

Beyond Complexion, Class and Race: An Ecocritical Study of Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* and *A Threefold Cord*

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Abstract

This paper is an ecocritical study of Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* and *And a Threefold Cold*. While many critics over the years have focused on the human dimension of apartheid in South Africa, virtually none has bordered about the republic's environment. In its imaginative journey to apartheid South Africa via a path not often taken by critics, this paper contends that the South African environment suffers degradation, neglect and destruction as much as the hapless non-white in the republic courtesy of its policy of "herding" people into little spaces leading to slums where the pervading perfume of bitter dereliction holds sway. The purpose of this research is located on the need for the Republic of South Africa, and indeed, many African countries to evolve environment-friendly policies which will ensure a relatively even distribution of their population. Even so, the overall significance of this research is the need for the world to be more conscious of the need to care for its environment. This is because in the final analysis, there can never be social justice without environmental justice.

Keywords: justice, environment, ecocriticism, apartheid, non-white, ecologists, nature

INTRODUCTION

In his *Epistles*, Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) asserts that "though you drive away Nature with a pitchfork, she always returns" (Geddes and Grosset, 1994:55) Encapsulated in Horace's keen observation is nature's characteristic resilience, a characteristic that nature writers and Romantic poets were later to celebrate in their works. In his destructive ways however, man has tried over the years to break down this celebrated resilience. The environmental crisis and ecological spoilation which became the hallmark of the closing decades of the twentieth century have remained particularly telling in the annals of the world. The concern for the interests of a natural world that is seriously under threat courtesy of man's greed, industrialization, abuse and maladministration led to ecological movement. Ecocriticism was inspired by ecological movement.

Essentially an earth-centred approach to literary studies, ecocriticism, according to Kerridge and Samuells (1998:5), "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis". It is preoccupied with the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view. Mankind certainly needs what Joseph Bate (1999:8) calls "consciousness-raising" with regards to his destructive activities which daily pose an "ever greater threat to our natural environment and in making us think about what it means to live with rather than simply on the earth" (Hans Bertens, 2008:203). In its concern with the "study of the

relationship between literature (or the arts) and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1966: XVII), ecocriticism places premium on the need to ensure that nature is given as much attention within the humanities as is currently given to gender, class and race" (Coupe 2000:303). Beyond mere attention, Buell (2001:430) even demands a commitment to action on the part of man with his penchant for bringing about environmental degradation. According to him, ecocriticism is fundamentally "a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis". This is perhaps germane, for as rightly observed by environmentalists, no human society has historically existed completely independent of nature be it at the material level or at the level of cultural representation. Philosophers like Rousseau have averred that equality varnished with the spread of civilization and its superiority over nature. Logically therefore, the preservation of nature is connected with social justice which can be brought about by the erasure of the duality of nature/culture. In fact, Rigby (2006:535), is even more emphatic when he states that man should look for a way to create a unity between "nature and culture", "earth and artifact" and "consumption and destruction" in order to be able to effect the much needed justice between man and nature.

Ecocriticism as a term is traced to William Ruckert in his essay entitled, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: XXIII). Ruckert's main focus in this essay is

the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature. In spite of this early attempt however, says Bellarsi (2009:73), "it was only in the late eighties and early nineties that a community of scholars who openly identified themselves as ecocritics became fully visible on the economic scene". The turning point in the study of ecocriticism was at the 1991 M.L.A Conference which devoted a special session to ecocriticism. This was later followed by the Foundation of the American Chapter of the Association for the Study of Literature of the Environment (ASLE). Many critics like Zolfagharkhan (2010:147) believe that while such movements as postcolonialism and feminism focus on the injustice among the marginalized and exploited minority in the world, ecocriticism's pride of place is nature whose interest is sometimes placed above human beings. It is this singular criterion, in the opinion of Parra (1999:109), that differentiates this school of criticism from other movements.

Like ecological movement, there are various strands of positions within the broad field of ecocritical enterprise. Han Bertens (2008:204-206) articulates these various positions into five.

1. Deep Ecologists. For deep ecologists, nature takes precedence over human beings in their radical belief that the interest of non-human life on earth can only be truly protected by a reduction of human population.
2. Marxist Ecologists. For the Marxist ecologist, our degraded environment is the direct result of unrestricted operations of international capital. The capitalists' free market is held responsible for the world's environmental crisis.
3. Eco-feminism. Eco-feminists extend the unequal relationship between men and women to human beings and nature. Just as our Judaeo-Christian heritage and Enlightenment constructed men as more responsible and rational than women who are regarded as more natural but less rational and therefore, inferior. Rationality is regarded as primarily responsible for the world's environmental crisis.
4. Social Ecologists. These are interested in the social cost of environmental problems like pollution and waste disposal.
5. Animal Liberationists. Liberationist critics seek to improve the fate of animals whose lives are often made miserable and short by man in his quest for self-fulfillment. According to Garrard (2004:149), liberation critics try to, "undermine the moral and legal distinction between humans and criminals. Although not necessarily advocating the same rights as humans, liberationists insist that human beings give animals more rights than they presently have.

In spite of the various strands of opinions that exist among the community of ecocritical scholars, they

are all united by a common focus which is to study the environment in literature. According to Bertens (2008:2004), scholars of ecocriticism are all united by "ecocriticism's moral and political agenda and the rejection of an unthinking anthropocentrism". The ideal ecocriticism-compliant work must live up to ecocritical standards which according to Lawrence Buell (1995, 7-8); unarguably one of ecocriticism's founding fathers, must have the following features.

- i. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
- ii. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
- iii. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
- iv. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Alex La Guma published five novels and many short stories before his death in Cuba in 1985 where he had been on self-exile for many years as a result of the oppressive socio-political apartheid situation in South Africa. In spite of their diversity, La Guma's novels – *A Walk in the Night* (1962), *And a Threefold Cord* (1964), *The Stone Country* (1967), *In the Fogs of the Season's End* (1972) and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) are all focused on apartheid South Africa where the nauseating politics of colour, class and race held sway until April 1994. According to JanMohamed (1982:273), these novels

have one fundamental factor in common: the marginality of life for the non-white in South Africa. Although not all his novels take up the theme of marginality, they inevitably end up commenting on and indirectly depicting the national, social, political and spiritual poverty to which apartheid relegated the darker "inferior" people.

The critical attention that has greeted La Guma's works has been quite overwhelming. Critics like JanMohamed (1982/3), Pointer (2001), Barnett (1983), Abrahams (1985), Adhikari (1992), Balutansky (1989), Asein (1986), Breidlid (2002), Roscoe (1977) and Chandramohan (1992) have carried out a series of research into La Guma's works. All these critical works are all focused on the human dimension of apartheid: an over-focused area in South African literature that made many literary critics like Lewis Nkosi to regard South African literature as one-eyed literature before the dawn of post-apartheid era. This paper therefore, proposes to tread the path not taken by carrying out an ecocritical study of La Guma's two novels namely *A Walk in the Night* (1962) and *And a Threefold Cord* (1964). The

rationale for this selection is borne out of the fact that the two works appear, of all La Guma's works, to lend themselves to the ecocritical enterprise.

VICTIM AND SUCCOUR: DUAL ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT IN LA GUMA'S *A WALK IN THE NIGHT*

As stated in the introduction, social and environmental justice is an essential aspect of ecocritical studies. Writing about justice in South Africa, therefore, which apartheid negates should not be seen only from the human angle. Nature or the environment is as much in need of justice as human beings in an apartheid- teleguided regime. *A Walk in the Night* (henceforth referred to as *A Walk*) is set in the crime and disease-ridden infamous District Six in Cape Town, South Africa ,where spivs, whores, gangsters, poverty-stricken families and countless societal derelicts are doomed by the apartheid system for a certain term to walk the night like Shakespeare's ghost. Unjustly fired by his racist white boss, Michael Adonis is livid with rage. La Guma tells us that the first victim of the young man's vengeance even before it gets to the decrepit Uncle Doughty is the garden behind the fence and the public convenience as he throws his half-finished cigarette butt into it. In his blind anger, Michael Adonis is simply oblivious of the well cultivated garden

The garden of the convenience was laid out in small terraces and rockeries carefully cultivated by the city council with many different kinds of rock plants, flowers, cacti and ornamental trees (2).

As if to underscore Michael Adonis' blinding feeling of rage, frustration and violence which he says, "swelled like a boil knotted with pain" (12), La Guma says, "This (meaning the garden) the young man did not see, as he stepped out of the pavement" (2).

The tall and narrow tenement where Michael Adonis lives is a veritable social ecologist's nightmare and the very definition of environmental injustice. The degeneration and decay arising from neglect are so embarrassingly overwhelming that our sense of environmental decency is insulted again and again

... the decorative Victorian plaster around the wide doorway was chipped and broken and blackened with generations of grime. The floor of the entrance was flagged with white and black slabs in the pattern of a draught-board, but the tramp of untold feet and the accumulation of dust and grease and ash had blurred the squares so that now it had taken on the appearance of a kind of loathsome skin disease. A row of dust-bins lined inside of the entrance and exhaled the smell of rotten fruit, stale

food, stagnant water and general decay (21).

The staircase in the tenement is worn and blackened with its oak banister loose and scarred, and as one climbs up one is driven to nausea as one's sense of smell is challenged by countless "smells of ancient cooking, urine, damp-rot and stale tobacco" (23). The floors of the tenements in District Six are littered with grime, spilled water, urine and drops of fat which are soon ground underfoot by their overpopulated poverty-stricken blacks. These dinghy, dust and dirt-ridden abodes of the poor are defined by their dampness, decay, mould, airlessness, heat and rot. In this type of environment, things that were once wholesome or new soon wither or petrify and the smells of their decay and putrefaction pervade everywhere in the tenements. At the risk of our senses of sight and smell, La Guma shows us, in his usual evokative style, an environment that has been rendered completely run down and sanitarily unfriendly by the apartheid system:

In the dark comers and the unseen corners, in the fetid heat and slippery dampness, the insects and vermin maggots and slugs, roaches in shiny armour, spiders like tiny grey monsters carrying death under their minute feet or in the sockets, or rats with dirty and dusty black eyes with disease under the claws or in the fur, moved mysteriously (35)

With the above environmental injustice, one is hardly surprised at the condition of the rooms of the poor and neglected blacks and coloured. Uncle Doughty's room is described as "hot and airless as a newly opened tomb" (25), while in the Franky Lorenzos, the children "slept under the one threadbare, worn and sweaty blanket, fitted together like parts of a puzzle" (38) Franky Lorenzo himself is so harassed by poverty, hardwork and unpaid bills that he has not only become oblivious of the health hazard of a contraption he calls his room but has equally become a perpetual complainant about his wife's fertility. In these hot, humid and vermin-infested tenements of District Six, the people's only respite comes from nature, the breeze that blows through the chinks and cracks of loose boarding and broken windows which stirs them in their sweaty sleep. Those who find it difficult to sleep at night because they brood over their poverty-stricken state only find solace in the cool breeze of the night. These victims of apartheid-induced insomnia often sit by the windows or in doorways where they look out towards the mountain beyond the roof-tops and search for the sign of wind. The breeze also helps to diffuse the smells that emanate from the half-washed kitchenware, unwashed bodies, stagnant water, urine, rotting vegetable and damp plaster and timber in those

tenements. The diffusion that takes place is so skillfully carried out by the breeze that the smells in the tenements are made “unidentifiable, hardly noticeable by the initiated nostrils of the teeming cramped world of poverty which it enveloped” (48).

The image of nature as succour is once again demonstrated in the case of the eccentric Joe. A veritable teetotaler, Joe has been denied his immediate family by the apartheid system. Joe has a passion for things that come from the sea. His livelihood comes from the seashore where he forages time and again. Joe knows that the apartheid police is ubiquitous in its operations; he therefore, rationalizes that going to the countryside like his mates as an escape is futile because the government’s eviction and harassment will sooner than later reach there and the whole exercise begin again. He therefore, chooses to live close to nature, the sea, where he hopes to ponder and bear calmly the still sad music of the suffering humanity of South Africa:

Somewhere the young man, Joe, made his way towards the sea, walking alone through the starlit darkness. In the morning, he would be close to the smell of the ocean and wade through the chill, comforting water, bending close to the purling green surface and see the dark undulating fronds of seaweed, writting and swaying in the shallow-like beckoning hands. And in the rock pools he would examine the mysterious life of the sea things, the transparent beauty of starfish and anemone and hear the relentless, consistent pounding of the creaming waves against the granite citadel of rock (96).

Joe’s decision to seek comfort in nature which in the Coleridgean sense does not disappoint the wise and morally upright like him is not La Guma’s suggestion that there are secrets against urban insanity on the sea shore. Joe’s first hand knowledge of the grinding wheel of apartheid seriously counsels against harbouring such a simplistic or even a romanticizing of the solution to the obvious racial oppression in South Africa. If anything, it must be the calm, serene, lonely and inviting beauty of the shore as contrasted with the urban maelstrom that must have attracted him. Lord Gordon Byron the romantic poet could not have put it more succinctly:

There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep sea and music in its roar
(As quoted by Geddes and Grosset,
1994:54)

As Joe wends his way towards the sea through the starlit darkness one cannot but wonder what persons like him will do in no distant future when the

apartheid government actually succeeds in “making the beaches so that only the white people can go there” (26). Even now, it is not as if the oppressive forces of the apartheid regime are totally absent even on the calm shore with its alluring beauty and serenity. The creamy waves which constantly batter against the granite rocks must be an unmistakable metaphor for the relentless struggle of the blacks against the oppressive white citadels that seem unconquerable like the impregnable rock of Gibraltar. Again, this is not a vote for pessimism but an indication that there are no easy victories in the anti-apartheid struggle. According to Adrian Roscoe (1977:238), “The image speaks less of despair than of long relentless struggle: no easy victories, no quick solution. It gives a measure of optimism from being couched in so much wild beauty and life”.

NATURE AS VICTIMIZER IN *AND A THREEFOLD CORD*

In *And A Threefold Cord*, La Guma artistically plays the crucial role of a historian, a recorder of the socio-economic conditions of a typical black family in apartheid South Africa. Presented here is a fanonian thesis of the native being hemmed in by all kinds of oppressive forces. According to La Guma himself:

I was interested in recording creatively the life of a community under various conditions. I thought it would help to bring to the reader an idea of what goes on in the various black areas of the Cape and that through a novel this would be done. (Abrahams 1985:30)

While the common but morally upright people like Joe find comfort in nature in *A Walk in the Night*, in *And A Threefold Cord* they are presented as victims of nature. The Pauls’ family is under the sledgehammer of both human and natural forces. If the private physical space of the Pauls is not being intruded upon by the ubiquitous apartheid police resulting in their loss of personhood, the rain must be wreaking havoc on their pitiable shacks. For the hapless residents of the black areas of the Cape it is rain, rain and more rain everywhere and almost everyday. The novel opens with rain which “came in the form of a fine, blown mist (which) left a film of wetness on the earth and on the park beaches and the steep flat sides of the building” (17). It ends on a rainy note: “The rain bored into the earth... fell steadily, like heart beats” (169). For the people in their shanties and pondokkie cabins, the constant rain has become a huge nightmare. The cold that the rain brings visits rheumatism on the old people while the young people, afraid of a similar fate resort to quaffing all kinds of hard drinks in order to keep themselves warm. When Ma Pauls pathetically remarks that “theres people going to be washed out, when it begins, the rain” (35), the tragic foreboding of Dad Pauls’ death becomes all very clear. The rains

have become a big clog in the people's path to progress, for every time they attempt to do something reasonable there is always rain. Not even during Dad Pauls' death are the people spared of a downpour. As rightly observed by JanMohamed (1982:61), "the constant rain menacingly brackets the lives of the people".

Like the people, the dilapidated houses in the shanty town are not spared the harsh effects of the elements. The arrival of bursts of rain on the roof tops often spring young men like Charlie into action. Loads of corrugated cardboard cartons, rusted sheets of iron and tins are either pilfered or salvaged from sundry places to reinforce the roofs. Heavy stones are heaved onto the cracks and patched roofs to keep them down when the wind rises. And when it eventually starts raining, old sacking is soaked in bitumen and stuffed into cracks and joints in many dilapidating houses to keep dripping water away sometimes to no avail. As the rain pours down in big heavy drops, the children's innocent songs pleading with it to come back another day is drowned. Ironically, perhaps tired of having to always carry out repairs on their house each time it rains or threatens to rain, Charlie is forced out of his colonized political consciousness like many of his ilk into the ideological realm of "consciousness of colonization" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991:21). This is the genesis of his worry about the haves/have-nots dichotomy which surfaces again and again as he poses the crucial existential question:

Is funny there got to be a lot of people like us worrying about the blerry roof any time it rains and there's others people don't have to worry a damn (54)

Apart from the people and their shanties, even the earth suffers from the overpowering effect of the ceaseless rain. La Guma tells us:

Beyond the city, the earth received the rain and drank it, sucking down the moisture and grew dark brown and afterwards, black. The earth drank its fill from the intermittent falls, and when it was saturated its surface was damp, so that when a man puts down his foot the ground subsides under his weight and there were curved ridges which moulded into the soil where he had walked or if he had been barefooted, small hollows made by heel and ball of foot, and tiny hollows by his toes (18)

When it rains, the shanties drip of water while numerous stagnant "lakes" and pools of black water litter the environment. The rains seem to accentuate the poverty of the slum. Each times it rains it often mixes with the general smell of the settlement, to give a pervading perfume of bitter dereliction. The tragic irony, however, is that most of the slum

dwellers have to pay for water when it rains almost everyday in the winter. This ironic situation of absolute need in the midst of surplus is the very definition of the republic of South Africa where the blacks, the original owners of the land have become beggars and squatters. Stressed even further, the ceaseless rain is, without undue exaggeration, a metaphor for the apartheid system of government of South Africa. This is because like the rain with its multitude of distracting destructions –removing rooftops, widening cracks on walls and creating a thousand puddles on muddy paths in the settlement, the apartheid government in South Africa remains a destructive force in the life of the non-white in the republic. Critics like Jan Mohamed who aver that, "the plot of this novel is virtually non-existent" (1982/83:6) will find that the ceaseless rain actually forms a greater part of this slim plot as it connects virtually all the characters, incidents and environment in the narrative.

La Guma's penchant for naturalism comes out vividly in his evocative description of the atmosphere, the shanty town, the physical environment of the people and their impoverished condition. "The tradition of portraying a nature that has been ravaged by human beings", says Paul Goring et al (2010:194) "is not just a recent one". And so, like Richard Jefferies' *After London* or *Wild England* (1986) which gives a striking account of a London that has been abandoned by man on account of some unspecified catastrophe and that is being recolonized by nature, George Mostart's service station reeks of extreme neglect by man and violated by the elements. In spite of the unarguable fact that he has been left behind in the competitive world of greedy commercialism to the extent that his business is now like "a slain enterlprise hung up for the last time in forlorn defiance" (65), George Mostart still wraps himself in a false sense of racial superiority. Social ecologists and concerned environmentalists will definitely be appalled by the countless dump sites brimming with rotting paper, wood offal, tin cans, damp breeze and filth that litter the slum. It is almost unbelievable to hear that the wretched children in these settlement often forage in these dump sites with all their disease vectors. The apartheid government has turned the settlement into a huge disease-infested slum because the population of the blacks and coloureds relocated there far outstrips the space available. The consequences of this oppressive policy are what one finds in abused streets, public convenience, and unhygienic shacks. A typical street in the settlement is nauseatingly revealing:

It could hardly be called a street, not even a lane; just a hollowed track that stumbled and sprawled between and around and through the patchwork of shacks, cabins, huts and wickiups: a maze of cracks

between the jigsaw pieces of the settlement, a writhing battlefield of mud and straggling entanglements of wet and rusty barbed wire, sagging sheets of sin, toppling pickets, twigs and peeled branches and collapsing odds and ends with edges and points as dangerous as sharks' teeth, which made up the fenceworks around the quagmires of lots (45).

In spite of the apartheid-inspired grim environment that one finds in the settlement, La Guma does not fail to invest the narrative with an optimistic vision. As Charlie looks out into the driving rain, he sees to his surprise, out of nowhere at the very end of the novel, a bird which darts straight into the sky. This is no doubt a gesture of hope that helps to break the monotonous downpour that permeates the whole work. Even so, the redemptive element inherent in the symbolic flight of the bird can be seen in its upward movement away from the rain-drenched environment. As observed by Adrian Roscoe (1977:251)

The movement of the bird gives a touch of renewed hope, a poetic emblem of a people's struggle, against the blows falling on them without cease. Whether it is a swallow heralding summer or a dove announcing peace, La Guma is allowing himself a brief and rare gesture of hope

An unmistakable element of optimism is also observed in the lone carnation that grows on the dump. Against the death-dealing ooze, slime, watery filth and the flaking brown rust, the carnation, reminiscent of the solitary flower which flourishes amidst death and decay in Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), blooms with its wonderfully bright, gleaming and diamond-like petals. Properly situated, since Ma Pauls' complete absorption in Bible reading in a fetishistic way, and Uncle Ben's hedonistic lifestyle have no room for ideology, Charlie with his growing political consciousness becomes the equivalent of the solitary carnation that is blooming in the dump in the midst of death, decay and disintegration. He is the very symbol of "hope blooming in an anguished breast" (154). This hope is extended to the birth of a new generation of joyful children playing on the rubbish dump. Some critics' reservation about the isolationist nature of these symbols of hope notwithstanding, they certainly help in concretizing the novel's optimistic vision thereby helping to tone down its disillusioned narrative. Kathryn Balutansky (1990:92) states:

In spite of the seemingly overwhelming pessimistic outlook of the narrative, the same – which inspired the symbolic

images of *A Walk in the Night* also permeates those of *And a Threefold Cord*. La Guma's symbols puncture the narrative to counter its pessimistic impact. Here, as in the previous novel, the images function as a reminder that a portrayal of the desperate condition of Black people under apartheid is by no means a surrender to it.

CONCLUSION

As the ecocritical analysis has shown, even the environment is not spared the damaging effects of South Africa's apartheid policy. As the poverty-stricken nonwhite population finds itself herded into the little space of District Six that is denied of social amenities, overuse and abuse of the environment become the norm leading to environmental disintegration. Semblance of succour only comes to the hapless inhabitants either through nature's serenity or calmness as in *A Walk in the Night* or through its cool breeze or wind at night as in *And a Threefold Cord*. In deference to deep ecologists' credo, the population in this settlement must be reduced or evenly distributed to other areas in the republic with the provision of social amenities in order to protect the environment. This way, the pressure on the environment will be minimized to a manageable level. "What distinguishes ecocriticism from other reading exercises", says Hans Bertens (2005:203), "is its political activist character". While La Guma is deeply concerned with portraying the terrible experience of the non-white population in an apartheid South Africa, he is equally concerned about the environment in which they live. He may not be as fanatical as Russert Sirkin in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* whose "let mankind pass away – time it did", (Lawrence, 1960:65), indicates a preference for the survival of the environment at the expense of mankind. A basic limitation of this study is the fact that it limits itself only to two of La Guma's five novels and short stories. Other novels on apartheid South Africa are also not covered. However, as is evident from the analysis, while La Guma asks the members of the United Nations and human rights movements to stand up and be counted in defence of the defenceless non-white population in South Africa, environmentalists and social ecologists are being prodded to put in a word too in defence of the environment. This is because in the final analysis there cannot be social justice without environmental justice.

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