

*An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
(LALIGENS), Ethiopia*
Vol. 4 (1), Serial No 9, January, 2015:119-
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v4i1.9>

The City as Trope: Snapshots of the Urban Experience in Alex La Guma's *A Walk In The Night*

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Abstract

In A Walk in the Night, Alex La Guma holds aloft, for his readers, a portrait of slum life in urban South Africa at a particular historical moment. Depicted on La Guma's novelistic canvas is a life which bears too frightening a resemblance to Thomas Hobbes "state of nature." This essay attempts to establish a causal connection between the brutishness, nastiness, shortness and solitariness which characterize the lives of La Guma's characters, and the cheerless, filthy and insalubrious physical surroundings in which these characters find themselves. By highlighting some of the many tropes which La Guma employs in the realization of his grim portrait of urban life, the essay validates the literariness of La Guma's work. The essay insinuates, in conclusion, that La Guma's narrative is animated by the consequential link the people and places in it.

Key words: Alex La Guma, *A Walk in the Night*, the Urban Novel, the South African Novel, Apartheid

I

It is hardly contestable that of all the genres of literature, prose-fiction—probably because of its considerable magnitude—is the one which allows the writer the most ample room to treat a variety of themes. In the African situation, one such theme which, on account of its frequent recurrence, can be said to have acquired the status of a *topos* or *leitmotif* is urbanism. It will be a quaint typology of African fiction, indeed, which neglects to carve up a discrete category and denominate it the Urban Novel, as opposed to, say, the Rural Novel. Helen Chukwuma, assessing the evolution of the African novel, looks back at the decades between the 1960s and 1980s, a period of nearly unprecedented ferment in modern African literature, observes that, “urbanization has been a current theme of a notable number of African novels, and a form of assessment of post-colonial life and government in independent African states” (66). So alluring must have been the subject of urbanization as a novelistic preoccupation that the South African novelist, Alex La Guma, writing at a time when apartheid was the staple fare of South African literature, subsumes that epoch-defining racial aberration under the urban concern in his novel, *A Walk in the Night* (1962).

In what follows, we examine what portrait is painted of urban life in Alex La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night*.

II

As the title of the novel clearly indicates, the series of incidents that constitute the plot of Alex La Guma’s short novel, *A Walk in the Night*, spans a single night in the dingy ambience of District Six, a suburb of the South African city of Cape Town inhabited principally by people considered the dregs of a racially stratified society—blacks, coloureds and poor whites. The sheer racial diversity of its population—not to speak of the wide variety of the personal traits of the characters who populate it—lends the suburb the aspect of a city within a city; a miniature South Africa, in short. The short novel is set in the apartheid era, a period when racial segregation was enthroned as the guiding principle of, not only, state policy, but even interpersonal relationships in South Africa. It tells the story of a young coloured man, Michael Adonis, and others of his ilk and their futile attempts to make any meaning of their lives in a slum which seems overly enthusiastic to transfer what it can of its squalor and cheerlessness to its habitués.

The physical setting of *A Walk in the Night*, complete with all the usual appurtenances of an urban slum, such as filth and overstretched amenities, bears a heavy hand in the way events in the short novel play out and resolve themselves. La Guma, it would appear, insinuates this link between location and action in the short novel by usually launching first into detailed descriptions of scenes, each time with an

accent on the pervasive putrescence, before relating the events which take place at such scenes. Here is one such scenic description which relies for its effect on the evocation of visual images of degeneration, corresponding to the degeneration in the lot of La Guma's characters who are portrayed as a bunch of drifting humanity:

On the floors of the tenements the grime collected quickly. A mud-died sole of a shoe scuffed across the worn, splintery boards and left tiny embankments of dirt along the sides of the minute raised ridges of wood; or water was spilled or somebody urinated and left wet patches onto which the dust from the ceiling or the seams of clothes drifted and collected to leave dark patches as the moisture dried. A crumb fell on a drop of fat, an was ground underfoot, spread out to become a trap for drifting dust that floated in invisible particles, the curve of a warped plank or the projections of a badly-made joint, the rosettes and bas-reliefs of Victorian plaster-work; the mortar that became damp and spongy when the rains came and then contracting and cracking with heat; all formed little traps for the dust. And in the darkness deadly life formed in decay and bacteria and mould, and in the heat and airlessness the rot appeared, to so that things which once were whole or new withered or putrefied and the smells of their decay and putrefaction pervaded and tenements of the poor (34).

In an environment such as the one elaborately described above, tempers are apt to be short and even the most quotidian of interpersonal interactions such as conversations can degenerate into physical confrontations. Unsurprisingly, when in the incident that follows the description, Grace, Lorenzo's wife, announces to her husband that she is pregnant, he flies into a rage, complaining that they "haven't got even enough for one kid, and we make eight, nine—one a year" (36) and verbally abuses her in the shouting match that ensues between them.

La Guma also employs symbolism in his handling of the urban setting of his short novel. One symbol which stands out in *A Walk in the Night* is darkness. This symbol proclaims itself even from the very title of the novel. Darkness is associated with night which forms part of the title of the novel. It is also associated with fear and confusion. In *A Walk in the Night*, darkness provides a cover for the various crimes committed in District Six—some by individuals against fellow individuals; others by individuals against the state; and still others by the state against individuals. It is true that night and darkness are not peculiar to the city, yet, as a cover for crime, they are associated more with urban slums than with a rural setting. Darkness, in *A Walk in the Night*, also provides safe hiding for the creatures which act as carriers of death and disease in the slum of District Six. According to the narrator:

In the dark corners and the unseen crannies, in the fetid heat and slippery dampness the insects and vermin, maggots and slugs, roaches in shiny brown armour, spiders like tiny gray monsters carrying death under their minute feet or in their suckers or rats with dusty black eyes with disease under their claws or in the fur, moved mysteriously. (34-35)

There is another, less grim or gloomy, even positive, sense in which La Guma also employs darkness in his characterization of the city. This is in respect of his use of the colour black, which is associated with darkness, as an aspect of colour symbolism to depict the racial diversity and cosmopolitan character of the city. This is quite significant, in view of the centrality of race and colour as instruments of stratification and segregation in the apartheid era in which *A Walk in the Night* is set. Here is how the narrator puts it: “the city was a patchwork of greys, whites and reds threaded with thick ropes of black where the darkness held the scattered pattern together” (71).

This, however, is not the only allusion to the city’s cosmopolitanism. Here is another, more overt, reference to the cosmopolitan character of the city couched in the form of a description of a street scene: “Up ahead the music shops were still going full blast, the blare of records all mixed up so you could not tell one tune from another. Shopkeepers, Jewish, Indian and Greek stood in the doorways along the arcade of stores on each side of the street, waiting to welcome last-minute customers” (7-8).

Besides drawing attention to the fact that the city’s foreign legion consists predominantly of Jewish, Indian and Greek immigrants, the above passage also attests to the important place occupied by commerce in La Guma’s city. It is commerce that has attracted the foreigners to the city with their presence lending greater diversity to the city.

As commercial hubs, cities in many parts of the world provide the site for the usually keen competition for profit between big, often multinational, business organizations which see in the large populations of cities, a ready market for their products and services. It is often the case, therefore, that large swathes of cities are almost completely taken over by these profit-seeking organizations and designated “commercial nerve-centres” or “business districts.” John Scott and Gordon Marshal, recognizing this trend, adduce as reason for it, “the relationship between urbanization, feudal decline, and the growth of capitalism” (681). This aspect of urbanism, namely its close association with commerce, is reflected in La Guma’s portrait of the city in *A Walk in the Night*. Indeed La Guma’s description of parts of Hanover Street in District Six, Cape Town, reads sometimes like an advertiser’s catalogue. Here is one example:

A half-mile of sound and movement and signs, signs, signs: Coca-cola, Sale Now On, Jewellers, the Modern Outfitters, If you Don't Eat Here We'll Both Starve, Grand Picnic to Paradise Valley Luxury Buses, Teas, Coffee, Smoke, Have You Tried Our Milk Shakes, Billiard Club, The Rockingham Arms, Chine...nce [sic] In Korea, Your Recommendation is our Advert, Dress Salon (8).

This bedlam of advertising signs in the business district of District Six parallels the general chaos and disorder which characterize the suburb and its residents, as none of the characters seem to have a clear-cut direction in which he or she is headed—certainly not Michael Adonis the protagonist whose aimless nocturnal wanderings, which lend the narrative its title, culminate in his murder of Mister Doughty the old Irishman.

La Guma also utilizes other rhetorical devices in his portrayal of the city in *A Walk in the Night*. For example, some textual elements are foregrounded and pressed into uncommon use in the short novel. One such textual element is language. Beyond its primary function as the medium of narration, La Guma utilizes it in a special way, in his characterization of the city. One common feature of cities is that as they evolve, they tend to develop a lingo, patois or argot of their own by which their denizens are easily identified. La Guma highlights this linguistic habit of cities in his portrait of District Six in *A Walk in the Night*. Certain lexical items with which the dialogue between the characters, especially the derelicts who inhabit District Six, is infested are clearly peculiar to the district and may be beyond the ken of a non-resident. In the following random selections from the short novel, such District Six slang expressions are highlighted and their close equivalents in Standard English inserted in square brackets next to them:

Man, that's **muck all**,’ [a lie] the taxi-driver said. ‘I seen somebody killed in the street, too. I remember the time,’ he started narrating. ‘I saw Flippy Isaacs get cut up. You remember Flippy? He was **in** [jailed] for housebreak and **theff** [theft]. Got two year. Well,’ he went on, ‘while he was up at the **oubaas** [penitentiary] he gets word that his **goose** [lover] is **jolling** [making out] with Cully Richards. You remember Cully? He **mos** [an expletive] used to work down here in Hanover Street at that butcher-shop... (17)

Elsewhere, the following argument ensues between a couple—a pregnant mother of five and her husband who blames her for getting pregnant again:

‘Maybe you ought to stop thinking of your pleasure every **blerry** [bloody] night,’ she flared back.

‘Well, I got a right. Don’t I say?’

‘Ja [Yes]. That’s all you think about. Your rights.’ (37)

Besides the ones cited in these extracts, several other District Six slang expressions creep up regularly in the conversations between the residents of the slum. Most of the slang expressions, like ‘mos’ and ‘blerry’ in the above extracts and “effing sonofabitches” (14) are expletives and swear-words. The preponderance of these taboo words betokens the decay that characterizes the physical surroundings of District Six and the decadence that characterizes the attitude of its residents.

Yet another rhetorical device which La Guma employs recurrently in his handling of the urban setting of *A Walk in the Night* is pathetic fallacy. Although the latter word of this two-word concept may tend to give it a pejorative hue, if we follow William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman’s definition of the term, we will find that there is nothing pejorative about the term. Pathetic fallacy, according to Harmon and Holman, is “the carrying over to inanimate objects of the moods and passions of a human being” (379). They further describe it as “the crediting of nature with human qualities” (379). In most of the incidents in *A Walk in the Night*, La Guma directly or covertly ascribes human attributes to the scenes of District Six, thus giving additional force to whatever quality of the slum he seeks to highlight.

Here is one cameo description in which Pathetic fallacy is utilized to telling effect:

“They cruised down a dark street past leprous rows of houses, an all-night delicatessen making a pallid splash of light against the gloom, bumped over cobblestones, and swung into the garish strip of Hanover Street” (39).

In the above description, leprosy which is a peculiarly human pathological condition that eats up some organs of the sufferer’s body and often leads to his/her being ostracized on account of the highly contagious nature of the disease is ascribed to the houses on Hanover Street in District Six. This indirect allusion to the rot eating away at District Six and its residents complements and accentuates the darkness and gloom which are directly referred to in the passage.

The sheer diversity of the racial composition of the city’s population, which has been earlier alluded to, makes the city the likely theatre for the racial-cum-social stratification characteristic of apartheid to play itself out. In his treatment of this aspect of life as lived in the urban slum of District Six, La Guma resorts to the creation of a we/them binary opposition. This becomes most manifest in the attitude of the white cops on patrol in District Six and the residents of the slum to one another. The relationship between the cops and the slum dwellers is characterized by mutual loathing and undisguised animosity, with each group barely tolerating the other. Michael Adonis’s attitude to the policeman during a chance encounter while the former is returning from work and the latter is on routine patrol is typical of the

distrust which exists between their different kinds. Here is how the narrator relates it (the markers of the we/them binary opposition are highlighted):

Going home', Michael Adonis said, looking at the buckle of this 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 Sam 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 challenge THEM or to question THEIR authority (11).

Elsewhere, the narrator captures the thoughts of a policeman as he reflects on the slum dwellers who are attracted to a crime scene by the spectacle it promises (as in the earlier excerpt, the markers of the we/them dichotomy are also highlighted): "You've got to set an example with THESE PEOPLE. Train THEM like dogs to have respect for you. If you whip THEM THEY'LL turn on you. You've got to know how to handle THESE PEOPLE" (79).

The fragile relations between the white policemen in these extracts and the mostly coloured and black residents of District Six underscore the precarious interracial relations in apartheid South Africa. Significantly, it is the urban setting of this short novel which provides the background on which La Guma reflects this paradoxical disconnect between the law and those it is meant to protect.

La Guma is not done yet with the seamy side of the city. With the proliferation of such urban facilities as casinos, bars, brothels and cinemas, to name only a few, the stage seems well-laid for all manner of vices in District Six. With most of the residents of the slum jobless and in dire straits, some become victims of alcoholism. Similarly, gambling and consumption of different kinds of narcotics from cigarette to cocaine are common features of urban life as seen through the lenses of Alex La Guma. Indeed, as La Guma sees them, the residents of District Six are incessantly "idling, talking, smoking [and] waiting" (3). District Six itself is characterized as a "whirlpool world of poverty, petty crime and violence" (4).

So pervasive is the violence and brutalization in District Six, as portrayed by La Guma, that there is hardly any place of escape for the hapless residents of the urban slum. In the work place, for example, the people are not insulated from violence: Michael Adonis gets fired simply because he "answered back to a effing white rooker" (4). As Michael laments, "every time a man goes to the piss-house he ['the white rooker'] starts moaning. Jesus Christ, the way he went on you'd think a man had to wet his pants rather than take a minute off" (4). In the streets, the situation is even worse: brawls compete with police brutality for prominence. For having the "effrontery" to make a joke, a man is beaten by a cop. As the narrator puts it, "Raalt

[the cop] struck him again, so that the blood formed in a pool in the corner of his mouth and slid out and down that side of his chin in a thin, crooked trickle" (42). In another instance, Willieboy is shot and killed by the same cop, Raalt, on mere suspicion for a crime Willieboy had nothing to do with other than being sighted at the scene of commission.

The violence also penetrates the homes of the residents of District Six. Domestic violence is a regular occurrence in this slum, as improvident husbands vent their anger on their innocent wives who, in turn, take out their frustrations on their children. The case of Willieboy's family illustrates this graphically. According to the narrator:

His mother beat him at the slightest provocation and he knew that she was wreaking vengeance upon him for the beatings she received from his father. His father came home drunk most nights and beat his mother and him with a heavy leather belt. His mother crouched in a corner of the room and shrieked and whimpered for mercy. When his father was through with her he turned to Willieboy, but sometimes he managed to escape from the room and did not return until late in the night when the father was snoring drunkenly and his mother had cried herself to sleep. His mother, unable to defend herself against her husband, took revenge for her whippings on Willieboy (84).

Since violence begets further violence, it is not surprising that La Guma's District Six is trapped in a vicious circle of endless violence.

III Conclusion

The foregoing analysis validates the following conclusions: firstly, that the city occupies a critically important place in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*; secondly, that, as seen in this novel, there is often a direct correlation between the actions of fictional characters and the milieu in which such characters are situated; and finally, that Alex La Guma's vision of urban life, judging by his portrayal of it in this novel, is highly pessimistic, even to the point of being nearly bereft of any redeeming features.

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