

Alex La Guma's Novels: A Study in Racial Segregation

Smt. Bhadalkar Dhanshri Shashikant

Research Scholar, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The Purpose of this paper is to analyse and describe the formal features of brutal system of South African society in the Novels of La Guma, a coloured novelist from South Africa, where the Racial Segregation structure was not controlled and proliferated in South Africa. The present study emphasized is completely the urgent need for impact with special reference to this Novel "A walk in the Night" The Stone country, The Time of Butcherbird, etc. 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 discrimination 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 nonwhites suffered during the discrimination 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 nonwhites clearly indicate that the discrimination system really took away the dignity of the non-whites in South Africa.

Keywords : discrimination, racial, apartheid, brutal system, Africa

INTRODUCTION

South African society has developed over the last three centuries as an impacted polity of ethnically defined groups within an overall framework of white 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. "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. 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." Ezekiel Mphahlele

therefore in an attempt to figuratively put it says, "There is a big barrier between us (Africans) and the Whites." 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." 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. 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 gives readers

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

Tragedy of Oppressed

A walk in the Night, 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. 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: 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.”* 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 overwork 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“. 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“ 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“. 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“. 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 nonwhites 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”. 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.” 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 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 fascist 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". 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."

Conclusion

The main conclusion of the study is that the brutal system of South African society in the Novels of La Guma, a coloured novelist from South Africa, where the racial segregation was not controlled by the racist ideology of discrimination. 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." And this has been evidently shown in Raalt's killing of Willieboy. 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 help human suffering.

References:

1. Abrahams, C. 1985. Alex La Guma. Boston: Twayne Publishers.
2. Balutansky, K. M. 1989. The Novels of Alex La Guma: The Representation of Political Conflict. Washington: Three Continent Press.
3. Heywood, C. 1976. Aspects of South African Literature. London: Heinemann.
4. Mphahlele, E. 1974. The African Image. London: Faber and Faber.