

Oases in the Desert: Optimistic Vision in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* and *a Threefold Cord*

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Abstract

The metaphor of the desert best describes the poverty-stricken, miserable and marginal apartheid-induced life of the blacks as depicted by Alex La Guma in *A Walk in the Night* and *And a Threefold Cord*. The crime, prostitution, drunkenness and gangsterism which constitute the world of District Six and the Cape Flats, the settings of the two works, no doubt, justify this metaphor. But then, not even the driest of deserts is bereft of a few refreshing oases, pockets of hope which La Guma couches in symbols. This paper, therefore, explores this optimistic vision in the two works in focus, a recognition of the novelist's faithfulness to realism which dictates that the artist should be able to capture imaginatively, the realities of his immediate environment. The overall artistic significance of this optimistic vision, the paper contends, does not only lie in helping to tone down the grimness of the narrative but in foreshadowing the ultimate victory of the struggle of the non-whites over the forces of oppression as represented by the hydra-headed apartheid system of government.

INTRODUCTION

In his inaugural lecture entitled, "Literature and Society on the Border of Discourse", Olu Obafemi submits:

Literature reflects, represents and refracts the reality of the world across age and time. It is not just a work of imagination and solely to give pleasure – pleasure and entertainment are crucial to human existence – but literature contributes more concretely and more materially to the creation and appreciation of the human condition (1997:7)

Obafemi's submission is a reminder of the age-old theory of mimesis in literature. Literature, down the ages, has always been concerned with the social circumstance. The mimetic critic believes that a good work of art must be able to capture the realities of the immediate society; it should display what James Redmond calls "a minute fidelity of imitation" (1980:XI) Realism has been an essential hallmark of African literature. Achebe, for example, sees it as the very embodiment of social relevance in literature while Ngugi wa Thiong'O, in his Marxist leaning, urges writers not only to portray the lopsided power structure in the society but also to proffer workable solutions. Presenting his argument in favour of social realism from the perspective of apartheid South Africa, Peter Nazareth calls his fellow writers to be concerned with:

Fighting apartheid, with demonstrating how monstrous apartheid is, with showing how it dehumanizes everybody (1972:2)

In his *Tasks and Masks* (1981), Lewis Nkosi avers that South African literature is mostly concerned with the socio-historical realities of the society Ayo Kehinde (2012:45), unravels these realities to include "white conquerors versus the conquered blacks, white masters versus black servants and the city versus the rural village". Alex La Guma is one of the South African writers who have been able to committedly reflect these embarrassing realities.

Until his death on October 11, 1985 in far away Cuba as a result of his apartheid – induced self-exile, La Guma's radical position in life as well as a social realist in literature was well known. So also was his immense contributions to the liberation struggle in South Africa which has remained undisputably significant. As a key member of many of the anti-government organizations in South Africa like the South African Communist Party (CPSA) and South African Coloured People's Organization (SACPO), La Guma's radical political position was a product of his family background and his childhood experiences in District Six, the predominantly coloured area in Cape Town where the excruciating experiences of oppressive apartheid were more telling everyday for the non-whites. In other words, his first-hand experience with the oppressed non-whites in District Six was later to determine his ideological course of direction. According to JanMohamed, La Guma "became aware of politics not through literature but through the fact of his political exclusion on racial grounds and through a radical family tradition" (1982:5) It is in this vein that Adrian Roscoe opines that La Guma resembles Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in "so far as his politics ...seems as if it has grown out of a shocked response, an instinctive response to human suffering and not from either library or lecture hall" (1977:255).

Although strictly speaking, La Guma would not be defined as belonging to the proletariat of District Six, yet his first hand experience of the harrowing realities of the members of this class was later to be fine –

tuned by the Marxist ideological persuasion, a perfect blend that was to form a major pillar of his literary objective which according to Vinson (1976:787) was “a concern with the contemporary South African scene, particularly the experience of the nonwhite population”. La Guma’s unalloyed commitment to the cause of the oppressed non-white is seen in the way his fiction conveys the sight, sound and the smell of poverty and misery which the apartheid system has visited on the people. Beginning as a staff of the radical *New Age Magazine* in 1956 where he penned several “striking vignettes” about life in Cape Town, La Guma’s creativity continued in his short stories like “A Glass of Wine”, “A Matter of Taste” and “At the Potagees” and later flowered in the full length fiction where various facets of South Africa’s disfranchised population are graphically depicted. *A Walk in the Night* (1962), his first novel, features the life of a coloured youth who is sacked by his white employer for talking back to his white supervisor; *And a Threefold Cord* (1964) shows us humanity groveling in the mud of squalor, alcoholism, prostitution, and unemployment. *The Stone Country* (1967), portrays South Africa as a huge prison where hierarchical social system, racial segregation and brutality towards the blacks are the norms. *In the Fogs of the Seasons End* (1972) and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) are preoccupied with black resistance movements against the oppressive system in South Africa. In spite of their diversity, “all these novels”, says JanMohamed (1982:273)

have one fundamental factor in common, the marginality of life for the non-white in South Africa. Although not all his novels take up the theme of marginality they inevitably end up commenting on and indirectly depicting the national, social, political and spiritual poverty to which apartheid relegates the darker “inferior” people.

Apartheid South Africa was a colonial world of manicheism where the black man was regarded as the quintessential evil. According to Franz Fanon, “he was the native whom the colonial exploiter declared insensible to ethics, the enemy of values and in this sense the absolute evil” (1968:41) Fanon’s description of the colonial society as one of Manichean binarism can be seen in the way the apartheid apologists regarded Africans as “infidels” or “Kaffirs”, who, in the manichean allegory, are black, evil, savage and therefore, damned. The whiteman, in this polarity, therefore, is the good, civilized, intelligent and saved. This notion was given a theological support in the Calvinist belief in predestination which negated the very being of the colonized people, the non-white of South Africa. According to Fanon, this kind of devilish negation breeds counter negation:

on the logical plane, the manicheism of the settler produces a manicheism of the native. To the theory of the “absolute evil of the native”, the theory of the “absolute evil of the settler” replies (1968:93).

The effects of the Manichean bifurcation imposed by apartheid on the blacks and coloured (racially mixed people) are seen in the way poverty, squalor, arbitrary justice, imprisonment and political oppression dog their unenviable life. The grimness that characterizes La Guma’s oeuvre is a function of his realistic attempt to remain faithful to the ugly reality of life of the non-white in South Africa which he says has “inspired (him) to expose the situation with a view to changing peoples’ ideas about what is happening in South Africa” (1972:IX) The metaphor of the desert appropriately describes the life of the non-whites in South Africa which La Guma portrays. It is to the credit of La Guma’s artistic sensibility that his works do not fail to favour the reader with some touches of optimism which are like oases in the desert. This paper is an examination of such pockets of optimistic vision with *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and *And a Threefold Cord* (1964) as the main foci. It is hoped, that like all great literature, La Guma’s two novels under study will help enrich our understanding of life in the Republic of South Africa; enrich our sympathies for her peoples and even deepen our knowledge of the social, political and particularly the historical issues that define her existence.

La Guma’s identification with the marginalized non-whites who daily struggle against the forces of apartheid clearly locates this paper in the Marxist ideological realm which among other things deals with “the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression” (Eagleton 1976:111). Although Marxism is eurocentric in origin, its message like the English language, has since been domesticated and Africanized since it is relevant to the African situation in its emphasis on the need for the poor masses to struggle out of their oppression by the few but wealthy and powerful ones be they white, coloured or black.

OPTIMISTIC VISION IN *A WALK IN THE NIGHT*

Set in the crime-ridden District Six, Cape Town’s toughest quarter in South Africa in the heyday of apartheid, *A Walk in the Night* (henceforth referred to as *A Walk*) focuses on a coloured youth, Michael Adonis, who is unjustly fired by his white boss. Blinded by anger, Michael visits his vengeance on an old and decrepit Uncle Doughty. His gradual moral dissolution finally leads him to join a gang of thieves. His friend, Willie-boy, is mistaken for the murderer of Uncle Doughty and later killed by South Africa’s trigger-happy police. The world of District Six, as presented by La Guma, is one inhabited by spivs, whores, gangsters, poverty-stricken families and sundry social derelicts who are doomed by the apartheid system for a certain term to walk the night

like Shakespeare's ghost. Hedged in by racial segregation, exploitation and lack of education and therefore, poor or no job at all, most of the coloured youths in District Six have come to see virtue in naked violence and the smoking of "dagga". Ironically, this marginalized existence – induced lifestyle further drives them into the blind alley of self-destruction and ruin. It is in this context that one must come to understand the personality of Michael Adonis with his faded jeans. In his blind rage, anything negative and criminal is possible. One is, therefore, little surprised at his unpremeditated murder of Uncle Doughty who is not even remotely connected with his problem.

In the midst of the gangsterism, violence and urban poverty of *A Walk* is the character Joe. Joe is indeed "something valuable forgotten in the junk shop" (9) of South Africa's District Six for, like Ayi Kwei Armah's solitary flower that grows in the midst of excreta in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), he represents a sane voice in a mad house; a veritable drop of optimism in the vast ocean of gloom and pessimism. A shy teetotaler, the enigmatic Joe has been denied his immediate family by the apartheid government. His siblings and parents have been scattered by poverty and unemployment. Joe is wise enough to see that turning to crime like most youths of the District is no solution. According to Adrian Roscoe (1977:237), "he is morally superb in his refusal to accept Mikey's criminal solution". He is a living symbol of negation of the general belief that the youth in District Six find solace in criminal activities in the face of a lack of a viable alternative or means of livelihood. Hear him admonish Mickey:

Like I said, we all got troubles. But jubas like them don't help you out of them. They in troubles themselves. You only ended to the whole heap of troubles... I don't know. I got nothing. No house, no people, no place. Maybe, that's troubles. Don't I say" (68-69).

Knowing the ubiquity of the apartheid police, Joe rationalizes that going to the country as an escape is nothing but a wild goose chase. This is because the government's eviction and harassment will sooner than later reach there and the whole exodus begin again. He has therefore, chosen to live close to nature by foraging on the sea-shore for his livelihood. Yes, he has decided to seek comfort in nature which in the Coleridgean sense "never did disappoint the wise and pure" (line 60) like him. After all, if the society has become degrading and frustrating, where even his virtues are not needed, then he had better move towards the sea where he hopes to ponder and bear calmly the still sad music of the suffering humanity in South Africa. La Guma is not suggesting through Joe's choice that there are secrets against the urban insanity on the sea shore. His first hand knowledge of the grinding wheel of the apartheid machine is, without a shred of doubt a huge bulwark against harbouring such a simplistic or even a romanticizing of the solution to the obnoxious system's problem. If anything, it must be the calm, serene and lonely beauty of the shore as contrasted with the urban maelstrom that must have attracted him.

It is not as if the oppressive forces of the apartheid system are totally absent even on the calm shore with its alluring beauty and serenity. The creamy waves which constantly batter against the granite rocks must be a metaphor for the relentless struggle of the blacks against the oppressive white citadels that seem unconquerable like the impregnable wall of Gibraltar. Again, this is not a synonym for pessimism but an indication that there are no easy victories in this anti-apartheid struggle. Victory is achievable only after a long drawn battle; after all in the immortal assertion of Thomas Hardy, constant droppings will wear away even a stone. History is a living witness to countless citadels of rock that eventually gave way to the relentless and consistent pounding of many a creamy wave.

Joe may not be a revolutionary (probably, La Guma was yet to embrace the revolutionary alternative at this early stage of his literary career); but his principle of "A man's got right to look after another man" (75), is unquestionably a hallmark of creative solidarity which is a major criterion of revolutionary struggle. As Joe wends his way towards the sea through the starlit darkness, a little nagging fear seems to tug at our sides, for if the apartheid government "is going to make the beaches so that only the white people can go there" (26), we just cannot guess where next Joe is likely to turn. We are optimistic, however, that his moral uprightness and his determination to survive without engaging in criminal activities will see him through. La Guma's achievement, says Coetzee (1992:358).

is to present a particular lucid description of the resultants of white oppression in self-destructive black violence and to embody his novels a growing political understanding of the process in the consciousness of a developing protagonist.

While Coetzee's assertion resonates in all La Guma's works, it is no gainsaying that Joe as a character is a refreshing exception rather than the rule in the self-destructive black violence reductionism that is at best aimless.

Unlike many families that have been torn apart by the obnoxious system, Franky Lorenzo's family is still happily intact, the couple's wretched state notwithstanding. The mature way in which Lorenzo apologizes to his wife, Grace, and settles the little family squabble over another pregnancy is a sure sign that the family will

manage to stay together to weather the ravaging storm of apartheid. At the end of the narrative, Grace is “lying awake in the night, awaiting for the dawn and feeling the knot of life within her” (98). This “knot of Life” is an image of new life and a symbol of hope not just to the Lorenzos alone but to the suffering black masses of South Africa.

SHADOWY HOPE IN *AND A THREEFOLD CORD*

Appreciating the novels of Nadine Gordimer, Ian Baucom (1997:244), declares that “with few exceptions, Southern African writers use their works to chronicle everyday life in their milieu”. Ogude also buttresses this point when he avers that “South African Literature is both history and literature” (1997:9). In *And a Threefold Cord*, La Guma plays the crucial role of a historian in his depiction of what Anders Breidlid (2002) calls the “here and now” of the Cape.

La Guma himself says

I was interested in recording creatively the life of a community under various conditions. I thought it would help to bring to the reader an idea of what goes on in the various black areas of the Cape and that through a novel this would be done (Abrahams 1985:20)

And a Threefold Cord shows La Guma as a recorder of the socio-economic conditions of a typical black family in apartheid South Africa. Here is presented a Fanonian thesis of the native being hemmed in by all kinds of oppressive forces. The Pauls’ family is under the sledgehammer of both human and natural forces. If the private physical space of the Pauls is not being intruded upon by the law itself, the rain must be wreaking havoc on their pitiable shack. In fact, when Ma Pauls pathetically remarks that “there’s people going to be washed out, when it begins, the rain” (35), the tragic foreboding of Dad Pauls’ death becomes all very clear. The tragic irony, however, is that most of the slum dwellers have to pay for water when actually it rains almost everyday in the winter. This ironic situation of absolute need in the midst of surplus is the very definition of the republic of South Africa where the blacks, the original owners of the land have become beggars and squatters.

A close appreciation of this novel shows various characters in different stages of human degradation. Roman is described as a punch-wielding drunken savage. Ronny’s wildness climaxes in the brutal murder of Susie Meyer. The straggle-haired Ria who reeks of vomit and wine is presented as a squalid parody of a female while excessive drinking has reduced Uncle Ben to a human wreck who is always clad in holed jersey, worn and patched trousers with cracked and muddy shoes. There are the ageless layabouts who La Guma describes as “motley collection of scarecrows, dummies stuffed with poverty” (46). These “Cape coloureds” are often described by the whites in South Africa as “children indolent, ne’er-do-wells, happy-go-lucky, gregarious and shifty people” (February, 1981: 187). This is however a superficial assessment, for La Guma emphasizes in no uncertain terms that it is the system’s deprivation and oppression that are responsible for the delinquent and deviant behaviour among its shanty dwellers. It is easy for example, to regard Uncle Ben’s excessive drinking as self-inflicted but no one needs to be a psychologist to know that his drunkenness is simply an escape route out of his hopeless state. Hear him

A man’s got to have his dring, don’t I say? But with me, is like as if something force me to drink, drink, drink. Is like an evil, Charlie, forcing a man to go on swallowing till he’s fall-fall with liquour. An evil, man (48).

Similarly the often destructive and misdirected violence among the youth like Ronald in District Six, is a way of objectifying their miserable existence. This form of introverted violence, according to Frantz Fanon, is apartheid-inspired:

The native is being hemmed in, apartheid is simply one form of the division into compartments, of the colonial world. The first thing the native learns is to stay in his place and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular process, his dreams are of action and of aggression (1998:41)

Like *A Walk in the Night*, the surface narrative of *And A Three Fold Cord* is bleak, perhaps in La Guma’s artistic deference to a faithful portrayal of the ugly reality of the life of the non-whites in the wilds of District Six. To the oppressed blacks, South Africa is a huge desert because the apartheid government has made it so. But then, even the driest of all deserts harbours a few oases which serve as refreshing points to the weary traveler and watering holes to the desert beasts of burden. *And a Threefold Cord* bristles with a few of these oases of hope which are dressed in symbols and artistically deployed to “punctuate the narrative to counter its pessimistic impact” (Kathryn Balutansky, 1990:52).

And a Threefold Cord is dominated by one central message of solidarity. According to Ma Pauls “we all got to stand by each other” (75). This need for solidarity to withstand the ceaseless rain of apartheid is based on the book of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 where the Bible writer, Solomon, celebrates the indispensability of togetherness in the battle of life.

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their hard work. For if one of them should fall, the other one can raise his partner up. But how will it be with just the one who falls when there is not another to raise him up. Moreover, if two lie down together they also will certainly get warm; but how can just one keep warm. And if somebody could overpower one alone, two together could make a stand against him. And a threefold cord cannot quickly be torn in two.

Through this message which forms the epigraph of the novel, La Guma envisions a ray of hope in collectivity and stresses the need for joint action to effect a positive change in the people's unjust situation. This call becomes even more germane in the face of the individual actions which have not yielded any positive result so far. Their selfishness notwithstanding, individual actions are often misdirected and puny. When Charlie punches the police man, for example, he gains a temporary relief as some of his pent-up anger is liberated through the punch but it provides him with no real and lasting victory. Baluntansky equates him with the fly in the puddle of wine in the novel. The fly's initial salvation from drowning, Baluntansky says is like Charlie "when he punches the policeman; the punch provides him with no real victory, but it allows Charlie to continue his search for the solution to the killing effect of apartheid" (1990:51).

As important and hopeful as the collective focus enunciated in the work is, La Guma does not fail to hint that it is only the first step in confronting the oppressive system. Since most of the squatters in the Cape Flats seem to have succumbed to what Comaroff and Comaroff (1991:18) call the "colonialization of consciousness", the second stage of confrontation should appropriately be the "consciousness of colonialization". The inhabitants of the Cape Flats desperately need to be immersed in the political pool of conscientization to be politically conscious. This is the significance of Charlie's exhortation.

There was this rooker I worked with when we was laying pipe up country ...
A clever fellow. Always was saying funny things. He said something one time, about people most of the time takes trouble hardest when they alone...
But this burg had a lot of good things in his head; I reckon. May be he was right... is not natural for people to be alone. Hell, I reckon people was just made to be together (168).

True, Charlie's exhortation is traced to the rooker. But there is no doubt that he is convinced about the exhortation hence his constant reference to it. Charlie's reiteration of the need for solidarity as a veritable means of transforming the lives of the oppressed squatters may still be tentative and therefore, theoretical. But we sincerely hope for the likelihood of the development of his consciousness. Like Cornwell (1991:19), we pray for "the likelihood of his interpreting and articulating his experience in the way that he does". This is because it will then lead to the much expected praxis thereby actualizing Gareth Cornwell's assertion:

that the novel dramatizes the hope that the instinctive loyalties among family and friends may in the course of time extend to the larger family of class, and hence to all humanity (1995:17)

Charlie's growing political consciousness which is clearly Marxist in the work is a symbol of hope in an environment dominated by political ignorance which the system uses as one of its weapons of oppression. Many critics like Anders Breidlid have attributed the prevalence of lack of political consciousness among the blacks to the lack of intellectual space in the novel like we find in apartheid South Africa. This intellectual space says Ramphela (1993:5)

is the capacity for intellectual awareness of one's environment and the position one occupies in the power structure of one's society: it helps individuals to demystify ideology and to limit the impact of the constraints of a hegemonic order in social relations.

Charlie's tentative political consciousness has led him to start asking questions about the oppressive status quo. Unlike the rest members of the family who dread any talk against the government and therefore ,have been forced to accept their fate in a Calvinist manner, Charlie has woken up to the ugly reality of the lopsidedness of the society where the haves lord it over the harpless have nots. He says

Is funny there got to be a lot of people like us worrying about blerry roof everytime it rains and there's other people don't have to worry a damn (54)

Since Man Paul's complete absorption in bible reading in a fetishistic way, and Uncle Ben's hedonistic lifestyle have no room for ideology, Charlie, therefore, is the equivalent of the solitary carnation that is blooming in the dump amidst death, decay and disintegration. Unlike Michael Adonis in *A Walk*, Charlie does not believe that a resort to crime is the solution to the problem of the oppressed blacks in South Africa. He is therefore ,morally and psychologically superior.

Closely associated with Charlie's optimistic political reflection is the symbol of the bird flying into the sky. As Charlie looks out into the driving rain, he sees to his surprise, out of nowhere at the very end of the

novel, “a bird dart suddenly from among the patchwork roofs of the shanties and head straight, straight into the sky” (169). This is a symbol of hope that helps to break the monotonous downpour that permeates the whole work. The redemptive value inherent in the symbolic flight of the phoenix-like bird can be seen in its upward movement away from the rain-drenched environment. According to Adrian Roscoe (1977:251).

the movement of the bird gives a touch of renewed hope, a poetic emblem of a people’s struggle against the blows falling on them without cease. Whether it is a swallow heralding summer, or a dove announcing peace, La Guma is allowing, himself a brief and rare, gesture of hope.

In spite of some critics’ reservation about the isolationist nature of the images of the carnation and the flying bird, it is no gainsaying that an indomitable sense of optimism certainly characterizes their presence in the novel. After all, an idea must have a beginning, which is usually a humble one. Like the pregnant Grace in *A Walk in the Night*, the intensity of Caroline’s labour pains notwithstanding, the regenerative value attached to the expected delivery of her baby is a symbol of hope for the oppressed people of South Africa. This hope is manifested in the birth of a new generation of joyful children playing on the rubbish dump. Thus, like one finds in *A Walk in the Night*, the optimistic vision, that La Guma invests *And a Threefold Cord* with, helps in no uncertain terms to modify the otherwise disillusioned narrative. It has helped to tone down the grimness or blankness of the plot. Kathryn Baluntansky is unarguably right:

In spite of the seemingly overwhelming pessimistic outlook of the narrative, the same bent which inspired the symbolic images of *A Walk in the Night* also permeates those of *And a Threefold Cord*. La Guma’s symbols puncture the narrative to counter its pessimistic impact. Here, as in the previous novel, the images function as a reminder that a portrayal of the desperate condition of Black people under apartheid is by no means a surrender to it (1990:52).

CONCLUSION

“The mimetic literary critic”, says Ayo Kehinde (2012:27), “believes that the *raison d’être* of a worthwhile work of art is its ability to imaginatively capture the realities of the society from where it has evolved”. An artist’s ability to imaginatively capture the societal realities is, to a great extent, a function of his descriptive power which makes his images come alive. In all his novels, La Guma’s power of description has never wavered. With this power, he presents the nauseating realities of poverty and misery among the blacks in order to shock people into action. The two novels discussed here celebrate the excellence of their descriptive passages. Jan Mohamed, for example, calls *And a Threefold Cord* a “prose painting” in which descriptive passages are clearly more important than the narrative” (1982:6) in the depiction of the oppressive conditions of the non-whites. La Guma’s realistic description has no place for romantic portrayal of the oppressed while demonizing the oppressors. In other words, his works are not strictly reduced to a binary opposition between evil oppressors and the deified oppressed. This is because even within the overriding oppressive apartheid machine, the oppressed blacks have their own pitfalls and shortcomings as witnessed the case of the exploitative black water sellers in *And a Threefold Cord*.

By this realistic, less subjective portrayal, La Guma avoids what Njabulo Ndebele calls “spectacular representation” (1991:39) It is in the face of such petty selfishness and narrow individualism even among the oppressed blacks that the call for solidarity in *And a Threefold Cord* against apartheid becomes highly relevant. Even so, La Guma posits that such solidarity must be backed by political consciousness as a huge bulwark against the oppressive system. There may be no easy victories in this struggle but the significance of the pockets of optimistic vision couched in symbols that dot the two novels is that victory is not unachievable. The optimistic vision therefore, does not only tone down the grimness of the narrative in the two works, but more importantly, foreshadow the victory of the black’s struggle over the obnoxious apartheid system.

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