"Realism and Transparent Symbolism in Alex La Guma's Novels"

In an interview when Alex La Guma was asked, "What do you think of symbolism as a literary device?" he answered, "I have no objection as long as the reader knows how to interpret it correctly. In my novels there is a combination of realism and of transparent symbolism."¹

In this paper I would like to talk about realism and transparent symbolism in his novels, especially in his first two novels *A Walk in the Night* and *And a Threefold Cord*. We are to pay attention to the condition stated in that interview - "as long as the reader knows how to interpret it correctly," because it will give us an important clue to understanding ethnicity, the topic of this forum.

Needless to say, "one cannot separate literature from life, from human experience and human aspiration."² That is even more true for Alex La Guma, living in such an abnormal situation, as even writers, if necessary, must fight against the oppressors with guns in hand. As Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu points out, in South Africa people must be engaged in a human rights movement, not a civil rights movement as in the United States, because the laws of the country themselves are discriminatory and they cannot look for protection and support from their Constitution. They have been forced to give up non-violent tactics because the white regime has not had the essential minimum moral standards. History declares that. La Guma "finds himself with no other choice but to dedicate himself to that movement which must involve not only himself but ordinary people as well."³ So we can say that he creates his novels in the midst of his liberation struggle, but they are not propaganda or slogans for the struggle. The following interview conveys to us his intention:

Q.: What are then the values which you seek to express in your novels?

La Guma: I want to express the dignity of people, the basic human spirit in the least pompous way possible. One must avoid propaganda or slogan. I am also politically involved. In my writing and in my political activities I vindicate the dignity of man but these are two different activities.⁴

It is his artistry that enables him to avoid polemical stances in his creative writing. These beliefs have led him to choose realism and transparent symbolism as literary devices, on the presumption that the reader knows how to interpret the South African situation correctly. He once observed in an article:

One of the greatest values of literature is that deepening our consciousness, widening our feeling for life, it reminds us that all ideas and all actions derive from realism and experience within social realities.⁵

From his keen desire for "at least letting the world know what is happening,"⁶ in South Africa, he describes in his novels characteristic scenes in the cities and the suburban slums.

*A Walk in the Night* is centered on two blacks on the verge of criminality, Michael Adonis and Willieboy, and an Afrikaner policeman, Raalt. These are typical and important thematic characters of the South African predicament.

Adonis, by answering back to a white foreman, loses his job, which frustrates and angers him. His anger and frustration drive him into killing a poor old white neighbour, Uncle Doughty. This act finally compromises him with the underground. Through Adonis' gradual degradation, La Guma shows us how inevitably an ordinary youth like Adonis gets drawn into illegality. Willieboy grows up in a broken family, but takes life very easily and is always unemployed, claiming that it is useless to work for anyone. One day he calls on Adonis, but finds himself wrongly suspected of the murder of Uncle Doughty. He is pursued by Raalt and finally shot to death. Through Willyboy's tragic fate La Guma hints to us how easily and vainly criminal activity can shorten one's life.
In *And a Threefold Cord* we find another kind of gangster called Roman. Roman was once an ordinary worker, but after going through various menial jobs, he takes to petty thieving and finally ends up in jail. In his kennel-like shack, he cannot support his family and they are constantly hungry. In a state of drunken savagery he regularly beats his wife and whips his eleven children, so his wife goes beyond hatred for him. Roman is a typical petty criminal, who compensates for his wretchedness by attacking weaker ones around him.

In that sense Raalt in *A Walk in the Night* is similar in mentality to Roman. Raalt feels dissatisfied with his marital life and resentful of his wife. He tries to discharge his anger and frustration by ill-treating black citizens. While on patrol he longs for something to happen to release his tension. Unfortunately his gunpoint is directed by chance towards Willieboy. His hunting for Willieboy is, therefore, relentless indeed; Raalt corners Willieboy and shoots him mercilessly. He refuses to allow an ambulance to take the dying youth to hospital. He rounds off his brutality by dropping in at a store to extort cigarettes, while Willieboy is passing away in the police van.

Another disturbing scene involving the white police is found in the same story. On his way home Adonis is confronted by two strolling policemen, who accuse him of having marijuana. He denies the accusation, and they order him to turn out his pockets. They find his money and accuse him of stealing it. But in the end they cannot find anything to charge him with, so they push past him, one of them brushing him aside with his elbow, and stroll on away. It is only because he came across them by chance on the street that he was accused. All of this happens in the presence of passers-by in broad daylight.

The same kind of white police brutality figures in *And a Threefold Cord*. On a pass raid a white policeman with two Africans breaks into a shanty, where a couple are lying naked in bed, after kicking the door open with his muddy boot. Finding that the man has no pass book, he puts handcuffs on him and takes him out into the falling rain after jerking the blanket from the woman's naked body. She begins to weep with a high, wailing sound.

In the night raid on Freda's shanty, Charlie is unjustly accused of having marijuana by a white policeman. Freda is humiliated by being sworn at, "Blerry black whore." Her children begin to wail with terror.

Such scenes of police inhumanity clearly convey to the reader the harsh reality of a police state which continually harasses black people in everyday life. The violent scenes make it quite plain that for the white regime even the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 was just another everyday incident.

Through his true-to-life description La Guma raises a serious dynamic. The more brutal white people become, the more the hatred of black people intensifies. Their gap widens and deepens more and more. They are fated never to attain mutual understanding. In that sense they are both victims of the monster Apartheid, because they are permanently at the mercy of the socioeconomic and political environment. If we borrow some words from Shakespeare, some of which are found in the epigraph of this story, brutal whites and hopeless blacks are both "just ghosts, doomed to walk the night," like Hamlet's father. Thus we can say that the night, haunted both by blacks and whites roaming aimlessly and despairingly, is one of the transparent symbols of this abnormal segregated society.

In *A Walk in the Night* La Guma concentrates on the negative side of the society, but in *And a Threefold Cord* he gives attention to the positive side of the oppressed people.

The story proceeds through the consciousness of Charlie Pauls, the protagonist, and through the experiences of his family and its associates. A number of incidents occur in this story, two of which especially affirm the reality of an oppressed people who are managing to sustain a community even under the severest conditions of Apartheid. One incident is Charlie's father's death and the other is his sister's childbirth. The situation tells us the importance of a "threefold cord" relationship, which means helping each other and living in harmony with love, as is indicated in the epigraph.

Charlie's father, Frederick Pauls, has worked continually for his family but finally becomes bedridden with illness. Their shabby shanty and meagre food make him worse until at last he dies,
all skin and bones. The only sounds from him throughout the story are his moans and coughs in his bed. Through his wife, Rachel, the reader catches his first and final words; "Rachy,.......is the children awright?...I would have like them to be living in another place. Like those houses with the roofs." The sickness forces him to lie in bed in a dark room with a ceiling stained by constant leaking. Day in and day out there is nothing for him to gaze at but a black map of dampness on the ceiling. He must have dreamed that he could have let his children live in a house with the roofs in which they wouldn't have to worry about leaks. Though in agony, he continued to feel concerned about his children until his last breath. His final words suggest such sorrowful regrets. His love and sorrow for his family have been great and deep.

This is true also of Rachel. She too is a conscientious worker and carries on all the ordinary chores of a hard life. When her husband dies, she does not get upset. Instead of weeping, she performs elaborate arrangements for the funeral, according to her sense of duty to consign one's dearest reverently to the grave. With the help of relatives and neighbours, she manages to conduct the funeral decently thanks to her contributions to burial insurance. In the scenes of Frederick's death and the funeral we can find no actual tears from Rachel - all her tears are expressed in her deeds. Each of her determined actions is her own way of expressing her deep love and great sorrow for her deceased husband.

Charlie's sister, Caroline, was born in a sort of chicken-run because her father and brother could not get a shack built in time. Now she is to give birth to her baby in her miserable shanty. The rain drums down and the rain-water, leaking in, spreads across the floor. Her mother arrives in time, but not the midwife. Her mother begins to put old newspapers under Caroline's waist. The following text shows us the nightmarish conditions of the birth:

At the moment Caroline screamed. The police raider said, 'Ghod!' He peered past Ma into the shack, saw Missus Nzuba's vastness crouched over the girl on the mattress. His eyes moved about, over the smoky ceiling, the muddy floor, the leak in the roof and ragged clothes displayed as if for sale. The smell of smoke and oil and birth made the air fetid. He said, again: 'Baby? What, in here?' Then he shrugged and growled, 'Awright, awright.' (pp. 150-151)

Though the policeman could not believe it, Caroline has given birth to her child successfully with the help of her mother and a neighbour. As long as the social system is not changed, childbirth in such awful conditions will recur from generation to generation, and that is what this episode tells us.

Through these two incidents we realize that South African blacks manage to support their existence by honoring the dead and the coming generation even in the harshest conditions through mutual aid.

In the story La Guma makes effective use of rain, falling on their shanties without let-up. He tries to compare this relentless rain to the oppressive white regime, and the miserable shanties to the plights of the people. The closing passages of the book are highly symbolic:

In the Pauls' house, those inside heard the rain, but took no notice of it. It was a sound apart from the feeling of sorrow. Miraculously, the house held. Dad and Charlie Pauls and others had built it well; well enough to stand up against this kind of storm, anyway. The rain lashed at it, as if in an anger of frustration. Finding the leak in the ceiling blocked, the water steered towards the ends of the roof and seeped down the walls inside. But the house seemed to clench its teeth and cling defiantly to life. (166)

We can see from this that a shanty, standing up against lashing storms outside, is another transparent symbol.

According to one interview, for La Guma realism is not "a mere projection of the present." "It must convince the reader of truth, suggest that something can happen."
La Guma's techniques of realism with transparent symbolism carry through successfully the correlation of night and darkness with the dark truth of Apartheid society, while the shanty, with its resistance to the storm, is a note of hope, suggesting indeed "that something can happen."

Notes

1 Richard Samin, "Interviews de Alex La Guma," in Afram Newsletter No.24 (January 1987), p. 11.
4 Samin, p. 13.
5 La Guma, "Literature and Life," p. 238
7 La Guma, And a Threefold Cord (Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers, 1964), p. 111; all quotations from this work will be cited in this paper.