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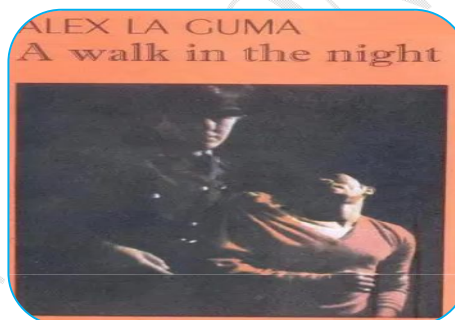
STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE IN ALEX LA GUMA'S *A WALK IN THE NIGHT*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is an attempt to study Alex La Guma's 'A Walk in the Night' from the perspective of struggle for existence. La Guma due to his early involvement in politics was a committed opponent of the South African system of government. All his writings reflect his political stance. Alex La Guma's A Walk in the Night, is set in Cape Town in District Six, in one night some where in the late 1950s. The time setting represents Apartheid South Africa, and hence, the novella depicts the abusive attitudes and methods of white South Africans against their black compatriots. Alex La Guma's novella is, in fact, about the harsh attitudes and actions of the obnoxious Apartheid system which the black community has to endure, and on the other hand, it is about little opportunity given to blacks to lead normal lives. In this respect, Michael Adonis and Willieboy are set as the epitome of the unfortunate black youth; unemployed, apparently uneducated, and exposed at any moment to the abusive methods of the police. In this way, Michael Adonis, cannot find a way out except into delinquency. Willieboy is engaged into petty crimes and aggressive acts in order to survive, and Michael Adonis, under the effect of an illegitimate dismissal from his job, resorts to a membership of Foxy's gang that is specialized in robbery and petty crimes. Worse yet, still under the rage of the recent sacking, he happens to unwillingly strike dead an old dying peaceful Irish man (Mr. Doughty) out of a dispute over a bottle of wine. As a reaction, the police get engaged in a frenzied chase of the wrongly supposed murderer. In fact, without holding enough evidence, Constable Raalt, a cruel white policeman, as he comes face to face with the innocent Willieboy, shows no hesitation to shoot him dead. A Walk in the Night depicts no case of easiness, rest or love even between members of the same family. We have already seen the effect of the coming childbirth on the Lorenzo family; the husband is disappointed with his wife and puts the blame on her, this leads to a big argument between them over what is supposed to be good news in a normal situation. But in the environment of the Cape Town District Six no place is devoted to rest and comfort; no ambition, no joy, no satisfaction, and no pleasantness can be expected between the members of the whole society. It is only the feeling of discontent, dissatisfaction, fear, hatred and readiness for revenge.



KEYWORDS: : delinquency, epitome, ambition, satisfaction, pleasantness, discontent, hatred, fear.

INTRODUCTION

The novel "provided information in literary form about the injustice of apartheid to a wider audience. In other words, it

brought in politics into a work of art and shows the compatibility of the two. The characters, as the title may reveal, symbolize people walking in the darkness of apartheid injustice. Due to limited

political commitment, they do not know how to organize a struggle for freedom. La Guma summarizes this as:

One of the reasons why I called the book 'A Walk in the Night' was that in my mind, the coloured community was still discovering themselves in relation to the general struggle against racism in South Africa. They were working, enduring and in this way they were experiencing this walking in the Night until such time as they found themselves and were prepared to be citizens of a society to which they wanted to make a contribution. I tried to create a picture of a people struggling to see the light, to see the dawn, to see something new, other than their experiences in this confined community (Abrahams *Alex* 49).

La Guma wrote the novella as part of his contribution to stop apartheid injustices. His purpose, as stated in the above quotation, was to open the minds of his community so that they could see exactly why they were oppressed, and what they had to do to become free. However, there is no evidence of the relationship and reception of La Guma's "A Walk in the Night", by his community. Breidlid points out that "A Walk in the Night" was a way of restoring a voice which had always been suppressed by the apartheid government". (*Resistance* 15) In his analysis, he attaches much importance to the historical and political causes around the time when the novella was produced. To substantiate his claims he gives the example of two white policemen who unjustly hunted and caused the death of the innocent coloured man, Willieboy, "for the perceived murder of Doughty, the old white man inhabiting District Six" (Breidlid *Resistance* 143). Normally, the proper obligation of the police is to save people and their property. However, in apartheid South Africa, it was not the case. Instead of honouring their correct obligation, they (the police) behaved as oppressors. Indeed, according to La Guma, "in South Africa, we live with the police, I believe Black people are continually being harassed by the police...so that when one is concerned with social situations, one can't leave out the police" (Abrahams *Memories* 23). It is this racially based fear that Michael Adonis (in "A Walk in the Night") comes across when he runs into the police on his way back home. For him, it was not a pleasant experience.

Cecil Abrahams, La Guma's "official biographer", has also made an important contribution to the understanding of the novella. Abrahams correctly points out that the novella "concerns itself with the social, economic and political purpose of the Cape Coloured community..." (*Alex* 49). According to him, La Guma has the ability to portray character...he is a master of observation, and he does not fail to notice every line of physique and every aspect of clothing and posture that a character may indulge in" (Abrahams *Alex* 67). . It is true that the novella deals with the social lives of characters. In a single night, different events occur and one event rapidly follows another.

La Guma recalled in a BBC interview that a character like Michael Adonis is a typical person modelled after his young contemporaries in the slums of Cape Town District Six:

I played with and met characters like him, young men, who, because of the lack of opportunity and because of their colour have been prevented from achieving anything progressive and from achieving any ambition-have been seen it going on around me. That made it easy for me to write and create such a character. (Asein *Alex* 48.)

Besides, La Guma spent an important part of his life in District Six, which made it useful for him to portray authentically and skillfully in detail the mood of the environment in the area: La Guma concentrates as much on the visual response of the reader as on his assumed sense of smell. He deliberately evokes the sordid qualities of the environment and blends details of suburban squalor with the ruggedness and somewhat decadent values which he identifies with the characters that inhabit the locations. Thus in varying degrees, all his characters embody one or another of the symptoms of pervasive decay and stupor.

La Guma's first novel, or 'long story' (Abrahams *Alex* 69), to use a term he prefers, *A Walk in the Night* was written during the late 1950s. In the late 1950s La Guma was active as a journalist. He was a reporter on the staff of *New Age* and reported events in Cape Town. Apart from his reporting, he wrote articles for *New Age* and *Fighting Talk* and contributed 'UP My Alley', a regular column of commentary on miscellaneous issues. Thus he was performing two roles, that of the journalist and that of a creative writer. He was aware of the different demands of the two genres and made attempts to seek a transition from being a journalist to a creative writer.

"Reportage might bore the reader. Experience in journalism gives one the discipline to organize the material, but it might have bad effects when it comes to creative writing". (La Guma "Discussing") The link between journalism and creative writing has been a prominent feature of South African literature, particularly of Black South African Literature. Couzens point out, 'journalism and literature were, for a long period of South African Black [African] literary history, Siamese twins'. (Couzens "The Black Press" 98) The same could be said of the literary history of the Coloureds and the Indians. Popular journals were the only creative outlets available to Black writers and the 'newspapers gave them both a public platform and a measure of social status in the aspirant urban middle-class'. (Couzens "The Black Press" 96) Many of the writers, including La Guma, were influenced by the link with journalism as regards their choice of genre, the content of their writings, and more importantly, the literary style. Links with journalism led to the predominance of the documentary style of narration. On account of their reliance on 'external subjects' for fictional creation, and photographic accuracy of observation many of the works of journalist-turned-writers could be categorized as 'fades of fact', (Hellmann *Fables*) a category of fictional works that Hellmann popularized La Guma's evolution as a creative writer shows the influence of his links with journalism, particularly in *A Walk in the Night*.

All the coloured characters in La Guma's novella belong to the non-educated category of people. We assume that the probably little amount of education of the taxi-driver, Greene, and Michael Adonis among others is meant to serve the interests of the white system by using the same language; for instance they are taught to reply when addressed by the authority by "yes baas" and "no baas".

Adonis' alienation from the social system is shown to be caused by ethnic and trans-ethnic factors. His ethnic experience of discrimination, the collective memory of enforced subordination, and the social distance from the whites determine the reaction of Adonis towards Doughty. In spite of Doughty's attempts to be accepted as a part of the community of the tenement, he remains an outsider. The larger social divisions between the Whites and the Coloureds (or 'brown people' as Adonis identifies his community) dominate over the individual attempts to cut across such barriers, hence the reaction of Adonis 'what's he[Doughty] want to come and live here among us browns for? (44)

The problem of the physical abuses of Willieboy during his childhood by his father and mother is referred to so repeatedly (83, 84, 90, 91 and 92) in many places in the novella that we readers have the impression that the author wants to convey an important message. The most apparent interpretation is that the author is blaming the system for pushing heads of coloured families by means of poverty, segregation, racial injustice, and violence to have recourse to alcohol abuse which leads them to abuse their children and their wives; and thus, create within the home a gloomy atmosphere of hatred, fear, and violence instead of peace, love and family warmth.

The character of Joe who epitomizes peace and patience among the coloured characters is also presented as a victim of family disintegration. In fact, his whole family suffered from starvation, which caused his father to abandon them. As a result the rest of the family (Joe, his mother, his sister, and his two small brothers) got disintegrated, all of them went back to his maternal grandmother in the countryside except Joe who did not want to go with them; he preferred to run away (69-70). So, the whole family fell a prey of disintegration because of financial problems, instead of leading a life of unity and integration, they led one of loneliness and separation. Of course under the umbrella of Apartheid no peace is expected, no family stability is possible; it is only disintegration and loneliness; the situation which is related more to death instinct than life instinct.

The sense of family conflict is not proper to the Coloureds, it is peculiar to the Whites as well. The prevailing feeling of Constable Raalt towards his wife is one of suspicion and lack of trust. It is even one of readiness for murder. In fact, by means of the stream of consciousness does Alex La Guma render repeatedly Constable Raalt's "gloomy thoughts about his wife" to convey the omnipresence of a profound sense of inner trouble, he is continuously obsessed by the potential infidelity of his wife; he even gets ready to kill her in case he finds further evidence. " I wonder what she's doing now, the Verdomte bitch, I'll break her neck if I catch her at something" (61). Raalt's obsession is so accentuated that it disturbs even his young colleague Andries the driver:

He (the driver) was somewhat irritated by the sullen presence of Constable Raalt who nursed gloomy thoughts about his wife[...] He's got trouble with his wife, and what have I got to do with troubles his troubles? What has his troubles got to do with this patriot? Let him leave his domestic troubles at home. He is dangerous, too, when he's like this and I don't want to get involved in anything. (78-79)

CONCLUSION

Throughout the story, the question that drowns all is the question of survival. There is no solution imposed and each character has his own answer. Willieboy has tried hard but after an existence of complete deprivation, is finally shot like a dog and left to die in the back of a van. Mike falls in with the criminals – from alienation he moves on to moral anonymity. Joe, however, serves as a light in the moral darkness of the book. He rejects the society and chooses to live in close harmony with nature, haunting the open places near the sea and “braving the urban maelstrom” rarely. He is bereft; the system has taken away his entire family, brothers, sisters, father, mother. Yet he is morally superb in turning down Adonis' criminal solution to problems – “like I said, we all got troubles.... I got nothing. No house, no people. No place. Maybe that's troubles. Don't I say”? (68-69)

The way Raalt, Adonis and Willieboy live through the evening shows parallel transfers of aggression. All these characters are victims of a system that denies them the facility of living in harmony with fellow human beings and their frustration finds release in acts of violence against weaker members of their society. Michael Adonis' life has been one of constant deprivation and frustration; he has been rejected by the society. Willieboy's anti-social attitude is a result of his brutal upbringing and the harshness of the society around him. His philosophy of life borders on the nihilistic. He is friendless, lacks affection, part of the 'massed nonentity' let loose in the world.

La Guma's concern with issues of ethnicity and trans-ethnicity illuminates the character and fate of Willieboy. He is shown as a product of material deprivation and a consequent depravity of moral values. He drifts to criminality as a result of the environment around him. He was forced to sell newspapers even from the tender age of seven often on a hungry stomach. His mother beat him if failed to take home the poultry earnings and ate something out of it instead. He had to run away from home very often to escape the lashings from his father. These bitter childhood experiences and the alienating atmosphere of District Six lead to the problem of identity crisis.

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