quotation in full to illustrate this:

But I am black, because I am black I was a piece of the ugliness of Sophiatown and a victim of the violence of white South Africa; I became an unwilling agitator trapped in the blackness of my skin, and because I am black I was forced to become a piece of the decisions, a part of black resistance. I wanted to be both black and unconcerned with the game at politics, but a non-committed African is the same black as a committed native. Intellectually, I resisted involvement with political parties, rejected attempts to be drawn into political discussions, yet my physical being became a tool of the decisions of the African National Congress. There was no choice, during riots the police shot their rifles and sten guns at anything which was black.<sup>123</sup>

The point made by Modisane is summed up well by Rosenblatt who concludes thus, “Blackness itself therefore becomes a variation of fate, the condition that prescribes and predetermines a life.”<sup>124</sup> An important question arises here: did the ‘crime of being black’ in South Africa make Modisane want to be white? What is the reader meant to make of his confessional statement: “I was to discover myself seeking white friends almost as a hobby.”<sup>125</sup> I doubt that such utterances prove that he wanted to be white. There are two possible reasons for this outburst. Firstly that, like Dhlomo and others in the 20's, Modisane felt a need to bridge the gap between blacks and whites. With regards to this, he writes that, “I was living in two different worlds which I tried to bridge.”<sup>126</sup> It is Dhlomo’s contemporaries like Agrrey and Jones who first promoted inter-racialism. The joint council that was set up advocated ‘Inter-racial discussions’ which were meant ‘for greater understanding between racial groups.’<sup>127</sup> These joint councils were a forerunner of the formation of Black Men’s Social Centre in which Peter Abrahams began his self-awareness.

Secondly, Modisane should be viewed as a modernist who resisted being tied to the ‘coffin of his blackness’. His association with whites and his inspiration ‘to be white’ was in many respects his way of showing the tragedy of being black in South Africa. His tragedy would be like that of Tony Morrison’s tragic heroine in her novel The Bluest Eye. Pressured by the society to believe that having blue eyes is the ultimate beauty, Pecola finally loses her mind when she realises that her dream to acquire blue eyes would never be realised. This was the path that Modisane was on, but not on the same scale.

The fact that he knew and appreciated that he was trapped in his black skin saved him from this tragic end. So, Modisane yearned for the whiteness that was symbolic of privileges that were denied blacks. That Modisane realised the cruelty of South African whites is certain. He knew that 'the white world rejected him' and would not alienate himself from the black world, although that world had its imperfections as well. What I want to argue here is that the 1950's generation strove for self-improvement, and not for the change of pigmentation as such. What one should realise is that there was a vast difference between the culture of the West, which Modisane and his contemporaries aspired for, and the Afrikaner's state-prescribed whiteness which was loathsome to blacks.

There is no evidence in the text that suggests that Modisane disliked staying in the slum, Sophiatown - the 'black spot'. So, one can say that Modisane was devoted to both the slum and self-improvement, hence his room in Sophiatown was adorned with material which was regarded as white and linked to white privileges and preserve. It would not be out of place to suggest that Modisane, consciously or subconsciously, wanted to break the stereotype that said blacks were inferior to whites. If anything, he believed in world culture which stipulated that all men are equal and should be given equal opportunities and possibilities. Unfortunately, such opportunities were denied blacks in the 1950's and urbanised blacks like Modisane had to deal with this unfair situation. Dealing with it meant that they had to be radicalized in many ways; politically, artistically, educationally, etc. They had to come to realise that the inequalities and discrepancies that existed

between blacks and whites called for a persistent challenge and struggle. They knew that in order to ease their lot and gain their rightful recognition they had to engage in a multi-faceted struggle, both as individuals and as a collective. That recognition though was to meet with resistance from the Afrikaners because ... A black man seeking recognition in the white world should be brutalised to the extent that when recognition comes, it will be to him as an animal.<sup>128</sup> It was such attitudes by white South Africa that forced Modisane to contemplate leaving the country than to succumb to the pressure or become white. By 'living white', I want to argue, he was just trying to survive the state's onslaught on black people.

To round off this section I want to restate that Blame Me On History is a political autobiography. Modisane's life story, it would be noticed, was interspersed with historical moments like the miners' strike, statistical facts, like the native wages and other social ills. In this regard one cannot agree more with Soyinka who says that the artist (writer) has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experiences of his society and the voice of vision in his own time.<sup>129</sup> One of the strengths of Modisane's text is that he interpreted the South African Constitution and also explained the manner in which it impacted on black people without necessarily forgetting his project of unwinding his life-story. In the postscript of the text he writes that:

The standard of (South African) law is white, its legislative authority is white, its executive authority is white, and as a black man I had to adjust myself to it though I accepted it as unjust. The discriminations are written into the law, to protest against the discriminations is to be produced against the authority of law. I see

South African Law as the basis and the instrument of my oppression. I am black, the law is white.<sup>130</sup>

He then listed the oppressive laws that governed black people as he left the country by train, turning his back on the country of his birth rather than accept the white law.

## **BLAME ME ON HISTORY AS A LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

The 1950's were ironically the most productive in literature, theatre and music. The names of personalities like Can Themba, Makeba and productions like 'King Kong' are synonymous with the Sophiatown of the 1950's. In the light of this, it would be no exaggeration to suggest that Modisane was a man of letters, and Blame Me On History is both a political and literary autobiography. The fact that the 1950's were prolific in literature was evidenced by the void which was left when black intellectual writers were forced into exile in the 1960's. The lean years of the 1960's would be arrested by black consciousness of the 1970's. In his sick-bed Motsitsi, Modisane's contemporary, paid a tribute to the 1950's greats in the following words.

Ou! Patience, Hazel, Mumsie, Lewis, Zeke, Bloke and all the rest of you. Life gets pretty dull around Old Burg sometimes now. Life gets pretty colourless without the goings on and the gossip and gaiety you gave it... I just hope these characters in London and the USA appreciate what they've got that's all.<sup>131</sup>

One of the most important literary features of Blame Me On History is the fragmentation of the structure, and I want to argue that Modisane consciously adopted this structure. Conventionally autobiographies are linear texts, beginning from when the author is

young and vulnerable to the old matured being who mostly disappeared. As Rosenblatt puts it, "In black autobiography in particular... something curious... happens to the black heroes (authors) of black autobiography, they disappear."<sup>132</sup> In Modisane's text this norm is broken because the text begins almost in the end (1948) and goes backwards and forwards. When the reader opens the text he is confronted by the matured but confused Modisane whose inner torture was paralleled with the destruction of the town which is symbolic of his life in South Africa.<sup>133</sup>

In Chapter Two, the text goes back by ten years to 1938 and points out to the author's earlier symbolic death. In 1938, the year his father was beaten to death, Modisane was only fourteen. Although the death marked a turning point in his life, what stuck to his mind was the funeral. On the coffin of his father he noticed his name and not that of his father. He writes that "The shock of seeing my name and not my father's on the coffin confused and frightened me, but it seemed symbolic somehow, I was officially dead."<sup>134</sup> So one deals with the life-story of someone who is confused and symbolically dead, hence the fragmented structure of the text. Another strength of the text is that it seemed as though Modisane's life was concentrated into a single year, between the winter of 1948 of the first chapter to January 1949 of the last chapter. Other years seem to be diversions although they are neatly tied to the whole life that is recovered. What makes the story 'seem' a unit is that Modisane gives equal weight to his own life and the life that surrounds him. As he takes stock of the demolition while he walked down the streets of Sophiatown, he mentally heard its noise, and mentally goes to the shebeens,

holds conversations and generally relives the Sophiatown of the past. What the reader is confronted with is the past that is interfaced with the present. Modisane's internal turmoil, private life and the life of the community that evolved created a whole. For instance, the silence and loneliness of Sophiatown triggered the thought of his dissolved marriage to Fiki:

It was the same loneliness and the same emptiness which surrounded Milner Road as I searched from out of the silence the noise of Sophiatown. ...at Edwards Road I jumped into the bus down to the terminus in Victoria Road, a few yards from Nobeni's shebeen, across the street from which was a front for Sophiatown's biggest fhafee, numbers games, pool, there was life and noise, a man came out of the shop and removed his hat, returning it...<sup>135</sup>

What this structure illustrates is the fusion of the past and present, the mental and the real, the individual and the community, the interior and the exterior. On the one hand what epitomises the text's achievement is the smooth transition that exists from one idea to the other and from one time frame to the other. On the other hand it is the intermix of the author and Sophiatown. By interspersing their life-stories with social ills the 'Drum generation' in general, and Modisane in particular, made it their duty to agitate for the betterment of the black man's lot, thus complimenting black politicians. As a result of this commitment to literature Olney observed that:

An odd consequence, which no one could have foreseen, is that South Africa has been especially prolific in literary (as well as others) autobiographies. Caught in various degrees mangled in the wheels of the political oppression, a number of South African writers have responded with personal documents testifying to what it is to be black and to be creative in the twentieth century.<sup>136</sup>

A noteworthy point about Modisane was his wide interest in world culture. It would seem that when he became aware that black cultural development was stunted by the regime's repression, he opted and embraced international culture - an attempt to free himself from the clutches of South Africa. By this assertion I do not suggest that he wanted to free himself of black identity, rather that he could not identify himself with South Africa as a nation. To achieve his goal of belonging to the international community he transported himself psychologically and materially to other nations. Like his contemporaries, his South African cultural void was filled by America and Harlem through movies. His generation not only emulated their heroes but also saw themselves belonging in the USA and elsewhere to create the illusion of existing out of South Africa. Modisane had surrounded himself with great works of art which included Klee's paintings, Shakespeare's work, Omar Khayam, Salvado Dali's art, Beethoven, Bartok, Stravinski's music, Miro and others.<sup>137</sup> By collecting these works, I want to argue, he was not trying to pass as white or even associate himself with the white community but to find himself an alternative community outside of South Africa (for the black man). His love for multiculturalism resembled that of Dlomo who drew extensively from multicultural sources in his works.

The above two sections show the extent to which Modisane tried to reconcile his split identity. His self-identification became complicated because of the political realities on the ground which made it difficult for him to identify with the country. Although he tried to find a place to fit in in politics he was disillusioned and decided to be apolitical.

Nonetheless, 'self', community and national identity are not easy to exist without. So Modisane had to find another way of identification through writing. In writing though he created his own unreal, fictitious community, self and nation. He records that:

I directed my energy to my writing, determined to use it as a weapon for gate-crashing into the worlds which rejected me, my writing showed a studied omission of commitment, that histrionics of tight-fisted protest, and in my first published short story, The Dignity of Begging, I created a satirical situation in which I sat back and laughed at the worlds which rejected me.<sup>138</sup>

However, as much as Modisane laughed at the real world one senses the agony he went through due to his rejection by white South Africa. The different masks he wore throughout the text only gave him a temporary reprieve from the harsh realities on the ground. Rosenblatt observes that:

Every autobiographer must find a guise or a voice with which to come to terms with himself and his world. If he is candid he will admit to a number of voices and guises that he will adopt as his mind and his world enlarges, "We wear the masks... and the mouths with myriad subtleties."<sup>139</sup>

Like many other black people at the time the masks helped Modisane to survive in the country but he never settled, he was in constant search for a stable self, community as well as national identity, which constantly shifted. Even the intellectual community he tried to identify with had disintegrated as intellectual after intellectual left the country. In the end like Abrahams, he decided to skip the country and accommodate himself in the international community. He left South Africa at the age of 36 in 1959 and would never come back. He died in Dortmund, West Germany within the international community he had chosen, leaving a German wife and child.

## CONCLUSION

As it can be seen from the three autobiographies, the question of identity was a complex and complicated one in South Africa in the period 1930 to the late 1950's. What had transpired in the discussion is that politics played a crucial role in determining individuals' and group's identities. As much as race is universal it would seem that in South Africa it became poignant for two related reasons, firstly, the rise of the Afrikaners and black nationalisms and secondly, the introduction of repression that accompanied the Afrikaner regimes. The colour of one's skin did not only become a symbol of classification but also a political tool that was used to segregate certain groups (blacks and coloureds) from mainstream politics.

Common to all race groups was a need to belong to a community and a nation. Unfortunately this belonging in South Africa was governed by the politics of repression, but even then the individuals strove to assert their identities. In the case of Peter Abrahams the negotiation of the levels of identity was complicated by the fact that the Coloureds were squeezed between the two dominant race groups, Afrikaners and blacks. The discussion revealed that while the coloureds were not accepted as either black or white, they were also not free to develop an identity of their own. What identity they had was a social construct by the regime. Born in such a situation, Abrahams was so frustrated that he concentrated on self-development which led to his drift away from his 'community' and South Africa. After reading the Negro literature he came to understand

his worth and that South Africa was debilitating to any aspirant young person. He then took a decision to leave South Africa for England, which proved to be a stepping stone to the world. He only could achieve his goal by becoming a part of the international community - a true internationalist. Within the international community he realised that his colour did not count more than the fact that he was a human being.

The repressive policies of the Afrikaner regimes in the period in question (i.e. 1930-to the late 1950's) did not only impact on coloureds. The white English speaking South Africans (WESSAs) also found themselves on the receiving end as regards their identity in South Africa although to a lower extent compared to other race groups. Although the WESSAs were allowed in the mainstream politics, they were not the part of the decision makers. The Afrikaners sidelined the WESSAs mainly because of the Anglo Boer War which claimed many Afrikaner lives. On the other hand though other race groups, like blacks, mistrusted the WESSAs since they accused them of complicity with the regime. Due to the way they were viewed by different individuals and groups some WESSAs decided to be spectators, others, like Alan Paton, were gradually drawn into identifying with South Africa as their country. Although tentative, Paton finally entered active politics and produced world class works of art as a South African. The fact that he did not leave South Africa at the height of repression evidence this national identification and the acceptance that he belonged with the entire South African community. Although Paton's lot cannot be compared to that of Peter Abrahams and that of Bloke Modisane, it is ironic that he did not leave the country while others did.

Modisane's case is similar to that of Abrahams in many respects. Both were oppressed and intellectually suffocated in South Africa and as a result decided to leave the country. Nevertheless, Modisane's account is by far the more fascinating. What sets his text apart is its balance between politics and literariness. As pointed out in Chapter Four, politics and literariness feature prominently in Modisane's text. Through balancing the two major characteristics, Modisane was able to show how difficult it was to be black and to be an intellectual in South Africa in the period in question, especially the 1950's. Among other things, through the choice of words and structure, Modisane was able both to create the necessary mood and tone and also show intellectuals like him, how to use (art) literature to survive in South Africa. Like Abrahams, his exile should be understood as a way in which he sought a community and a nation to belong to. To achieve his goals he chose the world and the international community.

The three autobiographies, then, show how individuals negotiated their levels of identities. All three accounts show how the authors searched for a community and a nation to belong to. The three accounts, clearly illustrate that the question of identity affected all race groups in South Africa. Although the three autobiographies represent different race groups as constructed by the Afrikaner regimes, it is important to note that they are also interrelated. On the surface level all three texts serve as mouthpieces of the marginalized community. Apart from the recounted life stories, the texts react to the socio-political actions by the Afrikaner regimes. On another level the lived life which is revealed and the experiences of the communities occupy the same space, South Africa.

As Jacobson-Widding points out, individuals can also be members of the same group or community. In the case of the three authors, they are South Africans even though they are stratified according to race.

Furthermore, all three autobiographers are some of the greatest writers to ever emerge in South Africa. The importance of this aspect cannot be underestimated. What this aspect indicates is that no amount of segregation can kill people's innate capabilities and desires. Inevitably, as writers the three authors belonged in the same fold, rendering through their writing, a valuable service to the country that rejected them. These interrelationships and others highlight the fact that identity is fluid and as a result constantly shifts as the individual negotiates the meaning and levels of identity. Lastly, it becomes apparent that racially constructed identities are unreal, artificial and therefore subject to challenge.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Abrahams, Peter, Tell Freedom (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p.61. (T.F.) Abrahams tries to understand the dichotomy and dilemma of being Coloured in South Africa. All subsequent references to this book will be included in the dissertation giving the abbreviation TF, followed by the page number.
2. Paton, Alan, Towards the Mountain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.206-212. (TTM). In this chapter Paton explains his enthusiasm to learn to understand the Afrikaners. But during 1938 centenary celebrations his enthusiasm was dampened by the calls for Afrikaner nationalism. 1938 was a crucial year as regards the South African race groups' identification, both with the country and special community. All subsequent references to this book will be included in the dissertation giving the abbreviation TTM, followed by page number.
3. Modisane Bloke, Blame Me on History (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), pp.87-8. (BMOH). Bloke Modisane finds himself sidelined by both the white and black community. What Modisane expresses here is the dilemma that black intellectuals found themselves in South Africa in the 1950's. All subsequent references to this book will be included in the dissertation giving the abbreviation BMOH, followed by the page number.
4. Karis T.K. and Carter, G. (Eds). From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 2 (California: Hoover Institution Press, 1973) p.71.
5. Jacobs, J.U. 'The Discourses of Detention' in Current Writing (Vol. 3, Oct. 1991), pp.93-99.
6. TF, pp310-11.
7. BMOH, p.220.
8. TTM, p.304.
9. Coullie, J.L. "Not quite fiction' The challenge of poststructuralism to the reading of contemporary South African autobiography" in Current Writing (Vol. 3, Oct/1991), p.1-2.
10. Gititi, G. "In prison under apartheid" in Current Writing (Vol. 3, Oct/1991). p.43.
11. Eakin, P.J. Fictions in Autobiography Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.3. The question of 'I: and the community as both the same and at the same time different entities is applicable to Abrahams and Modisane' autobiography.
12. Rosenblatt, R. 'Black autobiography' in Olney's Autobiography. Essays, Theoretical and Critical (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.57.
13. Eakin, P.J. Fictions in Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.17.

14. Wade, M. Peter Abrahams (London: Evans, 1972), p.98.
15. Eakin, P.J. Fictions in autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.17.
16. Dubow, S. Scientific Racism in South Africa (N.Y.: Simon and Schuter, 1997), p.257. Although Apartheid was only instituted in 1948 (i.e. later than the beginning of this study, 1930) racial policies preceded it.
17. The use of the 'mask' abounds in BMOH. Dhlomo, Nkosi and other black writers used the concept of the 'mask' extensively. See also T.F., p.90 and p.158.
18. Eakin, Fictions in autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p.27.
19. Coullie, 'Not quite fiction', in Current Writing (Vol. 3, Oct/1991), p.3.
20. Eakin, Fictions in autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.3.
21. TTM, p.132. In some cases in writings by whites, racism was neither intended or consciously engaged into, but since the master discourse was racist inclined racism was inevitable.
22. Olney, J. Tell Me Africa (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.40.
23. Rosenblatt, R. 'Black autobiography' in J. Olney's Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical (Princeton, Princeton University Press, p.171).
24. T.F. p.229. For the oppressed in South Africa the price of advancement, education and self-improvement was isolation and loneliness. One became different from the rest of the community not in colour but in the way he thought and saw things. But the main tragedy was, like in Things Fall Apart, being unable to do things that are done by the community.
25. Olney, J. Metaphors of the Self (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 15.
26. Gordimer, N. Living in the Interregnum in Human Science Research Centre for South African Literature (ed) C. Malah (Pinetown: Owen Burgess, 1987).
27. Worden, N. The Making of Modern South Africa (Great Britain: Blackwell, 1994), p.91.
28. TTM, p.56. This is one illustration of Paton's shifting identity.
29. Dubow, S. Scientific Racism, p.246.
30. Van Der Ross, R.E. Myths and Attitudes (C.T.: Tafelberg, 1979), p.2.
31. Ibid, p2-26.
32. T.F., p.9.
33. Ibid, p.19.

34. Ibid, p. 10. Also see Phillips, C.S. African Political Dictionary (Santa Barbara: California, 1994), p.42.
35. Ibid, p.11.
36. Wade, M. Peter Abrahams, p. 109.
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45. Ibid, p.74.
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47. Ibid, p.78.
48. Ibid, p.94.
49. Balibar, E. 'Race and Crisis' in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein's Race, Nation, Class, (London, Verso, 1991), p.49.
50. T.F., pp.124-5.
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52. T.F., p.149.
53. Ibid, pp.135-6.
54. Ibid, p.188.
55. Ibid, p.198.
56. Ogungbesan, K. The Writings of Peter Abrahams, p.86.

57. T.F., p.194.
58. Ibid, p.195.
59. Ibid, p.197-8.
60. Ibid, p.227.
61. Ibid, p.232.
62. Ibid, p.233-4.
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68. T.F., pp.278-299.
69. Ibid, p.311.
70. Ogungbesan, K. The Writings of Peter Abrahams, p.92. See also T.F., pp.309-311.
71. See T.F. pp.253-5, The way in which the Act affected Abrahams, see also BMOH, pp.205-229.
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89. Alexander, Alan Paton, p.150-1.
90. TTM, p.163.
91. Ibid, p.304.
92. Alexander, Alan Paton, p.160.
93. TTM, p.163.
94. Alexander, Alan Paton, p.151.
95. Ibid, p.144.
96. Ibid, p.197.
97. Mphahlele, E. The African Image, pp.157-160.
98. Callan, E. Alan Paton, p.53.
99. The conflict between politics and literature is a difficult one to resolve. In his essay 'The Discovery of the Ordinary' Ndebele debates the fact that the two can be separated, but a number of writers think otherwise.
100. Alexander, Alan Paton, p.108.
101. Mokgatle, N. The Autobiography of an Unknown South African, (C.E.: AD Donker Publishers, 1971), p.218.
102. For more on the NBC see Karis and Carter, p.3.
103. Mandela, N. The Struggle is my Life, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1994), p.85.

104. Mokgatle, The Autobiography, p.251.
105. Karis, T. and Carter (eds) Protest and Challenge, Vol. 2, p.3.
106. Ibid, p.3.
107. Mare, G. Ethnicity and Politics (London: Zed Books, 1992, p.42.
108. Olney, J. Tell Me Africa, p.30.
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110. Daymond, J.U. *et al.* (eds). Momentum, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), p.42.
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112. Ibid, p.101.
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127. The question of racial integration had been Dhlomo's concern in 'The New Africa'.
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131. Motloatse, M. (ed). Casey and Co. (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1980), p.129.
132. Rosenblatt, R. Black Autobiography, p.177.
133. BMOH, p.5.
134. Ibid, p.31.
135. Ibid, p.49.
136. Olney, J. Tell Me Africa, p.43.
137. Ngwenya, T.H. 'The ontological states of self in autobiography' in Current Writing (Vol. 1, Oct/1989), p.32. Ngwenya states that "It would be inaccurate, therefore, to say that Modisane wants to become 'white', as there is no natural relationship between being white and appreciating the beauty of art, or being moved by classical music."
138. BMOH, p.88.
139. Rosenblatt, R. Black Autobiography, p.176.

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