

"The Calm within the Storm

- La Guma's Symbolization of Rain in *And a Threefold Cord* -"

In *And a Threefold Cord* La Guma provides a vivid description of South African scenes of ordinary people. He tells his story to show us the oppressed people who manage to live on together even under the severest condition of Apartheid.

The story is centered on the three kinds of "a threefold cord" relationship, which means living in harmony with love. So as to make clear the importance of co-operation, he describes some isolated people and some incidents which impress on us the miserable condition of their society. The depressing conditions emerge from the story before our eyes through his skillful use of rain, which falls relentlessly on their shabby shanties.

He makes great use of the winter rain falling mercilessly on the shanty town. He is trying to reinforce and emphasize the "threefold cord" relationship. In *A Walk in the Night* he succeeded in recreating the oppressive atmosphere of District Six by applying the image of night and blackness. And in this work he recreates the wretched atmosphere of the slum with the image of rain and greyness.

It was government tourist propaganda that caused him to choose rain as one of the important thematic factors in the story. Though the brochures laud South Africa as "a country with perfect weather," black slum-dwellers get the worst, of, and suffer in, rainy weather. He thinks that as a writer he must tell the real condition of his country to the world.

La Guma begins the story with rain and ends it with rain, too. When we read the story, we find all incidents connected with the central theme, have something to do with rain; it might be said that the whole story is enshrouded by the image of rain.

La Guma starts the story with a distant view of the cities, the parks, and the country-side; they stand against the mountains and facing the ocean. Then we gradually focus on the shanties along the national road and beside the railway tracks. They come before our eyes in close-up, slow-motion, like a movie unfolding upon the screen.

It is July. In the Southern Hemisphere it is winter. The leaves are gone from the trees. The first rain has left a film of wetness on the earth. In the sky the clouds, ominous with moisture, hang beyond the mountain. Then bursts of rain fall and knock on the roofs of the shanties. La Guma brings Chapter One to a close with the following passage:

The sky was heavy and grey, shutting out the sun, and there was no daylight, but, an unnatural, damp twilight. The rain began again with gusty bursts, showering the world, pausing and pouring down in big heavy drops. Then it settled gradually into a steady fall, an unhesitant tempo of drops, always grey.¹

The opening chapter is indeed calm in tone. We find few expressions of sound there. It is remarkable that we find no onomatopoeic words in this chapter though so many echo words are found throughout the story. La Guma must have hoped to create the grey image of rain at first in the reader's mind by giving weight to the sense of sight. That is quite symbolic of 'the calm within the storm' of this sad and noisy story.

It is in the 'shanties' of Chapter Two that the story really begins. In the Pauls' shack Charlie is woken up by the clatter of falling rain. Here we find a lot of onomatopoeia, imitative of natural sounds, in marked contrast to Chapter One. By a glance at the first page of this chapter we can find many onomatopoeic words such as hissing, rattling, roar, drip-drip, plop-plop-plop-ping, tapping.... Such a variety of sound reminds us that rain makes all kinds of noises when it falls on a shanty. As later appears in the text, their home is constructed of sheets of rusty corrugated iron, planks, pieces

of cardboard, flattened fuel cans and so on; Pa and Charlie got them by scavenging, begging, or stealing on dark nights. A house with a tiled roof is free from such noises except in really heavy rain, so the din of rain is, so to speak, a symbol of the misery and poverty of shanty life.

Whenever it rains, their rusty roof leaks. When the rain is light, the sound is 'tap' or 'drip-drip.' The heavy rain changes its sound into 'plop-plop-plopping.' One scene with the leak runs like this:

Charlie placed the can on the floor under the drip from the ceiling. The plop-plopping sound was turned suddenly into a tiny rumbling as the drops struck the metal, and then gradually became a dull tinkling. (22)

The three onomatopoeic words, 'plop-plopping,' 'rumbling,' and 'tinkling,' effectively express the gradual sound shift of the leaking rain water which strikes the can directly. Two liquids, 'r' and 'l,' in those words express the flowing motion of the leaking water; the voiceless plosive 'p' symbolizes a clear and rhythmical sound when it strikes the can; two nasals, 'm' and 'n,' are imitative of the dull sound made by the gathering of water into the can. Those imitative words tell us that the increase of water in the can has changed clear sounds into dull ones.

When the wind blows harder, the sound of rain increases. Let's have a look at another scene in the same chapter.

The wind rose again outside and drove the rain against the house, rumbling on the metal for a few moments, and then the wind turned away once more, on another tack, abandoning the low rattling and tapping. (22)

By this paragraph we are taught that "rattling" and "tapping" turn into "rumbling" because the wind blows harder. The two liquids 'r' and 'l' in "rattling" symbolize the flowing movement of rain, and "tapping" indicates a less audible sound. The voiceless plosive consonants in those words express the plosive sound without a lingering echo. When the wind becomes harder, the sound of rain shifts. [r ㄏ t1] and [r ㄏ mb1] show a striking contrast between the voiced [mb] and the voiceless [t]. The contrast makes us feel the difference between the dull noise of the driving rain and the small sound of the light wind. The sound of "rumbling" gives us a vivid image of the flowing motion with the two liquids and of the frictional noise between the rain and the house with the voiced plosive [b], and of the continuous echo with the nasal [m].

In the same chapter we can see another effective use of an onomatopoeic word, "hiss" in the next paragraph:

He sat on the bed in his soiled underwear. The other brother Jorny, slept with his face to the wall, under an old, disembowelled quilt, his dark, crooped head alone showing. The rain hissed on against the house. (23)

The word is very short, but effective enough to hint to us the sharp image of the sound with the short vowel [i] and the violent image of the driving rain with the fricative consonant [t]. The sharp and abrupt sound of rain is fully contrasted with the quiet mood of the shanty and the brothers.

We come across more and more examples of La Guma's effective use of echo words in the story.

In general onomatopoeia is said to effectively convey something sensitive, immediate, and vivid, so making a direct connection with our imagination. As we can see, by his effective use of onomatopoeia La Guma appeals expressly to our sense of hearing and succeeds in describing vividly how the inhabitants of the shanties are constantly harassed and depressed by the tumult of falling and driving rain.

The noisy sound is not the only nuisance the shanty-dwellers experience from rain. Another

nuisance to them is the bad odour in and around their homes. They have neither adequate ventilation nor sewerage. Dampness from the rain makes the smell worse. Their shanties are a kind of repository for bad odours. In this chapter we find a passage on smell:

There were smells in the room, too. The smell of sweat and slept-in blankets and airless bedding, close by; and somewhere indefinite, the smell of stale cooking and old dampness and wet metal. (20-21)

It is the reek of poverty. The smell is another symbol of the misery and wretchedness of the shanty towns. The sad thing is that the constancy of the odour leads them to take no particular notice of it.

It might be said that La Guma awakens the reader's sense of hearing and smell in Chapter Two, after appealing to sight in Chapter One.

It is raining when Pa breathes his last in their shanty. He passes away, hearing the falling rain and gazing at the dirty ceiling stained by the leak. Of course, we don't hear Pa; but Ma relates that his final words were that he would have liked his children to live in a house with a tile roof. He passes away, after working himself into his deathbed for his family; death finally forces a regretful separation from his family. Though she well understands his disappointment, she can do nothing but look at her husband sorrowfully. When we think of his regret and her grief, it seems to us that the 'stained maps' of the leaks are a visible expression of his blighted hopes and that the falling rain outside is the expression of her tears of sorrow.

It's also raining heavily when the police raid Freda's shanty. The falling rain, with its loud roar, symbolizes the fright of Freda and her children and acts to deepen the cruel impression of the policemen who storm the shack. The ubiquitous rain envelops another shanty raid, too. In this case a white policeman with his men steps into the shanty in muddy boots and takes a naked handcuffed African forcibly to the police van. The rain in this scene gives us an even more merciless impression of the police.

There is rain again when Caroline gives birth to her baby. Its ominous roar arouses so much fear in her, alone with the labour pains, that she is afraid that she is going to die. The rain drums down and a leak opens in the ceiling. The water forms a puddle in front of the doorway and begins to spread across the floor. We become even more sympathetic to her childbirth.

The downpour also embraces Ronny as he hacks Susie to death. He stands, soaked, over her dead body while her dead eyes stare up out of the rain-washed face. The rain emphasizes the tragedy of these two, doomed to live out their lives of spiritual isolation.

La Guma puts his message in Chapter Twenty-Eight, the last chapter, and begins it as he did in Chapter One; "In the northwest the rainheads piled up,..." And it ends with rain, too. It is a world of greyness. We see Charlie, Freda, and Ma in their shack. Ma and Charlie put Freda on Dad's bed and try to console her for the lost children. Outside the shanty the weather rages furiously. The text reads:

The rain excavated foundations and dredged through topsoil and a house sagged and tottered, battered into a jagged rhomboid of gaping seams and banging sides. The rain gurgled and bubbled and chuckled in the eaves and ran like quicksilver along the ceilings, and below, the shivering poor blew on their braziers and stoked their fires, crouched trembling with ague in the relentless dampness, huddled together for warmth and clenching their teeth against the pneumatic chattering. (166)

The Pauls family and their hovel are not extraordinary in the suburban slums of Cape Town. Such families and such shanties are everywhere in the district. The family, though each has their own troubles, manages to live on together; their shack, though sagging and tottering in the wind and rain, provides shelter to the inhabitants. In a sense the makeshift home is an exact microcosm of the shanty town. The shanty, weathering the storm outside, symbolizes the position of black people who are

somehow making it through the ugly conditions of Apartheid. In other words the shanty is a metaphor for the slums; and the black people are a metaphor for South Africa.

La Guma created *And a Threefold Cord* in the midst of his liberation struggle. His desire was to record history and let world know what was happening in South Africa. His pride fired him to create his story and his writer's ability enabled him to appeal to the reader's sense of sight, hearing and smell.

By his symbolization of rain and effective use of isolated characters, La Guma surely conveys to us his following message, "...people can't stand up to the world alone, they got to be together,..." (168)

Notes

¹ Alex La Guma, *And a Threefold Cord* (Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers, 1964), p. 34; all quotations from this work will be cited in the paper.