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Analysis of '*A Walk in the Night*' by Alex la Guma

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will be concerned with the analysis of Alex La Guma's "A Walk in the Night." It is also going to be examining some vices attached to colonialism like racial oppression, racial segregation, racial violence, poverty, and so on in South Africa. Oppression is the act of oppressing, the imposition of unreasonable burden either in taxes or services excessively rigorous government severity. Racial oppression however would mean, "The severity or misery imposed on a particular group of people with the same biological features by another group or specie of mankind". Racial oppression in South Africa occurs during colonialism as a result of racism, that is, the belief that some race is superior to others because they are of a different race. During the colonial period, racism was wide spread and caused major problems. The whites who held that they are superior justified discrimination, segregation, colonialism, slavery and even genocide (mass murder), on European colonial empires. All these came to existence as result of colonialism and have caused disorderliness and death of an innocent young man (Willieboy). One of the ailments of this period (colonial period) is poverty. Poverty during the apartheid regime in South Africa ruined some young people's lives. In La Guma's "A Walk in the Night" Willieboy's poverty in life caused him trouble, he went to Adonis's house to see if he would get some money from his pay-off, when he was taken for the murderer of the old man (Doughty), Joe's upbringing (his parents poverty lives) affected him so much and turned him to a beggar. There is an example of racial violence, constable Raalt's unlawful killing of Willieboy is a typical example of racial violence in "A Walk in the Night".

Racial Oppression in the text can be examine through Michael Adonis's sacked from work by his white foreman. Racial Segregation also can be seen, that is, the whites oppressor segregate (set apart) the coloured people to live separately in the hot tenements, while the whites live apart in a very conducive environment. All these are caused by colonialism, when the white oppressors came to some parts in Africa and some other parts of the world, mainly to colonize during this period, they ruled African State and treated the coloured people as slaves, because they believed they are nothing, and that is the main reason they did not cater for them and instead of been compassionate, they rather segregated and left them with their predicament. That is the main reason this paper will be concerned with some of the ailments of colonialism by analyzing La Guma's "A Walk in the Night".

## **Analysis of the Novella A Walk in the Night by Alex La Guma**

### **Alex la Guma – A Literary and Political Biography, Roger Field.**

While Cecil Abrahams based his biography of Alex la Guma (1985) essentially on his personal experiences and contacts, Roger Field could use the collection of the la Guma papers in the University of the Western Cape library. This provides an abundance of detailed factual information which makes the book valuable as a source for further research.

Field opens his biography with a genealogical preface (Family, society and founding political moments) outlining the activism of Jimmy la Guma, “the Ambassador of Marcus Garvey”, his involvement in the resistance of the pre-WW II years, the early ANC with Sol Plaatje, the Communist Party and first contacts with the Soviet Union art movement and the American NAACP with Langston Hughes. Field details la Guma’s (father and son) experiences as “the brown sons of Africa”:

“la Guma made a conscious effort to write about the community and life of District Six because nothing satisfactory or worthwhile...had been written about the area” (p 38).

He speaks about la Guma being imbedded in the artistic and intellectual environment of Cape Town in the 1940s, about the importance of the debate about a specific “coloured identity” and the resultant tensions within the South African resistance movement, particularly vis-à-vis the ANC. Due to the increasing repression after the National Party election victory in 1948, la Guma follows the footsteps of his father Jimmy, joining the Communist youth organisation and the CPSA (Coloured People of SA), he publishes stories and essays in *Fighting Talk*, *New Age* and also in *Drum Magazine*. He subscribes easily to Stalin’s theories of nationhood and ethnic identity as a model for South Africa. The Soviet Union’s solution of the nation state/multi-ethnicity dichotomy made a life-long impression on la Guma’s thinking and therefore became a recurrent topic in his writing.

Alex la Guma involuntarily follows his father’s footsteps also as far as the prosecution by Special Branch/secret police is concerned. He suffers imprisonment without trial several times (1960 after Sharpeville, 1963 at the same time as his wife Blanche), he is one of the defendants in the Treason Trial, and he is under ban and house arrest, which determines his mode of creation and procedure of writing. Being under ban and house arrest means that he must not meet other people, receive materials, receive or pass on information, i.e., the entire research for the biography of his father is illegal, conspiratorial: he is under permanent threat of imprisonment. The notorious Special Branch searches of his house or his friends means that he has to be constantly alert to hide the materials he is using, the manuscripts he has been writing, always losing materials and scripts and having to start all over again. “What we have in the published versions are beginnings, middles, ends that initially stood in unresolved relationships to each other...la Guma began, restarted, continued, and “re-continued”, ended and “re-ended” [a story] under a succession of different conditions with different pre-texts and memories at his disposal”. (151) La Guma tried to beat the system by diverting into popular art with his comic series *Little Libby* for *New Age* and *Liberation Chabalala*. With this excursion into comic art (as equal to “high art”) he deviates from the pure gospel of socialist art theory. On the other hand he

establishes contacts with foreign writers, editors to circumvent censorship and the publishing ban. Ezekia Mphahlele was in Nigeria at the time working with Black Orpheus and Mbari Press, Ulli Beier managed to smuggle la Guma's manuscripts out of South Africa and published them by Mbari Press, Seven Seas Press in East Germany took over later. Robert Serumaga from Uganda linked him to BBC, a contact which he could use when he came to London as an exile, supporting himself with radio essays and newspaper articles on African writers and the South African condition in particular.

Exile eased the pressure from the Apartheid regime, but as official representative of the ANC in Cuba, Alex la Guma attained diplomatic status that demanded political allegiance to ANC doctrine. Field's approach of the "literary and political biography" underlines this allegiance and suggests a direct translation of political convictions into literary production. This leads to a reading of la Guma's later works as propaganda, rather than fictional and aesthetic representations. Field sees a similar closeness between literary models like Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and *The Stone Country* (Tom Joad equals Shilling Murile), Hemingway's *To Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Time of the Butcherbird*, (Pilar = Mma Tau), or *Death in the Afternoon* and *A Soviet Journey*. This seems to me a simplified reading of la Guma's texts which is definitely not supported by his latest essay "Is there a South African Culture", published posthumously in *The African Communist*. Just like Albie Sachs and Njambulo Ndebele in the middle 1980s, la Guma pleads for a concept of culture suitable for a post-Apartheid South Africa, transcending fixed ideological positions of the struggle.

## **An Introduction to A walk in the Night by Alex La Guma**

A Walk in the Night is La Guma's first work of long prose fiction. It is a part of his transition from journalism to fiction. Because of its shortness, many critics refer to it as a novella. Mbari, an important African publishing house, published it in Nigeria in 1962. Its first edition had 91 pages and Peter Clarke, the artist and writer, designed its cover. La Guma began to write it in 1959, and he appears to have finished it sometime in 1960, though it is unclear whether he had almost finished it in before his detention or whether he finished it in jail. Characters, as described in the novella, are victims of the apartheid regime. The novella brought information in literary form about the injustice of apartheid to a wider audience. In other words, it introduced 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 follows:

"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.

La Guma wrote the novella as part of his contribution to end 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 readership and reception of La Guma's "A Walk in the Night", by his community. "A Walk in the Night" was a way of restoring a voice which had always been suppressed by the apartheid government". In his analysis, he attaches much importance to the historical and political factors around the time when the novella was produced. In analyzing, characters, we confirm the positional superiority of the whites (as the representatives of the apartheid regime) over the positional inferiority of the blacks and attributes that situation to the apartheid policy.

To substantiate this claim we analyze the example of the two white policemen who unjustly hunt and cause the death of the innocent coloured man, Willieboy, "for the perceived murder of Doughty, the old white man inhabiting District Six". Normally, the proper obligation of the police is to protect people and their property. However, in apartheid South Africa, it was not the case. Instead of honouring their proper 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".

It is this racially based fear that Michael Adonis in "A walk in the Night" experiences when he meets the police on his way back home. For him, it was not a pleasant experience. They came on

and Michael Adonis turned aside to avoid them, but they had him penned in with a causal, easy, skillful flanking man manoeuvre before he could escape.

“Where are you walking around man?”...going home’, Michael Adonis said, looking at the buckle of the policeman’s belt. You learned from experience to gaze at some spot on their uniforms, the button of a pocket, or the bright smoothness of their San Browne belts, but never into their eyes, for that would be taken as an affront by them. It was only the very brave, or the very stupid, who dared look straight into the law’s eyes to challenge them or to question their authority.

Michael Adonis does not look the police in the eye for two contradictory but meaningful reasons: to do so would challenge them, and to avoid their gaze is to reduce their power. As in the army, where one is not supposed to look one’s superior officer in the eye, under apartheid ‘rule’ the oppressed were not allowed to look at their oppressors. A further analysis of Adonis’s refusal might be viewed as a denial of their own very existence. Adonis’s decision to consider the police as negative forces was justified by the fact that the law in South Africa at the time did not “represent” the clichéd concept of truth, honesty and justice... The police in ‘A Walk in the Night’ are not interested in the safety or well-being of their black people.

Assessing the reaction of coloured characters to the injustices, it is evident that they seem both unconscious of the outer world of political strife and conflict and the political mechanisms which govern their day-to-day existence. In other words, this reveals the lack of political maturity among coloured people to organize resistance against white oppression.

## **PLOT**

The story revolves round Michael Adonis a young coloured South African who has just been fired from his job in a sheet- metal factory for daring to speak back at his white boss, and was later harassed by two white policemen on a daily check route. On his way home, he stops at one drinking joint and another hoping that by so doing, he will purge himself of the shame and humiliation of his encounter with the white fore man which had resulted in the loss of his job. However, when Michael gets home, he meets his decrepit and inebriated Irish co-tenant, Mr. Doughty. An argument ensues between them over a bottle of hard-wine. Michael already bottled-up with anger as a result of his earlier experience with whites spits at his antagonist. He loses his self-control and unintentionally kills Mr. Doughty in a fit of rage with the wine-bottle. This incident turns Adonis into a murderer. He flees from his tenement to avoid arrest. His friend, Willieboy, arrives at the scene to ask if Michael can give him some money out of his pay-off, and discovers the corpse of the old Mr. Doughty. Willieboy flees from the tenement to avoid being taken in as the murderer. [Based on the evidence and description given by John Abrahams. John seeing Willieboy leave the tenement in a suspicious manner. The rest of the narration centres on the hunt for Willieboy.] The law finally catches up with Willieboy. He is shot in the leg by a police Constable: Constable Raalt, and in no time, died. As said earlier, the whole story centres on Michael Adonis, and later Willieboy is introduced to the next happening (scene) where he is mistaken for the murderer of Mr. Doughty. In the plot of the novella, one can find out that the stories of Michael Adonis and Willieboy virtually form the plot of the text: (“A Walk in the Night”). Having read the story very well, it will be noticed that, there are set of people (the whites) having a superior hand over the ‘coloured’ people (blacks). They oppressed the blacks through several means, they racially oppressed, segregated caused violence and so on, during colonial period. They ruled the people, but did not cater for their needs and they judged them unrightfully.

Alex La Guma’s “A Walk in the Night,” showcases the attitudes of the white oppressors to the South African people, during the colonial period; apartheid regime in South Africa.

## THEMES

In La Guma's "A Walk in the Night," there are racial vices, which the main ones, concerned with this study will be examined.

### RACIAL OPPRESSION

Michael Adonis is fired from his job, for daring to speak back at his white boss. Michael is treated the way a white man could not be treated. Another example of Racial Oppression is the unlawful killing of Willieboy, by a police constable: Constable Raalt, who kills Willieboy unlawfully. The whites oppressed the coloured people (blacks) during the colonial period, the way they could not treat their fellow race, claiming and acting as superior. All these caused by the period of colonialism.

### RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

The drunkards, bums, thugs, touts spins, derelicts, sycophants, fugitives' vagabonds and the taxi drives are all victims of apartheid in one way or the other. And there is another instance of discrimination where the black majority live in the 'ghetto'

"In the hot tenements the people felt the breeze .... The breeze carried the stale smells from passageway to passageway, room to room, along lanes and back alleys, through the realms of the poor until massed smell of stagnant water, cooking, rotting vegetables, oil, fish, damp plaster and timber, unwashed curtains, bodies and stairways, cheap perfume and incense, spies and half-washed kitchen-ware, urine, animals and dusty corners became one vast, anonymous odour, so widespread any all – embracing as to become unidentifiable, hardly noticeable by the initiated nostrils of the teeming cramped world of poverty which it enveloped".

### RACIAL VIOLENCE.

The theme of violence dominates the entire novella. Apart from Joe who always begs for existence and Andries (a policeman) a man of virtue with conscience, all other male characters in the text engage in violence. The male character are frustrated of the period of apartheid in South Africa, most of them transfer aggression while others get themselves engage in violence, like stealing other people's properties and fighting all about. Michael Adonis is lured to violence as a result of his jobless and maltreatment. Foxy, Hendricks and Toyer engage in violent stealing, killing and destruction of people and property. There is also black versus black conflict (Richard kills Flippy Isaac in self-defence). Willieboy going everywhere challenging everybody with a knife is an act of violence. Willieboy's mother's transferring of aggression whenever Willieboy's father beats the mother is another example of the frustrated life Willieboy has. Michael Adonis also transfers aggression on Uncle Doughty when he unintentionally kills him over a bottle of hard-wine.



## **CHARACTERIZATION**

### *Michael Adonis.*

Michael Adonis is the hero of the novella. He is introduced at the opening of the story, as a poor fellow who cannot provide adequate clothing for himself as he puts on jeans “that has been washed several times.” He is well built. He engages in smoking and drinking all the time his foreman sack him for having talked back at him. He goes regularly to the pub and the café to while away his time. He is regularly in association with socially deprived boys like Willieboy, Foxy and his gang. After becoming a jobless man, he resorts into life of violence and transfers his aggression on Uncle Doughty and unintentionally kills him he sees Uncle Doughty as a replica of the oppressive institution (been a white Irish man). He goes about dodging the law to avoid being punished for the crime he has committed. Colonialism (apartheid) has made Adonis a murderer, he is fired from work by his white boss (racial oppression) and causes him to transfer aggression on Mr. Doughty, this thus makes him a murderer and constantly dodges the law in order not to be caught and punished.

### *Willieboy.*

Willieboy is a young dark, notorious boy who wears a sport coat cover, a yellow T-shirt and crucifix around his neck. He has no parental care. His father constantly beats his mother and she beats Willieboy in turn at the slightest provocation. At the tender age of seven, he starts selling newspapers on commission basis without bringing any part of the money home. His father would get drunk and beat everyone around him. He is deprived of proper education and climbing the social ladder becomes impossible for him. From his discussion with Michael Adonis, we understand his joblessness and lack of readiness to work under any Whiteman. He goes about begging for existence and almost lynching Mister Greene for a small amount of money. He goes to Michael Adonis house for financial assistance only to discover that Uncle Doughty has died. He crawls downstairs but he has been noticed by John Abraham and Grace. John Abraham describes his manner of dressing to Constable Raalt who pursues him and eventually shoots him.

### *Uncle Doughty.*

He is an old wretched white Irishman living amidst the coloured (blacks). He is an adaptable and a sociable person who enjoys the goodwill of the people in his neighbourhood. He is given to too much alcohol. Once, he was an actor and has served in two wars. He gets married to a coloured woman, he travels extensively to England, Australia, London and he likes acting. He played the ghost of Hamlet’s father once. In his self-evaluation. He is now a ghost of his former better self. Now, he has nothing worthwhile to show for existence. He says “That us, us.... Just ghost doomed to walk the night”. He is eventually killed (unintentionally) by Michael Adonis. The title of the novella is derived from the above assertion. Constable Raalt is surprised to find a Whiteman so humble as to live with the coloured people.

*Police Constable Raalt.*

Raalt is a white policeman representing the institution of oppression. He has no respect for the coloured people and could kill them at will. He is a character being oppressed by the nature of his work coupled with the careless attitude of his wife, about which he thinks of all the time. He is an aggressive person. He is the devil's incarnate. He has no respect for the requirement of his job. The psychological discomfort created by his wife at home turns him into a sadist; his dealing with Willieboy shows how dangerous and uncanny he could be. He kills the innocent boy in cold blood. He terrorizes the life of the coloured people everywhere he is significantly "violence" personified. He treats the black people as nobody during the apartheid regime in South Africa.

*Joe.*

Joe is a short boy with the swift brown eyes of a dog. His father leaves the family and Joe keeps begging around for existence. Most of the time, he wanders around the harbour, gathering fish discarded by fisherman and anglers or along the reaches of the coast picking impetus and mussels. He is a good friend and personal adviser to Michael Adonis. He endures all sorts of social degradation like all the other boys, but does not take part in criminal activities like other boys. Intellectually, he is dull and almost becomes a moron. He is kind-hearted and gentle in a foolish manner. He does not drink or smoke. He rejects any social malice. He shares Adonis's sorrow, but dissuades him from joining Foxy's notorious gang. Since the disappearance of his father, he lives on the charity of others. He has no future and he is being tossed up and down by the tides of life.

*Andries.*

Andries is a white policeman of virtue. He, unlike Constable Raalt is a considerate, dutiful, disciplined, and admirable person. He is a total contrast of whatever Raalt appears to be. He warns Raalt not to shoot Willieboy. He does not like Constable Raalt at all. It is almost unthinkable to see such a nice white man, especially during 'colonial' apartheid system in South Africa, who will have empathy for the coloured people (blacks). His self-control is revealed in his ability to restrain himself from flirting with one of his father's maid but prefers to select a beautiful white lady as his wife. He has not given into smoking and drinking but he is strictly committed to the tenets of his job. Andries is a man who does not terrorize the blacks; he is always in opposition of the ways and manners Raalt treat the blacks, especially how he (Raalt) treats Willieboy.

## **SETTING**

“In hot tenements the people felt the breeze.... The breeze carried the state smells from passageway to passageway, from room to room , along lanes and back alleys, though the realms of the poor until massed smells of stagnant water , cooking rotting vegetables, oil, fish, damp plaster and timber, unwashed curtains, bodies and stairways, cheap perfume and incense , species and half – washed kitchen- ware , urine , animals and dusty corners became one vast , anonymous odour ,so widespread any all-embracing as to become unidentifiable, hardly noticeable by the initiated nostrils of the teeming , cramped word of poverty which it enveloped.” (La Guma, 1967:48, My emphasis).

In this passage the reader’s attention is immediately drawn to the opposition between the wealth of smells and their final dissolution, into “one vast anonymous odour” as well to the antinomy between ‘hardly noticeable and initiated nostrils,” as if the description were fighting a lost Battle against reality. From the setting of la Guma’s “A Walk in the Night” one can point to one or two things, even from the description of the environment we can conclude that during the apartheid regime in South Africa, the coloured people were not cared about by the whites in authority. Such people (blacks) were not given good social amenities. People in the area, however, were abandoned and deprived of their social rights. Meanwhile, the issue of apartheid was introduced by what is known as ‘colonialism’. This made some people live a worthless life, because they looked down on themselves and government of this period (oppressors) would not want to know what their problem was. As portrayed by La Guma’s “A walk in the Night”, some of the victims of this period (colonial: apartheid period) who reside in this environment include Michael Adonis, Willieboy, Joe...

## **Point of view**

The third person omniscient narrative point of view otherwise known as the Eye-of God method is employed. The writer delves into the mind of the characters, inner feelings and intents. This stream of unconsciousness technique provides answers to the asked and the unasked questions the novella might generate.

## **LITERARY CRITICISM**

Yousaf, in his book; Alex La Guma: Politics and Resistance (2001), suggests that the novella is about the problems of limited political understanding. He goes further and uses Marxist theories to understand the novella. He claims that, writing from a Marxist perspective, La Guma exemplifies the macrocosmic capitalist-sponsored apartheid state's ill treatment of its majority population in microcosmic detail in his first novel". Making a general comment on the presence of ideas and resistance in La Guma's novels, Yousaf points out that La Guma "develops a range of overarching themes introduced in an opening chapter that explores issue of writing and resistance in the context of apartheid South Africa.

Another critic who has made a valuable contribution to the understanding of "A Walk in the Night" is Fritz Pointer. In his "A Passion to Liberate, La Guma's South African-Images of District Six (2001)", analyses the themes of literary techniques of the novella. In his analysis he stresses the use of imagery.

"The images are firmly attached to the dominant themes of the book and play a dynamic part in conveying its meaning and deepening its artistic effect". Pointer contributes to the understanding of La Guma's style, particularly where he says that "when he (La Guma) is not using similes, he is using other figures of speech the most common being metaphor and personification."

In his (La Guma). "A Literary and Political Biography of the in the South African Years" (2001), Field analyses "A Walk in the Night" in the light of political and literary approaches. His analysis is based on an understanding of the circumstances under which La Guma wrote "A Walk in the Night". He clearly explains how historic- political and socio-economical influences inspired the author of the anthology. His analysis presents La Guma in his infancy, childhood and adulthood. His research describes La Guma as a product of the society in which he grew up. His analytical understanding is based on demonstrating how coloured people, La Guma's community, were victims of apartheid. He explains how La Guma wanted them to become conscious of the socio-economic and political issues in a society which they were forced to live. His analysis clarifies La Guma's main themes: Race, Social injustice and Resistance to apartheid. But, more importantly, his idea about the ending of "A Walk in the Night" will be used to explain the presence of realism in the novella.

"A Walk in the Night" describes the social problems which coloured people were forced to face due to the apartheid system. Much stress is placed on the influence of critical realism in the novella.

Cecil Abrahams, La Guma's "official biographer", has also made an important contribution to the understanding of the novella. Abraham correctly points out that the novella "concerns itself with the social, economic and political purpose of the Cape colored community ..."

According to him, La Guma has the ability to portray character... he is a master at 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 further presents the novella as a slow-moving book

which examines carefully every aspect of the major characters' lives and their cruel environment. I partly agree with Abraham's claim. It is true that the novella deals with the social lives of characters, but it is wrong to consider the novella as "slow-moving", it moves fast. In a single night, different events take place and one event rapidly succeeds another.

La Guma was not only concerned with class struggle; other factors such as race consciousness and the assumption of a racial hierarchy were part of the political context in which La Guma worked politically. These features in the anthology. To justify this claim, there is the example of Doughty, the drunken old white former actor who considers himself as much a member of the oppressed as Michael Adonis.

## **Conclusion**

At the time Alex la Guma wrote “A Walk in the Night” the South African society was ruled by an ideology which advocated separated development of the race, but which in reality used the racial argument to establish the complete economic supremacy of the minority over the majority. Such a system cannot adapt, it can only refine endless on its promises without any hope of even achieving its goal. Indeed, examples elsewhere have shown that attempts of this kind are doomed to fail not so much because of external contradictions. And this is what was happening in South Africa, where apartheid had to undermine its own ideological foundations in order to ensure that economic privileges continued to remain in the hand of the minority.

On the one hand, the avowed purpose of apartheid was emphasized with the creation of “black homelands” and the supremacy of the minority was reinforced by increased oppression of the majority. But on the other hand, black labour was exploited more and more extensively in white areas, the black consumers market attracted more and more attention, the development of a black comprador-class was actively encouraged, and even some timid attempt were made to enlarge the base of the minority by granting some political rights to the Asian and coloured communities. Apartheid contained in itself the germ of its own destruction.

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