

A Postcolonial Reading on Alan Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country*

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Abstract

Postcolonialism refers to the period in which colonized nations confront the lasting effects of European colonialism. Postcolonial literature addresses the culture and experiences of non-European people marginalized by colonial rulers, aiming to reclaim their heritage. Post-colonial theory, in contrast, examines colonial strategies and explores intersections of race, class, gender and racial segregation in literature, highlighting the cultural, historical and economic impacts of Western colonialism. The paper explores the intersections of caste, status, race and gender faced by Africans through Alan Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948), which highlights the impact of social status, caste and racial segregation on people’s lives. By analysing Edward Said’s *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) and Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), this paper focuses on the emotions, politics, conflicts and segregation depicted in Paton’s novel. It explores the cry for equality, respect for Africa and the hope for freedom and progress. The paper examines how these issues intertwine with postcolonial struggles and the quest for cultural and societal decolonization in Africa.

Keywords: *Race, status, colonization, segregation, Johannesburg and murder.*

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Introduction

Born on 11 January 1903 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, Alan Stewart Paton was an anti-apartheid activist and a South African writer. Paton has written two novels *Cry, The Beloved*

Country (1948) and *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), and has also written a short story *The Waste Land*.

It is true that the victim was a black man, and there is a school of thought which would regard such an offence as less serious when the victim is black (Paton 172)

Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948), is divided into three books, book 1, book 2 and book 3. The novel provides a powerful story on racial injustice, struggles of the 'blacks' and issues of segregation in South Africa. Paton highlights the impact of race, class struggles, social status, and the cultural and economic oppression caused by the Europeans. The novel discloses the story of Stephen Kumalo, a religious 'black' priest, who travels to Johannesburg in search for his son and his sister Gertrude. While Kumalo was on his journey he discovered several bitter truths on the harsh living conditions of his fellow Africans who were living in tattered, segregated places. During the journey Kumalo also learns about the conflicts and murder committed by his son and how he copes with his son being in jail and his journey back to Ndotsheni. Therefore, through the analysis of Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) and Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1994), the paper shall discuss on the conflicts, politics, emotions, racial segregation and a cry for betterment and equality.

The field of postcolonial study is a very "dynamic field that is routinely examined and re- evaluated at international conferences and in scholarly journals throughout the world" (2), on the other hand postcolonial theory explores on the ideology of the Europeans, the racial prejudice and the "feminization, marginalization and dehumanization of the native" (18) people who have been colonized by the colonizers. Edward Said is said to have been introduced the postcolonial field through his work *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978). Born on 01 November 1935, Edward Waddie Said was an academic, literary critic and an activist. Said was a Professor at the Columbia University and was also one of the founders of Postcolonial studies. His book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) was considered as the constitutional work on which post-colonial theory was developed. According to Said he states that, "Orientalism is a school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples and localities" (203) and Orientalism is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring and having

Special Issue - March 2025

ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)

authority over the Orient” (3) or the colonized people. This authority and oppressive nature of the Europeans towards the Orient is evident in Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved Country*.

Born on 01 November 1949, Homi Kharshedji Bhabha was a theorist and an Indian scholar. He works as a Professor at Harvard University and was one of the notable figures in the field of Postcolonial studies. Bhabha has introduced many key concepts through his work such as hybridity, mimicry and third space. He states that, “mimicry is a defense, fought with the resistance of the native” (28), whereas hybridity and the third space resulted from the “split and negotiation between colonizer and colonized, which is ‘neither the one nor the other’ is thus the point where anti-colonial resistance is first articulated” (28) or comprehensible. Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture* (1994) states that, “the borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of traditions and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low” (3) and social differences. Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*, deals with the shaken, unstable hybrid and the different identities that the colonizers and the colonized holds and this unstable hybrid leads to the loss of family roots, traditions, cultures and freedom and this hybrid issues is highlighted in Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, The Beloved Country*.

The novel *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948), unveils the journey of Stephen Kumalo, a priest, a religious man and God’s follower who travels to Johannesburg from Ndotsheni in search of his son Absalom. In the novel, when being asked if he hated the ‘whites’ for breaking the tribe and for everything that they have done to his people he answered, “I am a Christian. It is not in my heart to hate a white man. It was a white man who brought my father out of darkness but you will pardon me if I talk frankly to you. The tragedy is not that things are broken. The tragedy is that they are not mended again” (25) reveals his nature as a religious and God-fearing man. While Kumalo was on his journey, he discovered several truths and rules the ‘blacks’ are forced to follow. While taking a train from Ndotsheni to Johannesburg he noticed that the train was divided into two sections one for the ‘blacks’ and the other for the ‘whites’ or the Europeans. “Kumalo climbed into the carriage for non-Europeans, already full of the humbler people of his race” (14) and this was the first racial segregation noticed in the novel. Even though racial segregation such as the Jim Crow Laws has been legally abolished yet it is not fully abolished. Jim Crow Laws is a law that has been passed to

Special Issue - March 2025

ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)

subordinate and suppress the 'blacks' by the Europeans. The law "codified discriminatory practices and provided the legal framework necessary for the unequal treatment of African-American" (145), and this law is slowly and minutely creating a "kind of "raced space". This segregated use of space ensured that white Americans were treated in a superior manner not only in their neighbourhoods, but also in schools, restaurants and a myriad of places in their communities" (145) and this act has created inequity and injustice against African-Americans.

While Kumalo was on his journey in search for his lost son and sister he reaches at Orlando and he was asked to go to Shanty Town for his son Absalom was seen in the town. Upon arrival at Shanty Town along with his companion Theophilus Msimangu, he discovered that the town was built for the poor 'blacks' people belonging from very low economic background. When Kumalo reached at the town he felt uneasy and felt the ruins, destruction, packed and polluted Shanty Town, a town where,

children laugh in the narrow lanes that runs between those tragic habitations. A sheet of iron, a few planks, hessian and grass, an old door from some forgotten house. Some smoke curls from vents cunningly contrived, there is a smell of food, there is a sound of voices, not raised in anger or pain, but talking of ordinary things, of this one that is born and that one that has died, of this one that does so well at school and that one who is now in prison (57).

The above description is enough to tell the readers on the harsh living conditions and the daily struggles of the 'black' people living in a several isolated and segregated places in Johannesburg. However, changes start from book 2, when Mr Jarvis learns that his son was shot death by Absalom, Stephen Kumalo's son, "he was shot death at 1:30 pm, this afternoon at Johannesburg" (116) by a native man. When Kumalo heard the news he felt betrayed, emotions rushed through his blood and he was shattered into pieces and could not believe that his son, a son of a priest has committed a great sin, that is, murder and he keeps on seeking forgiveness from Mr.Jarvis for his son's action. During the trial, Kumalo had tried to seek help from his brother John Kumalo but was however betrayed by his own brother as well. At the court, the white man presents the three accused in front of the court that was charged with the murder of Mr.Jarvis's son Arthur Trevalyan Jarvis at his own house in Johannesburg. The three accused was introduced as Absalom Kumalo, Matthew Kumalo and lastly Johannes Pafuri.

However, a shift took place from the murder scene to gold mines. The discovery of gold found in Johannesburg has shifted everyone's attention from the murder scene. The discovery of gold mine has also led to the massive exploitation of 'black' labourers under the hands of the 'whites'. When gold mine was discovered the 'black' labourers were at high demand and this demand has made the "white people realize how dependent they are on the labour of the black people" (163) but however during mining three 'black' people was also killed. The novel attention is again shifted to the murder attempted by the three native and Absalom Kumalo being one of them. In the court when Absalom was trying to defend himself and tell the judge and people in the court that it was not his intention to kill Arthur and that it was an accident, the court did not hear a word of him and said that, "such an intent is not confined to cases where the object is to inflict grievous bodily harm, calculated to cause death regardless of whether death results or not" (172); thus resulting to Absalom Kumalo finding guilty and was charged of the murder and the judge proclaimed, "I sentence you, Absalom Kumalo, to be returned to custody and to be hanged by the neck until you are death" (174), whereas the other two Matthew Kumalo and Johanned Pafuri was not pleaded guilty and was discharged. Upon hearing the decision made by the judge Kumalo was dumb struck and was unable to process the decision. Mixed emotions and thoughts rushed through his mind, he suddenly thought about his wife at home on what answer should he gave to her when she asks about her son and he also thought about his status as a priest and how will people in Ndotsheni react when they see or meet him and when they learn that he is a father of a murderer. After the court ended all the people from the court came out and everyone was standing on their own respective side that was segregated by the Europeans, the 'blacks' on their own side and the 'whites; on their own sides accordingly, which has become a custom to be followed by all. But however, when Kumalo could no longer stand and fell on the ground due to shame, sadness and distress, the "young white man break the custom, and he and Msimangu help the old and broken man, on each side of him" (174), which symbolises that there is no hatred or that nothing is superior than kindness and humanity, which also further serves as a symbol for equality, hope and respect for each other.

Before leaving Johannesburg for Ndotsheni, Kumalo visited his son Absalom in prison, and "he took his son's hands, and they were not lifeless anymore, but clung to his, seeking some comfort,

Special Issue - March 2025

ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)

some assurance. And the old man held them more strongly, and said again, Be of good courage, my son” (177) and before his father leave Absalom, “caught his father by his knees and cried out to him. You must not leave me, you must not leave me. He broke out again into the terrible sobbing, and cried, No, no, you must not leave me” (178) and further and said that he is afraid and does not want to die, but want to live with his wife who is now pregnant with his child. This symbolises redemption and new beginning in the novel.

Stephen Kumalo returned to Ndotsheni with heavy heart, with grief, sadness, bitterness but with a mind and thought to rebuild everything. Upon arrival at his own home, he introduces Gertrude’s child to his wife, and she

lifts the small boy and kisses him after the European fashion. You are my child, she says. She puts him down and goes to the girl who stands there humbly with her paper bag. She takes her in her arms after the European fashion, and says to her, You are my daughter. And the girl bursts suddenly into weeping, so that the woman must say to her, Hush, hush, do not cry (187)

revealing the kind and compassionate nature both husband and wife have.

Throughout the rest of the novel Stephen Kumalo keeps on seeking forgiveness from Mr Jarvis until Mr Jarvis forgave and said, “That may be, that may be. He turned suddenly to Kumalo. Go well, umfundisi. Throughout this night, stay well. And Kumalo cried after him, Go well, go well” (232), and his face lit up with happiness. Kumalo waited for Mr Jarvis to leave until the “sounds of the horse had died away” (232) and he started climbing to top of the mountain till her reach the peak. Later Stephen Kumalo has also started forming a relationship with Arthur Jarvis’s son. In book 3, the novel talks and teaches us about kindness, love, forgiveness and compassion and proclaims that, “pain and suffering, they are a secret. Kindness and love, they are a secret. But I have learned that kindness and love can pay for pain and suffering” (193), and even though the novel ends as a tragedy and fear but however it also ends with lots of new hope, better life, forgiveness, new beginning, equality and progress for Africa and even though, Ndotsheni is still in darkness but the light will come there also. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has for the thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why that is a secret (236),

and hope remains the overall tone of the novel. The novel is set on a crucial moment during the backdrop of political and economic breakdown. The apartheid era and its incrimination are an inherent factor which provides the detail background of the novel. The writer provides us a comparative analysis of the life in city and in town, about Christian faith, racism, injustice, exploitation both on environment and humans' inequality, redemption and reconciliation.

Conclusion

Even though the novel deals with issues such as race, tragedies, mixed emotions, murders, struggles, political, social and economic oppressions discovered by Stephen Kumalo in his journey, however despite all sadness, bitterness and fear the novel ends with a new beginning and a new hope, hope for a better and equal beloved country, Africa and that men,

should walk upright in the land where they are born, and be free to use the fruits of the earth, what was there evil in it? Yet man were afraid, with a fear that was deep, deep in the heart, fear so deep that they hid their kindness, or brought it out with fierceness and anger, and hit it behind fierce and frowning eyes. They were afraid because they were so few. And such fear could not be cast out, but by love (235),

revealing that everything can be solved when there is kindness, love, forgiveness and understanding. In the end of the novel, we see that Kumalo climbs up the mountain to weep and pray for his son's soul and seek forgiveness from God and mercy on his son's soul, which symbolises Christian faith. Paton's novel, *Cry, The Beloved Country* investigate the austere contradiction between the urban and rural panorama of South Africa, exposing the oppression, injustice, discrimination, racial segregation and inequalities faced by the 'black' people. However, through the story and characters from the novel we can conclude that racial peace and harmony is possible in South Africa.

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