

The Lost Dignity: The Reading of Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*

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Abstract

This paper unravels the dark side of apartheid system through the analysis of Alex La Guma's novella; *A Walk in the Night*. The analysis brings out how La Guma uses his literary texts under study to reveal to his readership the lost dignity of the oppressed. This novella reveals to readers the atrocities that were perpetrated against the non-whites in South Africa. This study highlights the restrictions placed on African workers under the oppressive Apartheid system and its effects on the psyche of the non-whites in South Africa have been given credible space in the novella. There is seen in this novella a fictionalization of the different forms of maltreatments that non-whites suffered during the Apartheid regime. There is also seen in the novella a relentless effort by La Guma to protest against the Apartheid era. The life-styles of the non-whites clearly indicate that the Apartheid system really took away the dignity of the non-whites in South Africa.

Keywords: Alex La Guma, Apartheid, South Africa, Oppression, Dignity

1. Introduction

South African society has developed over the last three centuries as an impacted polity of ethnically defined groups within an overall framework of white¹ political and military dominance. During this era, racially based classification became a principal response to what Christopher Heywood describes as 'a maze of contradictory loyalties.'²

Numerous literary works deal with the theme of inter-human clash whereby there is an attempt by the weaker to escape the dominance of the stronger. South African writers therefore perceive racial prejudice as an encumbrance to their art. They further argue that racial discrimination has restricted their view of life across the colour line of birth.³ To cite an example, writers like Alan Paton, opine that "the policy (of racial segregation) of our rulers is killing the novel by dividing life into unknowable segments."⁴ Ezekiel Mphahlele therefore in an attempt to figuratively put it says, "There is a big barrier between us (Africans) and the Whites. We are looking at each other through a keyhole all the time."⁵ La Guma therefore recognizes the fact that racial separation is an essential artistic predicament that South African writers face. He says: "The artistic vision [in South Africa] is restricted by apartheid barriers and even the most vivid imagination is no substitute for experience [. . .] In South Africa the wall [between the races] is impenetrable."⁶

This paper seeks to analyze the various aspects of maltreatment that is perpetrated against the non-whites in the novel. It will look at how the maltreatment of the non-whites culminates into their lost dignity. La Guma uses the title *A Walk in the Night* for his short novel to represent his disagreement with what he considers as an ethnically-political attitude in the coloured community.⁷ In an interview with Cecil Abrahams, La Guma says:

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 walking, 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.⁸

These words from La Guma are an indication of the fact that the non-whites of South Africa have gone through various kinds of maltreatment as they struggle to oppose the oppressive nature of the whites on their native land. "Night" denotes the period of darkness and "darkness" also connotes evil. This therefore clearly

¹ M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds. (1969), *The Oxford History of South Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Vol. I p. xi

² Christopher Heywood in his introduction to Heywood, C., ed. (1976), *Aspects of South African Literature*. London: Heinemann, p. viii

³ Chandramohan, B. (1992). *A Study in Trans-Ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925-1985*. Lewiston/Lampeter: Mellen Research University Press, p. 1

⁴ Alan Paton cited in Cope, Jack, (1961). "South African Literature", *Quest*. Bombay, no. 30, Summer, p. 66

⁵ Mphahlele, E. (1974). *The African Image*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 14

⁶ La Guma, A. (1975). "South African Writing Under Apartheid", *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings*, vol. XXIII, p. 17

⁷ *A Study in Trans-ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925-1985*, p.75.

⁸ La Guma's interview with Cecil Abrahams in 1978; cited in Abrahams, C., *Alex La Guma*, p.49

gives readers the impression that the coloured probably walk through this period of darkness to suffer maltreatment.

La Guma has spoken of having “really had no hope for the book” when he wrote it. “I just did it as an exercise for myself, and I was therefore, surprised (when it got published in 1962)¹. Here, then, was a book that had been written without a particular audience in mind; but in technique and subject matter it didn’t differ much from the short stories he had started publishing in South African media a few years earlier. This novel was longer than anything else he had composed, but it was largely an experiment, an exercise in self-improvement aimed at helping him develop his narrative powers.

Critics tend to classify the novel as a naturalistic novel – that is, a novel manifesting what the Oxford English Dictionary defines rather laconically as “a style or method characterized by close adherence to, and faithful representation of nature or reality.” This kind of fiction often is set in ugly urban slums or ghettos, where man is shown not acting freely; merely reacting to external and internal pressures that ultimately overwhelm him.

Certainly, no one can deny the fact that the characters we meet in this novel are trapped in a hellish environment. They live in District Six, a Cape Town slum, where everything is in a state of dilapidation and decay. La Guma describes in vivid detail the sordid tenements and shanties of the urban working class—living conditions that spawn crime and random violence. Two people are killed in the course of the story—a young thug named Willieboy and a derelict Irish actor called Doughty—and neither deserves his death; they are innocent victims of a cruel, vicious sociopolitical system that routinely destroys the lives of the disadvantaged. A promising young man, Michael Adonis who is sacked from his workplace ends up being a criminal. The police, supposedly the upholders of law and order, have been brutalized into agents of oppression. Clearly, something is wrong with a society like this, a world where death, degradation and despair crush the human spirit.

La Guma, through his naturalism, suggests that the situation is hopeless, that South Africans brought up in such a world are at the mercy of forces much too large and powerful for them to resist and overcome. They appear constrained to continue forever their nightmarish walk in the night. Yet, it is through adroit use of symbolism, a contradictory and complementary strategy of protest, that he gives this pessimistic story an optimistic conclusion. The book ends with a vision of hope, a promise that this society is destined to change profoundly in the future.

2. The Oppressed

This short novel is about the cruel treatment of the detestable Apartheid system which the non-whites community has to suffer and, alternatively, it is about the hardly any benefits granted the non-whites to live supposedly standard lives. Michael Adonis and Willieboy are in this vein, presented as typical examples of the ill-fated coloured people. Hence, numerous other young fellows including Michael Adonis and Willieboy who live in District Six in Cape Town, cannot practically find a solution to their plight except through criminal behavior. Willieboy, in order to survive, involves himself in petty crimes and violent acts and Michael Adonis, also after dismissal, finds solace in Foxy’s gang which is specialized in burglary and minor crimes, hence becomes a member. To worsen the situation, Adonis who is still angered by the sack, transfers his anger onto an old Irish man; Mr. Doughty, during an argument over a bottle of wine and strikes him dead. In response, the police begin a furious hunt of the supposed killer. With no evidence against Willieboy, Constable Raalt, a vindictive white police officer, pulls the trigger and shoots him.

In *A Walk in the Night*, the third-person narrative point of view is employed. Through the use of the third-person point of view, readers are made to view circumstances and events through the lives of two major characters—Michael Adonis and Willieboy. The sequence of the events is also made to revolve around Adonis and Willieboy such that the story literally moves with them. It is through the lives of these characters that readers are made cognizant of the characteristics of apartheid and its consequences on the people.

The story begins by introducing to readers Michael Adonis, a coloured worker in a sheet metal factory. He is dismissed from his job upon talking back to a white foreman, Ou Scofield who refuses to allow him to take a few minutes off his work for urinating. It is obvious that the story deals with a subtle but steady moral deterioration of Michael Adonis. Adonis who meets a friend, Willieboy at the café tells us how and why he got sacked from his job:

‘Nice, boy, nice. You know me, mos. Always take it easy. How goes it with you?’

‘Strolling again. Got pushed out of my job at the facktry.’

‘How come then?’

‘Answered back to a effing white rooker. Foreman.’

‘Those whites. What happened?’

‘That white bastard was lucky I didn’t pull him up good. He had been asking for it a long time.

Every time a man goes to the piss-house he starts moaning. Jesus Christ, the way he went on

¹ Alex La Guma, p. 46

you'd think a man had to wet his pants rather than take a minute off. Well, he picked on me for going for a leak and I told him to go to hell.' (p.4)

From the dialogue above, we are made aware of the main reasons for sacking Adonis from the job. It is quite unfortunate that working for the white man is a tedious task for the non-white fellow. One has to get worn out for working under the white's authority. As in the case of Adonis, he goes out to urinate and he is questioned on that. The verb 'moaning' as used in the passage tells us the displeasure shown by the foreman when he realizes that Adonis takes a break to visit the urinal. Adonis who considers himself as a human being but not a working machine also talks back to the foreman which results in his dismissal from the factory.

Willieboy informs us: 'Ja,' Willieboy said. 'Working for whites. Happens all the time, man. Me, I never work for no white john. Not even brown one. To hell with work. Work, work, work, where does it get you? Not me, pally.' (p. 4). From this quotation, one can glean that the non-white is not respected by the white man. He is made to overwork himself like a 'donkey'. Adonis' colleagues in the factory are not even given the chance to urinate when they wish to. One has to work all the time when one gets to the work place. The only time he gets to rest is when he has closed from work. This therefore indicates how cruel these white employers are. Willieboy, on the other hand, who does not want to over-work himself decides that he will never work for a white man.

However, Adonis is not only sacked from his job but also is insulted by his foreman. He does not remain silent after he had been insulted but also insults the foreman by saying 'he was no-good pore-white' (p.4). Having nowhere to go and nobody to appeal to against the dismissal, he finds himself in a café which is described as an outpost of 'the whirlpool world of poverty, petty crime and violence' (p.4) of District Six. Thrown into this coloured urban slum, without a job, or the surety of getting one in the near future, his thoughts were 'concentrated upon the pustule of rage and humiliation that was continuing to ripen deep down within him' (p.1). Adonis is boiled up with anger deeply in his thoughts to the extent that even when eating at the restaurant, the thoughts of the foreman insulting him never escaped the mind and he says: 'That sonavabitch, that bloody white sonavabitch, I'll get him' (p.5).

Further, when Adonis comes out from the restaurant, he is stopped on the road by two Afrikaner policemen who intend searching him for dagga (marijuana) in a very derogatory manner. Smoking of marijuana is associated with the non-whites because they are seen as having nothing to do with their lives than to smoke and foment troubles in the society. "This policeman asked in a heavy, brutal voice, 'Where's your dagga?' 'I don't smoke it'" (p.12). The adjective 'brutal' as used to describe the voice of the policeman indicates how pitiless and heartless the policeman is when asking Adonis whether he has marijuana in his pocket or not. This indication brings to the fore how the white men in the society live with the non-whites. There is no point of respect for the non-white races as regards their human identity and that authorizes the white men to derogatorily approach the non-white. The whites perceive the colour black to be connected with evil and wickedness; "virtue is white as sin is black."¹

Interestingly, during the search for dagga, the policemen see money in Adonis' pocket and as a matter of fact takes Adonis for a thief:

'Jong, turn out your pockets,' the first one ordered. 'Hurry up.'

Michael Adonis began to empty his pockets slowly, without looking up at them and thinking, with each movement, You mucking boers, you mucking boers. Some people stopped and looked and hurried on as the policemen turned cold blue light of their eyes upon them. Michael Adonis showed them his crumbled and partly used packet of cigarettes, the money he had left over from his pay, a soiled handkerchief and an old piece of chewing gum covered with the grey fuzz from his pocket.

'Where did you steal the money?' The question was without humour, deadly serious, the voice topped with hardness like the surface of file.

'Didn't steal it, baas (*you mucking boer*).'

'Well, muck off from the street. Don't let us find you standing around, you hear?'

'Yes, (*you mucking boer*).'

'Yes, What? Who are you talking to, man?'

'Yes, baas (*you mucking bastard boer with your mucking gun and your mucking bloody red head*) (p. 12)

Consequently, in advance, with no any proof, Adonis has been classified as a thief. Adonis possessing any amount of money means it was a stolen item and that he has no other ability or capability of getting money in the view of the white police officer. However, the truth is, the non-white only earns a living from succumbing to performing the laborious jobs for the whites for low earnings devoid of stealing. Yet, he (Adonis) is regarded as a thief since he is caught possessing money. In the apartheid system, the non-whites, only do the menial but tedious work in the society. They work in areas like the mines and steel industries like that of Adonis and are

¹ Fanon, F. (1986). *Black Skin, White Masks*. [1952] Trans. By Charles Lam Markman, London: Pluto Press, p.106

paid small amounts of money as wages. This is a major characteristic of the apartheid system where non-whites are not given better jobs with better remuneration but are made to go through various forms of maltreatment in their workplaces and at the end of the month they go home with a salary that cannot cater for themselves not to talk about a family.

Obviously, this kind of attitude by policemen is a characteristic nature of the fascist¹ regime of apartheid South Africa. Non-whites are stopped by policemen and searched anyhow all because they are prejudged by the white man as callous creatures who can cause destruction at any point in time on the streets. This therefore causes the white policemen to maltreat the non-white races with contempt and indignation.

Besides, with insult added to injury ‘They pushed past him, one of them brushing him aside with an elbow and strolled on. He put the stuff back into his pockets. And deep down inside him the feeling of rage, frustration and violence swelled like a boil, knotted with pain’ (p. 12). The disrespect shown towards the black’s identity by the white man creates a serious pain in Adonis. This is shown by the use of the simile “like a boil” in the sentence. The comparison made in the sentence by relating a boil to Adonis’ feeling with the use of ‘like’ probably shows implicitly how painful the treatment meted out to Michael Adonis is. A boil is defined as “a painful pus-filled abscess on the skin caused by a bacterial infection of a hair follicle.”² This definition gives credence to how painful it is to be humiliated by a white man on your own soil. For the pain to be compared to a boil on a skin is indicative of the intensity of the pain that Adonis harbours in his heart.

Yet again, Adonis goes into a pub on his way home and meets a few of his friends who were already there enjoying themselves and sharing ideas. We are told by the narrator that:

The pub, like pubs all over the world, was a place for debate and discussion, for the exchange of views and opinions, for argument and for the working out of problems. It was a forum, a parliament, a fountain of wisdom and a cesspool of nonsense, it was a centre for the lost and the despairing, where cowards absorbed dutch courage out of small glasses and leaned against the shiny, scratched and polished mahogany counter for support against the crushing burdens of insignificant lives. Where the disillusioned gained temporary hope, where acts of kindness were considered and murders planned. (p.13)

From the passage above, we are given a vivid description of what goes on in the pub. All good and bad things evolve from this pub. The pub creates an avenue for every person who is one way or the other facing a peculiar problem. ‘The lost’, ‘the despairing’, ‘the coward’ and ‘the disillusioned’ all have their place here because the pub is ‘for the working out of problems’ and ‘acts of kindness considered’. The adjective ‘temporary’ used by the narrator to modify ‘hope’ tells us that the pub is just a means to overcome hardships for a short period of time and that there is a better means to attain a permanent status of hope which probably is fighting for your right position in your own land. Besides the benefits one gets from visiting the pub, the fact is established that the pub is also ‘a cesspool of nonsense’ where murders are planned. It is therefore not surprising that Adonis before going home passes by the pub to be a beneficiary of its components—positives and negatives.

Fascinatingly, their conversation shifts to the discussion of the treatment of Negroes in America. The Negroes in the United States of America were treated the same as the blacks and coloureds in the South African society. Adonis’ friend, Greene tells him:

‘I read how they hanged up the negro in the street in America. Whites done it.’

‘Huh?’ Michael Adonis said.

‘Read it in the paper the other day. Some whites took a negro out in the street and hanged him up. They said he did look properly at some woman.’

‘Well, the negroes isn’t like us,’ Michael Adonis said. He thought about the foreman, Scofield, and the police, and the little knot of rage reformed inside him again like the quickening of the embryo in the womb, and he added with a sudden viciousness: ‘Anyway those whites are better than ours, I bet you.’ (p.16)

According to Fanon³, a thought that is ingrained in the psyche of the whites is that the Negro possesses a very strong longing for sex. “The sexual potency of the Negro is hallucinating . . . God knows how they make love!”⁴ “The Negro is viewed as a penis”⁵ “The Negro symbolizes the biological danger. For the Negro is only

¹ Fascism was a form of radical authoritarian nationalism that came to prominence in early 20th century Europe. Fascists sought to unify their nation through a totalitarian state that promoted the mass mobilization of the national community, and were characterized by a vanguard party that initiated a revolutionary political movement aiming to reorganize the nation along some principles according to fascist ideology. Fascism views political violence, war, and imperialism as a means to achieve national rejuvenation and assert that stronger nations have the right to expand their territory by displacing weaker nations; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fascism>

² “Boil”. *Microsoft Encarta Dictionary*. U.S.A: Microsoft Corporation, 2009.

³ Frantz Fanon was a Martinique-born, French Creole psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary and writer whose works are influential in the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory and Marxism. As an intellectual, Fanon was a political radical and existentialist humanist concerning the psychopathology of colonization and the human, social and cultural consequences of decolonization.

⁴ *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.122

⁵ *Ibid*, p.123

biological. The Negroes are animals . . . Whoever says rape says Negro.”¹ The whites therefore are ultimately sure that the blacks are animals, “if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses.”² These prejudged thoughts that the whites have against the blacks make the whites very careful and watchful of the black’s threat to the spotlessness of their (Whites’) female counterparts—wives, sisters and daughters. It is therefore not surprising that a Negro is reportedly to have been hanged for no better reason that “he did look properly at some woman.”

So, the topic of the ill-treatment by whites makes Adonis even more bitter about the whites of South Africa. Adonis ‘thought about the foreman, Scofield, and the police, and the little knot of rage reformed inside him again like the quickening of the embryo in the womb’. The verb ‘reformed’ used in the sentence implies that the rage that is formed in him from the time of his dismissal through to his meeting of the policemen on the streets is reformed when he becomes cognizant of the maltreatment perpetrated against the blacks in the Americas by the whites. The comparison made through the use of simile depicts the brewing of anger in Adonis’ mind.

Indeed, blacks are brutally humiliated at every corner of this world. But for Adonis to say that ‘Anyway those whites are better than ours, I bet you’ does not mean that they were better treated than the blacks in other continents especially Africa. It is probably suggestive of the fact that the blacks in the Americas are privileged enough to receive maltreatment on a foreign land. But the blacks in South Africa are virtually maltreated in their own native land.

Moreover, Adonis’ anger against whites remains unmitigated while climbing the stairs of his tenement and ‘nursing the foetus of hatred inside the belly.’ The word ‘foetus’ used here gives the indication that the ‘hatred inside the belly’ will surely grow to become a “baby” and that it will surely be delivered. When invited by Doughty, an old Irish one-time actor living in the tenement to share a drink, Adonis’ ‘anger mixing with headiness of the liquor he had consumed and curdling into a sour knot of smouldering violence inside him’(p.26) makes Doughty a focal point of his anger against whites. Adonis ‘struck out at the bony, blotched, sprouting skull, . . . The old man made a small, honking animal noise and dropped back on the bed’ (pp.28-29).

Eventually, the prevailing racial situation in South Africa makes matters difficult for Adonis. The realization that the man he kills is a White makes him feel very nervous. The writer’s use of interior monologue reveals to us the feeling of Adonis: “. . . There’s going to be trouble. Didn’t mean it. Better get out. The law don’t like white people being finished off. Well, I didn’t *mos* mean it. Better get out before somebody comes. I never been in here” (p.29). The third person omniscient narrator reveals to us the ‘flood of thoughts’ (p.29) that runs through the mind of Adonis. The thoughts that run through Adonis’ mind are not stable but like ‘bubbles’ floating in space. He feels uncomfortable after this incident and does not want to explain the occurrence to anybody in the tenement nor to the police. Knowing very well that killing a white man is an action against the ‘law’, he is gripped by the fear of its consequences. Lying on his bed after being able to slip out of his victim’s room, Adonis goes through a thinking process:

To hell with him and the lot of them. Maybe I ought to go and tell them. *Bedonerd*. You know what the law will do to you. They don’t have any shit from us brown people. They’ll hang you, as true as God. Christ, we all got hanged long ago. What’s the law for? To kick us poor brown bastards around. You think they’re going to listen to your story; Jesus, and he was a white man, too. Well, what’s he want to come and live here among us browns for? To hell with him. Well, I didn’t *mos* mean to finish him. Awright, man, he’s dead and you’re alive. Stay alive. Ja, stay alive and get kicked under the arse until you’re finished, too. Like they did with your job. To hell with them. The whole effing lot of them (pp.43-44).

One major characteristic of the apartheid system in South Africa is separation with regard to ethnic background. Apart from the major social discrimination against blacks, the natives are grouped into various ethnicities. This is done in order to destroy the bond of solidarity among the natives to enable the Whites manipulate the blacks to their advantage. Adonis’ ethnic experience of discrimination and the social distance from the Whites are determinants of his reaction towards Doughty. The once-sensitive and kind-hearted Michael Adonis (pp.6,10,22-23) degenerates into feeling a sense of importance even from killing an old helpless man.

However, Adonis’s reaction is not just an outburst of ethnic anger. He qualifies his reaction against the police by emphasizing that it is the ‘poor brown’ rather than just ‘brown’ people who get the raw deal from the police. Adonis, therefore, realizes that he is not only a part of the social group which is based on ethnicity but also a social group which is based on poverty. The dwellers of the tenement only feel united and experience the sense of a community not from any other thing but the perilous living that poverty compels on them. Adonis’ reaction arises as a result of an exercise of free will, though the conditions that constrain the scope of the free will lie in the social environment. Consequently, Adonis emerges as a symbolic character representing an attitude of ethnic exclusiveness. Ethnic exclusiveness leaves Adonis in a moral cul-de-sac, and in the pervading

¹ Ibid, p.127

² Ibid, p.131

atmosphere of criminality of District Six Adonis' ending up as a member of Foxy's criminal gang was only a matter of time.¹

Undeniably, poverty characterized the lives of the non-whites living in this era of apartheid—particularly those people living in the slums of District Six. La Guma does not explicitly tell us about the economic suffering and widespread poverty but portrays an even more powerful impression of this through his style of narration based on physical details. The detailed description of the tenement tells readers the extent of the poverty that engulfs the lives of the non-whites:

He turned down street, away from the artificial glare of Hanover, between stretches of damp, battered houses with their broken-ribs of front-railings; cracked walls and high tenements that rose like the left-overs of a bombed area in the twilight; vacant lots and weed-grown patches where houses had once stood; and deep doorways resembling the entrances to deserted castles . . . (p.21).

. . . The floor of the entrance was flagged with white and black slabs in the pattern of draught-board, but the tramp of untold feet and the accumulation of dust and grease and ash had blurred the squares so that now it had taken on the appearance of a kind of loathsome skin disease. A row of dustbin lined one side of the entrance and exhaled the smell of rotten fruit, stale food, stagnant water and general decay. A cat, the colour of dishwater, was trying to paw the remains of a fishhead from one of the bins (p.21).

The staircase was worn and blackened, the old oak banister loose and scarred. Naked bulbs wherever the sockets were in working order cast a pallid glare over parts of the interior, lighting up the big patches of damp and mildew, and the maps of denuded sections on the walls. Somewhere upstairs a radio was playing a Latin-American music, bongos and maracas throbbing softly through the smells of ancient cooking, urine, damp-rot and stale tobacco. A baby wailed with the tortured sound of gripe and malnutrition and a man's voice rose in hysterical laughter . . . (p.23).

The three passages above give a description of the kind of settlement that the poor non-white lives in. The first passage describes the general settlement of the poor. The settlement of the whites in Hanover is described as 'artificial glare' and one looks down the street of Hanover just to see 'stretches of damp, battered houses with their broken-ribs of front-railings; cracked walls and high tenements that rose like the left-overs of a bombed area in the twilight'. The comparison made here indicates that the native's settlement looks like a deserted area, in fact, a 'left-over'. To be living in a settlement described as being a 'left-over' is indicative of the fact that the dwellers of these settlements are themselves left-overs—a left-over of a human being (in the perception of the white). How can a native of a land be relegated to living in such a settlement of tattered penury?

Moreover, the second passage gives the description of the tenement itself when Adonis enters his apartment. Readers are moved from the general overview of the entire settlement of the non-whites to the actual state of the non-whites in their tenements. We are made aware by the narration that 'A row of dustbin lined one side of the entrance and exhaled the smell of rotten fruit, stale food, stagnant water and general decay' (p.21). This is virtually what the poor live in. They are victims of circumstance—apartheid. Poor sanitation is fundamentally a characteristic of the poor living under the apartheid system. It is the settlement of the poor that serves as a refuse dump and no one is conscious of the effect of poor sanitation on health. Children even play in the street 'darting among the overflowing dustbins and shooting at each other with wooden guns' (p.21). The idea of a cat 'trying to paw the remains of a fishhead from one of the bins' is also symbolic of the quality of life the blacks are forced to adopt. Thus, the non-whites are to find their own means as likened to the 'cat' in order to gain a kind of quality life.

From the streets of Hanover to the entrance of the tenement, we are now led into the interior of the tenement and given a clear view of its make-up. The third passage, therefore, is the description of the tenement's interior. We are told that not only the streets and the entrance is 'decorated' [emphasis mine] with dirt but also even the interior of the tenement is engulfed in 'big patches of damp and mildew', 'the smells of ancient cooking, urine, damp-rot and stale tobacco'. The situation in which Adonis and people like him live in is practically an eye-sore. Again, from the passage, we get to know one major repercussion of poverty on children. Children become sufferers of poor sanitation and malnutrition due to parents' inability to provide the basic food nutrients for them. We are informed that 'a baby wailed with the tortured sound of gripe and malnutrition'. The verb 'wailed' used in the sentence gives a clear sign that the baby is not just crying but making a loud high cry. We are also made aware that malnutrition has tortured the baby to the extent that it can no longer contain the pain than to wail 'with the tortured sound'. It is therefore quite unfortunate that innocent babies and children are adversely

¹ *A Study in Trans-Ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925-1985*, p. 82

affected by the atrocities of apartheid.

As a matter of fact, one character that symbolizes the poor life of some blacks and their lost dignity is Joe. He is one of the many people who ‘just seemed to have happened, appearing in the District like a cockroach emerging through a floorboard’ (p.9). Many people like Joe don’t belong in the society as others do. He is compared to a cockroach which has to always escape being crushed by someone. The image stresses the nature of the nocturnal lives of the blacks, searching for physical and psychological comfort. It is therefore not surprising that Joe is known to be living as a beachcomber. The narrator presents to us the physical details of Joe:

Joe was short and his face had an ageless quality about it under the grime, like something valuable forgotten in a junk shop. He had soft brown eyes of a dog, and he smelled of a mixture of sweat, slept-in clothes and seaweed. His trousers had gone at the cuffs and knees, the rents held together with pins and pieces of string, and so stained and spotted that the original colour could not have been guessed at. Over the trousers he wore an ancient raincoat that reached almost to his ankles, the sleeves torn loose at the shoulders, the body hanging in ribbons, the front pinned together over his filthy vest. His shoes were worn beyond recognition (p.9).

The passage above provides to readers the disgusting image of Joe and the wretchedness of some black people living like Joe. He is actually in tattered penury from the description above. Thus, Joe becomes a representative of Strandlopers, the beachcombers near Cape Town who survived on animals washed up by sea. The Strandlopers, as Schapera points out, ‘were merely Bushmen who took to the seashore, so that we have to deal with a particular mode of life rather with particular people’.¹ Joe never gets the “luxury” of life which even some blacks have but is content with whatever he has because that is where he gets comfort from. The writer thus appeals to our sense of sight—visual imagery—with the description of Joe. With vivid description of this character, we are presented with the picturesque nature of the poor natives. Nothing but tattered penury has enveloped Joe to the extent that his pair of trousers’ original colour cannot be guessed and shoes ‘worn beyond recognition’. Effectively, this form of imagery brings to readers the lost dignity of the natives of South Africa under the apartheid era. The dignity of Joe is nothing to write home about and therefore is compared to ‘something valuable forgotten in a junk shop’. The verb ‘forgotten’ shows how unimportant the black man is to the whites. We are created as ‘something valuable’ but our valuable dignity is ‘forgotten’ by our white counterparts.

Although Joe retreats to the beachcombing habits of his historical past, yet it does not save him from the problems of the industrial society. He is prevented from bringing the dead fish he finds on the beach into the city. Otherwise, as Adonis tells him, ‘City Council would be on your neck’ (p.10). On one hand, the colour-blind laws of the City Council of an industrial city prevent him from bringing in dead stinking fish into the city. On the other hand, the colour-bond laws of the City Council condemn him on account of his ethnic origin to a situation where he cannot even access the beaches his forefathers freely moved about. In his conversation with Adonis, Joe says: ‘I hear they’re going to make the beaches so only white people can go there. [. . .]. It’s going to get so’s nobody can go nowhere’ (p.10). The separation laws of the apartheid seem not favourable for Joe, so he finally resorts to the option of retreating further away from the society of Cape Town, to make ‘his way towards the sea, walking alone through the starlit darkness’ (p.96).

Another major character worth being discussed as regards the lost dignity of blacks is Willieboy. The racial discrimination in South Africa illuminates the character and fate of Willieboy. La Guma describes Willieboy as a product of material deprivation and consequent depravity of moral values.² He slips into criminality and he gets himself into breaking laws due to the society he finds himself in. At the tender age of seven, he is forced to sell newspapers on commission basis often on an empty stomach. He is beaten by his mother if he fails to bring home the paltry earnings and spends it instead. In order to escape the lashings of his father, he has to run away always from home. He is deprived of proper education and climbing the social ladder becomes impossible for him. Through the third person narrative point of view, we are given the description of Willieboy who has experienced childhood bitterness:

He was also aware of his inferiority. All his youthful life he had cherished dreams of becoming a big shot. He had seen others rise to some sort of power in the confined underworld of this district and found himself left behind. He had looked with envy at the flashy desperadoes who quivered across the screen in front of the eightpenny gallery and had dreamed of being transported wherever he wished in great black motorcars and issuing orders for the execution of enemies. And when the picture faded and he emerged from the vast smoke-laden cinema mingling with the noisy crowd he was always aware of his inadequacy, moving unnoticed in the mob. He had affected a slouch, wore gaudy shirts and peg-bottomed trousers, brushed his hair into a flamboyant peak. He had been thinking of piercing one ear and decorating it with a gold ring. But even with these things he

¹ Schapera, I. (1965). *The Khoisan People of South Africa*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.29

² *A Study in Trans-ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925-1985*, p.82

continued to remain something less than nondescript, part of the blurred face of the crowd, inconspicuous as a smudge on a grimy wall. (p.72)

This passage brings to the fore the unfulfilled aspiration of Willieboy which leads him to finding fulfillment outside his inner being. He sees himself as an inferior being compared to the white man. His attempt to compensate for his inadequacy becomes unrealized. This is the real state of being of the black man in the apartheid era which the author records impartially. The simile as used in the sentence 'inconspicuous as a smudge on a grimy wall' indicates that Willieboy is not recognized by the society he lives in. 'A grimy wall' has many spots on it and it will be very difficult if one wants to identify a particular mark. Thus, Willieboy being compared to 'a smudge on a grimy wall' will never be recognized by the society he lives in, particularly by the whites. The native blacks have lost their dignity and identity because they are mixed up totally in a 'grimy' society.

Willieboy goes to Adonis' apartment to borrow money. Finding the door locked he thinks of borrowing it from Doughty. He opens the door and finds the dead body. He therefore runs away from the tenement, but while doing so he is seen by two occupants of the tenement. When these two people are questioned by the police, they indicate that they had seen somebody 'with kinky hair and yellow shirt'. This sets Constable Raalt on Willieboy's trail. Raalt in his patrol van, catches Willieboy in a glare. His yellow shirt and kinky hair are evidence enough to conclude that he is the murderer. Willieboy's immediate reaction is to run away from being caught by Raalt and consequently a chase ensues.

Nonetheless, Constable Raalt's anger against 'bushmen' the derogatory stereotype of all coloureds is sourced from his private frustration. He is unable to control his wife whom he suspects of indulging in an extra-marital affair. Upon further frustration even while on the patrol, he gets very angry about the affair and tells himself: "It's enough to make a man commit murder, [. . .] I'd wring her bloody neck but it's a sin to kill your wife. It's a sin the way she carries on, too. If I ever find out something definite she'll know all about it" (pp.38-39). Raalt becomes so furious that he does not care about committing murder. Again, he tells the patrol van driver, Andries: "I wish something would happen. I'd like to lay my hands on one of those bushmen bastards and wring his bloody neck" (p.39). His private frustration is therefore transferred to unknown 'bushman bastards'. The derogatory names given to this unknown victim who is probably a black or coloured person reveal the intensity of Raalt's anger against his victim. Here, the difference between his wife and the unknown 'bushman' victim totally disappears when he thinks of what he would do if ever he finds the guilty person. The omniscient narrator tells us that Raalt 'found little relief in transferring his rage to some other unknown victim, but he took pleasure in the vindictiveness . . . (p.39). This therefore indicates that Raalt is determined to commit a horrendous act which comes out of malice. La Guma, therefore, suggests very early in the delineation of Raalt's character a link between his private frustrations on one hand, and on the other his brutal behaviour in the discharge of his public affairs.¹

Moreover, Raalt is psychologically equipped to be extremely ruthless if his targets are 'effing hotnot bastards' (p.31) or 'bushman bastards' (p.39). Finally, upon becoming aware that the alleged murderer has kinky hair, his desire for violence takes on racial overtones. While he is putting down the specifics of the suspect murderer of Doughty, he thinks:

They hate us, but I don't give a bloody hell about them, anyway; and no hotnot bastard gets away with murder on my patrol; yellow shirt and kinky hair; a real hotnot and I'll get him even if I have to gather in every black bastard wearing a yellow shirt (p.63).

Raalt here represents the fascist ideology in the South Africa. Political violence is a hallmark of fascism and it is of no doubt that Raalt without evidence initiates a chase for Willieboy. He represents the many policemen who commit atrocities against the blacks just because in their prejudiced minds the blacks are criminals.

This chase is described through the use of a visual imagery which specifically points to hunting. This is evidenced in the passages below:

He was a hunter now, stalking.

[. . .]

He wondered vaguely where the driver had got to, but he was not concerned with him very much, preferring to hunt alone and undisturbed (p.82).

Constable Raalt was determined to take his time about this. He had his quarry trapped and he was quite sure that he would conclude the hunt successfully. He crouched there in the dark and smiled with satisfaction.

[. . .]

Raalt flung himself forward, firing as he did so (p.85).

[. . .] Raalt pounded on, leaping projections, holding his head low to evade the clothes-lines.

He saw the boy poise himself for an instant on the edge of the far wall and drop out of sight.

¹A Study in Trans-ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925-1985, p.85

[. . .]

The bullet slapped into the boy, jerking him upright, and he spun, his arms flung wide, turning on his toes like a ballet dancer (p.86).

In the three passages above, we are presented with the imagery of hunting demonstrated by a white policeman, Constable Raalt. The imagery of hunting brings to the fore the discriminatory situation in South African society. Symbolically, the blacks' dignity is of no value to the white. It has been reduced to the level of a game and needs to be hunted and gunned down. The blacks and the coloureds do not have any way to prevent the dangers that the society they inhabit pose to them. Therefore, like Willieboy, they have to run very far to escape the dangers of living in such a stereotyped society.

3. Conclusion

As a critical reaction to the socio-economic, political and cultural practices of the South Africans which serve as impediments for both growth and emancipation of the blacks in South African, La Guma develops his literary aesthetics. This is clearly exhibited in the lives of his characters that are irritated, treated roughly without any form of dignity and incarcerated by the apartheid system. However, he is highly resolute to end their state of affairs. It is due to this radical spirit of altering an iniquitous structure that resulted in Adonis striking Mr. Doughty dead without knowing just owing to the fact that he feels discrimination against him as regards colour is the ultimate reason for his disturbed life. In this novella, the characters presented to us are "helpless victims who have no control on their fate."¹ And this has been evidently shown in Raalt's killing of Willieboy.

A symbolic promise of profound social transformation is carried in the last paragraph of the story, which takes us back to the grimy tenement where Frank Lorenzo and his wife remain for the duration of the night: "Frank Lorenzo slept on his back and snored peacefully. Beside him the woman, Grace, lay awake in the dark, restlessly waiting for the dawn and feeling the knot of life within her" (p.96). Lorenzo's eyes may be closed now, but it is just a matter of time before he will open them, wake up and see the truth. And when that dawn of illumination comes, as it inevitably must, a new day will begin and a new generation will be born that no longer will have to live in darkness. La Guma's depressing story of life and death in District Six thus ends with an Utopian vision of rebirth through proletarian revolution.

A Walk in the Night is literally a story of Michael Adonis's walk through District Six in one eventful evening. But it is also a narrative that attempts to convey an impression of the nightmarish experience of living in the South African ghettos and it contains a critique of the kind of benighted society that promotes human suffering. The people we see in District Six are presented to us as victims of an oppressive social order who have lost their real identity and to the large extent their dignity. Perhaps this is all that we as readers need; a picture of oppression vivid enough to shock us into a further awareness of South African horrors.

Uncle Doughty before being killed accidentally by Adonis said: "We're like Hamlet's father's ghost" (p.27). The key word here is the first person plural pronoun: 'We'. Uncle Doughty and Adonis, men of different colour, are identified as fellow sufferers in South African's purgatory. In other words, whites as well as blacks are victims of the system, so everyone in South Africa will continue to walk in the night until corrective measures are taken to transform it into a just, democratic society.

La Guma's concern in the novella is to present a comprehensive depiction of callousness and a naturalistic representation of black-white opposition:

La Guma's achievement is to present a particularly 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.²

Therefore, La Guma goes well beyond the ordinary limits of naturalistic fiction and creates in *A Walk in the Night* the inspirational uplift of a truly revolutionary novella. He uses his novella *A Walk in the Night* to demonstrate his contempt for the atrocities of the apartheid system perpetrated against the black people in South African society through his style of writing.

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² Coetzee, A. D. (1992). *Doubling the Point*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.358

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