

Making Long Statements with Short Stories: Alex La Guma's Short Stories as Vignettes about Life in South Africa

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Abstract

As a specific genre of prose work, the short story is often marked by conciseness, unity of impression and brevity of form which often precludes any leisurely development of its few characters and social milieu. Ever since its resurgence in the nineteenth century in the hands of Edgar Allan Poe, its first critical theorist, the short story has not only become less parabolic and surrealistic but more popular and realistic. As a committed and realistic writer, Alex La Guma not only uses his five novels but also finds his numerous short stories handy in portraying the oppressive realities against the non-white in the heydays of the apartheid regime of South Africa. The significance of this research can be seen in the fact that through the six short stories that constitute the spine of this paper, La Guma makes long statements of concern about the pathetic life of the non-whites in South Africa in order to prick the conscience of the world to take action. The paper concludes that although South Africa is now a democratic country, La Guma's short stories, like his novels, remain timeless reminders of the brutal excesses of the apartheid regime to scholars and readers who are likely to find them extremely useful for their research and general interest with regard to South African issues.

Keywords: short story, apartheid, non-whites, South Africa, vignettes

INTRODUCTION

As a specific genre of literature, the short story is characterized by brevity of form which precludes any leisurely development of its few characters and social milieu. Unlike the novel which presents a stretch of extended creativity as a demonstration of the process of life, the short story gives the reader a distillation of such leading to a lighter form. According to M.H. Abrams (1981:176), the short story teller often "begins his story close to, or even on the verge of the climax, minimizes both prior exposition and the details of the setting, keeps the complication down and clears the denouement quickly, sometimes in a few sentences". In short stories, less is stated and more attention is often required. Short stories are often marked by epiphany, an illuminating moment in which something hidden or not understood becomes immediately clear. "While one may lose oneself in a novel", says V.S Pritchett (in Drabble and Stringer, 2007:654), "one turns to a good short story to find oneself".

All human communications are endowed with a strong history of oral lore. The art of telling stories, which is an aspect of oral tradition, is as old as the human race. In fact, some anthropologists have averred that the age-old practice of telling stories at the end of either a victorious or disastrous day "could be the forerunner of the short story that we tell today" (Sithebe, 1986:255). The roots of the short story,

therefore, lie in oral tradition. Lawrence (in May 1976:65) corroborates this view:

Story telling is as old as the day when men first gathered around the campfire or women huddled in a cave... oral tradition (therefore) begins with the first human family... it is to the first oral tradition that we look for the genesis of the short story.

The earliest history of Europe reveals that oral narratives were part of the popular culture of the people. But since these narratives were virtually presented as oral genre, emphasis was put on poetry, drama and the novel which had found their way into written forms. They were considered "more serious art forms" of the century. Short story historians like May (1984) and Reid (1976) have opined that the genre only became a serious art form almost simultaneously in United States of America, Germany, Russia and France in the late nineteenth century. The credit for this development goes to Edgar Allan Poe, who after reviewing Nathanael Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* (1842) and admired the way they were crafted "set down specific and clearly defined ideas on the form of this genre" (Sithebe, 1986:254). As its first critical theorist, Poe defined the prose tale as a narrative "which can be read at one sitting of from one-half hour to two hours and is limited to a certain unique or single effect to

which every detail is subordinate” (Abrams, 1981:76).

Often called the father of the short story because he was the first to give a comprehensive definition to the genre, Poe stated that a good short story is one with one action, in one place and in one day with a single character whose single emotion or a series of emotion should be sparked off by a single situation. According to Reid (1994:55-57), Poe had also recommended that there be a “moment of crisis” in the story. This is a moment of revelation of hidden emotion of the character which James Joyce calls “epiphany or a showing forth”, where a decisive change occurs in the character’s understanding. This “twist in the tail” which is a kind of denouement should be brought about according to Poe, not by “interposed incidents external and foreign to the main subject as the common twist in the tail is, rather this denouement should, spring from the bosom of the thesis – out of the heart of the ruling idea”. Poe also emphasizes the need for necessariness to the short story. The effect of totality, he says, should be felt in a good short story. There should be unity of impression in the story because it is concise, compressed, vigorous and introduces subject matter that is necessary. Unlike the novel, Poe stated that a short story should be a unique prose creation which comprises compactness and unity of impression.

As it often happens with theories, Poe’s literary dicta have undergone some manipulations and interpretations as they transcended time and culture. While some scholars and critics have come to see them as the only valid approach to the appreciation of the short story, linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the writer notwithstanding, others have subjected them to oversimplification. Citing Poe’s suggestion that the short story end with a “twist in the tail”, for example, many short stories of the nineteenth century seemed to give the reader a form of self-knowledge and not a moment of any hidden emotions. In a climate of so many practitioners, perhaps this is not unexpected. A theory is often fine tuned through practice. While one does not advocate oversimplification of a theory, surely one does not campaign for its fossilization especially when it is obvious that such a theory is likely to pass through different linguistic and cultural mills of different people all over the world. Essentially however, Poe’s fundamentals of the short story like compactness, brevity, unity of impression and single event have stood the test of time as touchstones of this distinct literary form. Regardless of its specific format, “a short story”, says Kirsznner and Mandel (2007:417) “offers readers an open window to a world that they can enter – if only briefly”.

Short Story in Africa

The belief by many scholars that the folktale is the natural mother of the short story is unarguably true in the African case. This is evidenced by the fact that the first practitioners of the genre actually saw it as a variant of the folktale. Amos Tutuola’s “The Complete Gentleman” (1952) and Jomo Kenyatta’s “The Gentlemen of the Jungle” (1938), no doubt, justify this assertion. Similarly, according to Emmanuel Chiwome (2009:496), “the first major response to introduction of the short story in Africa took the form of assembling and transcribing folktales in collections like *Eating Chiefs* by Taban Lo Lyong (1970); and *Three Solid Stones* (1975) by Martha Mvungi”. In the introduction to his anthology, *Hungry Flames* (1986), Mbulelo Mzamane posits that, the short story in South Africa is as old as the Xhosa *intsomi*, the Zulu *ingankwane*, the Sotho *tsomo* and other indigenous oral narrative forms”. Over the years, the African short story has come into its own by becoming less parabolic and surrealistic and more realistic as seen in Achebe’s *Girls At War and Other Stories* (1970), Ama Ata Aidoo’s *No Sweetness Here* (1970), and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Secret Lives* (1975). In spite of this however, the African short story continues its symbiotic connection with the folktale as a mark of its distinctness. In fact, in his *The Art of D.B.Z. Ntuli in Short Story Writing* (1999), Ntuli celebrates the oral influences of the short story “as the dynamic element that liberates the African short story from the straight jacket of formal realism and endows it with the flexibility for experimentation” (Chiwome, 2009:496).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The critical attention that has greeted La Guma’s five novels has been so overwhelming that many people have forgotten that he actually started his literary career with short stories. Critics like JanMohamed (1983), Pointer (2001), Barnett (1983), Abrahams (1985), Adhikari (1997), Balutansky (1989) and Breidlid (2002) have carried out a series of research into La Guma’s novels to the detriment of the short stories. Ntaganira (2005:21), for example, states that, “though *A walk in the Night* and its accompanying six short stories have many features in common, most critics have only analyzed the novella and ignored the short stories” while Abrahams (1985:22) and Chandramohan, (1992) only make general statements about La Guma’s short stories. This paper proposes, therefore, to fill this vacuum by discussing six of these stories namely: *Tattoo Marks and Nails*, *At the Portagee’s*, *The Gladiators*, *Blankets*, *A Matter of Taste* and *The Lemon Orchard*. The rationale for this selection is based on the fact that they were published together with La Guma’s first work – *A Walk in the Night* in African Writers Series in 1968.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

La Guma was a Marxist and so, the theoretical framework for this study is understandably Marxist. According to Eagleton (1976:VII).

Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more currently, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggle of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression.

No doubt, La Guma's preoccupation, in his works, with the pathetic experience of the non-whites in South Africa and their daily struggles for survival more than justify the location of this research in the realm of Marxism. He says, "all my works are concerned with the contemporary South African scene, particularly the experience of the non-white population" (Vinson, 1976, 782)

LA GUMA'S SHORT STORIES AS VIGNETTES OF LIFE IN CAPE TOWN

In *Tatto Marks and Nails*, the first in this collection, the reader is shown the picture of a typical cell in Cape Town where the inmates, mostly coloured and black youths are the very definition of injustice-inspired human degradation and violence. The anonymous narrator who is one of the inmates tells us more of their inhuman condition:

Around us were packed a human salad of accused petty-thieves, gangsters, murderers, rapists, buglers, thugs, drunks, brawlers, dope-peddlers, most of whom by no means strangers to the cell, many of them still young, others already depraved, and abandoned sticking at the disintegrating, bitter cigarette end of life(98).

In spite of the fact that the prisoners are all awaiting trial, they are deprived of their clothes and packed together in a small cell where the heat is so overwhelmingly oppressive that, according to Ahmed the Turk, one of the cell mates, one could "grab a handful of heat, fling it at the wall and it would stick" (97). Overcrowding, asphyxiation, few and careless guards hold sway in this prison where inmates claw at one another like depraved monsters on the loose. The Creature and his helmsmen are holding court trying a new inmate who they suspect must be the murderer of the Creature's brother, Nails. The poor bloke is at pains to convince them that he knows nothing about Nails' murderer. The tattoo on his body which they claim resembles that of Nails' murderer does not help his case. Ahmed the Turk's pathetic story of how inmates often resort to sundry diabolical tricks in order to corner water for

themselves in prison is a further testimony to the dog eat dog mentality that presides in the prison in South Africa where inmates end up more hardened than reformed. The prison itself is a microcosm of the tragic reality in South Africa where, hemmed in by the oppressive system, many young, coloured and black youths resort to criminal activities in order to survive. The trials in the prison, say Odendall and Field (1993:18) are carried out in such a way that "the weak were doomed to an existence of terror and depravity".

Away from the dog's life of the prison, "*At the Portage's* is a veritable demonstration of the notion that gainfully employed, no matter how menial, the non-white youth hardly harbours criminal tendencies. He tries to live a normal life that is devoid of gangsterism and the smoking of "dagga". Banjo and his friend, the narrator of the story, work as factory hand and messenger respectively. His miserable income notwithstanding, Banjo's friend still manages to squeeze out six pence for the jobless and hungry man unlike the miserly restaurateur. Within this café setting, La Guma through the mouth piece of the anonymous narrator, chips in a satiric piece. After forty years as a messenger in a factory, Hilda's father is given a mere silver tray with his name on it "for services rendered" (113). The blacks only have access to poor quality education which leaves them as cheap labour for the white managed factories in South Africa. In the words of Mphahlele (1965:181).

The "Bantu Education Act" was intended by the government precisely to halt the African's march forward. The Government was worried that so many Africans pass through university in spite of their poverty and their general position of underdogs.

In this kind of setting, the juke-box crazy pair of Hilda and Dolores are likely on their way to full time prostitution. The experience of the poor hungry coloured man says so much of the society in which poor people have no place. Chandramohan (1992:71), has stated that, "it is not colour or ethnicity, but cash nexus that leads to the poor man's humiliation. But the truth of the matter is that the poverty of the non-white in the society is apartheid-inspired to the extent that a full grown man cannot fend for himself.

The apartheid government does not miss any opportunity to extend its tentacles. Its oppressive divide and rule policy of self-sustenance is seen displayed in an otherwise entertaining game of boxing. *The Gladiators* demonstrates "how important skin pigmentation was in the racist division of South African society" (Abrahams, 1955:32) and "how apartheid made the racial group, the determinant of all social interaction" (Erasmus, 2001:73) Written in a racy colloquial style, the idiom of cape coloured, La

Guma is at his best as seen in his judicious selection of scene and incident; he draws for the reader, “vivid miniatures that seem to encompass the entire South African scene” (Roscoe, 1977:245). Two boxers, Kenny, a coloured and Panther, a black, are about to slug it out in the boxing arena with a predominantly black crowd and the best ringside occupied by whites. Kenny does not hide his hatred for his black opponent who he thinks he is a thousand times better than. The older and perhaps wiser narrator tells us:

... he's lighter, just miss being white which was what make him so full of crap. He was sorry he wasn't white and glad he wasn't black. He has a nice face, too, except for the nose that is a little flat from being hit on it a lot, almost like a black boy's nose, but not exactly (114).

With this mindset, one is hardly surprised at his outburst at being made to fight only blacks and coloured, an arrangement he reckons will not promote his fisty trade. Hear him:

I'll muck that black bastard ... But what the hell I got to fight black boys and coloured all the time? (115).

In the lopsided arrangement of things, which favours only the white in the republic, all other races are simply classified as non-white: Being coloured, Kenny is not qualified to fight any white boy who belongs to a “superior” race. Blinded by his own false sense of racial prejudice, he snaps at the narrator, “muck, that own kind, that boy ain't our kind” (115). But the narrator, who is not a greenhorn in the race politics of the apartheid regime, is not swayed by the narrow-minded vision of Kenny who thinks that being coloured, he must be better than the black boy. He wastes no time in reminding the racially prejudiced Kenny that the whiteman does not care a damn as far as you are not of their kind, for all other races are nothing but an inconsequential mass of humanity. He tells him in unflattering terms: “But we all get kicked in the arse the same” (115). A mind full of confident contempt like Kenny's can hardly win any game. One is therefore, little surprised that at the end, he is knocked out by the dancing, bobbing and more calculating Panther. By the time the hitherto cocky Kenny comes to, his face is nothing but “a mess and his mouth swell up like a couple of polonies” (120). In a rather subtle artistic way, La Guma wants the reader to look beyond pugilism to a wider racial perspective that seems to colour every facet of South African life. Kenny's racial discrimination is apartheid-induced to cause disaffection among the non-whites so that a common front against the white supremacists will be impossible. This is the wider significance of the narrator's observation: “bastards paying cash to see two other black boys knock themselves to hell”

(117). According to the Race Classification Act No. 30 of 1950 of apartheid South Africa, a white person is one who in appearance obviously is or is generally accepted as a white person but does not include a person although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally regarded as a coloured person (Pepple, 1998:43). A coloured person by this understanding, “is one who is not a white person or a native, a native is a person who is in fact, or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa” (43).

Kenny's ignorance of the race relations in apartheid South Africa is possibly responsible for his unwarranted hatred of black Panther. Although nearer the whiteman in complexion, the coloureds were not only marginalized on the subsistence level but also incapacitated by the death-dealing fumes of apartheid. In fact, the position of the coloured becomes more complicated when they realize that although light in complexion compared to their black counterparts they are not as “white” as the whiteman after all. The result, says Ogbeide (1988:19) is that:

They cannot therefore fit into either of the races. They may not be required to carry passes; but because some are dark skinned they are compelled to carry identity cards to save themselves from arrests.

Alex La Guma's life in Cape Town remains a living testimony to the above assertion. Before his self exile to Britain, he had had to suffer several arrests due to his complexion. These coloureds who fit into neither white nor black races are what Malcolm X called the “house niggers”. The parliamentary election that was held in August 1984 into separate chamber indicated that; though they were granted the “privilege” to participate in the elections, their position remained inferior. The overall goal of this diabolical marginalization of the non-whites by the whites was to establish themselves economically, militarily and politically as the undisputed owners of the country's God-given endowments. Like Peregino who “placed strong emphasis on the need for black unity denouncing coloureds who felt superior to Africans” (Lewis, 1987:18), La Guma wants coloureds and blacks to eschew their differences and put all their energy together for collective struggle.

With *Blankets*, we are back to the crime and disease-ridden District Six, the predominately coloured area in Cape Town where the consequences of oppressive apartheid regime are experienced daily. A taste of these is seen in this story where Choker, a young hoodlum stabbed three times by an old enemy, returns in his delirium to earlier scene of poverty, despair and deprivations. In this cold, poverty-stricken environment, blankets are priceless materials. A sympathetic onlooker quickly throws a

blanket over the stabbed Choker. Later, the guard in the place where he is carried to by the ambulance throws two blankets at him to drive away the freezing cold. The possibility of the blankets to keep the badly wounded Choker warm is doubtful because they are either torn, thread-bare, stained or smelling and vermin infested; The bleeding Choker may have succeeded in eliciting sympathy from our hearts; but he too is a hardened criminal as evidenced in the statement of one of the onlookers: "Ja. But look what he does to others ..." (121) in the jungle of District Six, you either eat or be eaten. The apartheid government has placed a stamp on the political and intellectual space. Oppositional discourse is forbidden. Thus, having been socially asphyxiated, the native finds an uncanny solace in an introverted violence. Fanon, (1984:44) was right when he averred that "the native is being hemmed in ... This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess, his dreams are of actions and of aggression".

The gap between the rich whites and the poor non-white is so wide that even when a member of the former finds his way amidst members of the latter, the difference is always stark. In *A Matter of Taste*, a young white man, Whitey, join two coloured railway workers as they are about to drink coffee. It is a rural setting and the narrator and Chinaboy had just finished a job for the railway and were camped out at a few yards from the embankment and some distance from the ruins of a concrete siding. Chinaboy is described as "a short man with grey-flecked kinky hair and wide-heavy face that had a look of patience about it" (125). Over the years, he had "gown accustomed to doing things slowly, carefully and correctly" (125). Knowing the way the South African police have placed them under strict watch, the non-white have learnt to be perpetually alert. This is why as soon as Whitey shows up, uninvited, Chinaboy's cautiousness instantly comes to the fore:

"well", China boy said with that quiet careful smile of his. Seeing you's here. I reckon I don't min either (127).

The narrator and China boy know that Whitey does not belong in their group of poverty-stricken railway hands who use condensed-milk tins for tea cups. Circumstances may have forced him to join them for coffee but as a white boy he has taste and choice, two pieces of luxury the non-whites cannot afford. When China boy says that they should have had some baked beans with their coffee, Whitey instantly corrects him that it should have been with hot dogs instead, for, "Hot dogs go with coffee" (127). In a subtle way, La Guma underscores the wide gap in status between China boy and Whitey in their pronunciation of the word coffee. China boy's "cawfee" is a product of what has been called "Englikaans", a dialect of Cape

Town's mixed race ghettos that blends Afrikaans with English language.

Whitey is going to Cape Town where he hopes to "maybe get a job on a ship and make the States". The very expression "may be" is an indication that Whitey is not in a hurry. He is not desperate because he has options unlike his hosts who are trapped in their poverty. While to him, it is a matter of taste in terms of food, it is simply a matter of money to his friends. Adrian Roscoe (1977:245) could not have put it better:

The gap between Whitey's status and other two workers is gradually opened up as the yawning chasm that it really is. China boy and the narrator suffer hunger as an unavoidable way of life. They have no choice in the matter and the system guarantees that they will be denied the money that makes choice and taste possible. Unlike their guest, they are in no position to consider seriously the idea of going to the States. They are trapped while Whitey is free as the wind. This is the centre point to which all the banter about taste has been leading.

At the end of the story, Whitey is helped on to the passing train enroute to Cape Town while his hosts are still trapped in their disused station house that resembles a huge desecrated tomb. It is such a tragic irony that is peculiar to the Republic of South Africa. Whatever the case, La Guma's message which underlines the accommodationist stance of the two coloured young men towards Whitey is "that regardless of the racist laws of South Africa, which seek to destroy harmonious communication between the races, there is a natural propensity among human beings to share their joy and despair" (Abrahams, 1985:40) Whitey's temporary ordeal notwithstanding, La Guma makes it quite clear that the whites and the non-whites are both victims of apartheid.

As if to foreground the point that the evils of the system are not limited to the urban centres, La Guma again sets the last story in this discourse in a rural environment – a Boer farming area. *The Lemon Orchard*, is "an excellent demonstration of how La Guma portrays the brutality of South Africa" (Abrahams, 1985:34). Here at night, a group of white young men is dragging along a black school teacher for punishment for daring to insult a Boer cleric. The name of the teacher is not mentioned neither is the nature of the punishment identified. But going by the conversation of the members of the group, his punishment will be so severe that:

Afterwards he won't be seen around here again. He will pack his things and go live in the City where they 're not so

particular about the dignity of the volk
(135).

What follows this utterance is a series of utterance that are loaded with irony. The leader of the group, which history says came to settle in South Africa, tells the black teacher that they “don’t want any educated hotnots in OUR town” (emphasis mine). Ordinarily, the law is expected to take its course in a case of murder or other criminal activities. However, the white seem an exception to this rule as they can get away with any illegal act in the Republic. This is why the leader of the philistine group boldly says that he will shoot any non-whites he desires. It is ironic that as the group sing praises of a barking dog, they take delight in the punishment of a human being. Their hatred for education is simply beyond comprehension. Perhaps this is as well, for the whole apartheid system is beyond comprehension. The brutality of the group may be taking place at night and away from the people but nature is a living witness to this man’s inhumanity to man:

The blackness of the night crouched over the orchard and the leaves rustled with a harsh whispering that was inconsistent with the pleasant scent of the lemons. The chill in the air had increased and far-off the creeks-creek-creek of the crickets hardened into solid strips of high-pitched sound. Then the noon came from behind the banks of cloud and its white light touched the leaves seemed to grow stronger, as if the juice was being crushed from them
(135).

To a very great extent, all the short stories analyzed here manifest Poe’s idea of the form. Virtually all La Guma’s short stories display one action in one place in one day which Poe emphasized constitute a basic criterion of an ideal short story. All the short stories are compact, brief and can be read at one sitting. Each of these short stories contains a major or single character with a single event. It is this major character that motivates a series of emotion in a single situation. All other characters revolve around this main character. In *The Gladiators*, for example, it is the prejudiced Kenny’s emotion that attracts a series of other emotions in the boxing situation. All the short stories are characterized by unity of impression because they are concise, compressed, vigorous and introduce a subject matter that is necessary.

However, Poe had recommended a “moment of crisis” in the story which should be more of an “epiphany or a showing forth” where the character undergoes some decisive change in attitude or understanding. There does not seem to be anything epiphanic about the characters in these short stories

neither does one notice any moment of crisis leading to a decisive change in attitude. Kenny remains a boaster until he is knocked to pulp by Panther. Choker remains a hoodlum throughout while Whitey heads for Cape Town without any thought about his hosts’ pitiable condition. What prevails in most of these short stories is a kind of dramatic irony which often leaves the character in ignorance while the reader understands the situation. This deviation is not new, for according to Sithebe (1986:259), “many short stories of the nineteenth century Europe seemed to present a form of self-knowledge for the reader and not a moment of revelation of hidden emotion and the essence of being for the character as Poe had prescribed”. During Poe’s era, it was not easy to follow all the rules. In fact, Poe himself had warned against rigidifying his suggestions. “Extreme brevity”, he warns, for example, “will degenerate into epigrammatism” (May, 1976:47). Even so, as stated earlier, circumstances and the passage of time are likely to bring their influences to bear on the genre. In South Africa, for example artistic immediately places premium on realism which marks La Guma’s short stories.

CONCLUSION

Committed writers have never wavered in their insistence on a vital relevance between literary concern of the writer and the pattern of reality. This is no doubt, a call for realism in literary creativity. “Literature”, says Olu Obafemi in his inaugural lecture (1997:7), “reflects, represents and refracts the reality of the world across age and time”. The big reality during La Guma’s time was apartheid which Peter Nazareth (1973:75) refers to as “a virulent form of cancer that affects every aspect of the South African’s life”. He therefore, called on the South Africa writer to be “concerned with fighting apartheid, with demonstrating how monstrous apartheid is, with showing how it dehumanizes everybody”(96). La Guma’s short stories, like his novels, are certainly not found wanting in this regard. In fact, it is the over-emphases on apartheid as a social malaise that attracted criticism from Adrian Roscoe and Lewis Nkosi some years ago. This criticism was unwarranted going by the socio-political realities in South Africa whose overall reflection in many anti-apartheid works was nothing but a child of necessity. To have glossed over this obnoxious reality in a vague pursuit of imagination for mere pleasure would have been tantamount to the foolish man in Achebe’s story who left his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.

Since April 1994, South Africa has become a democracy and apartheid has since taken a back seat in the big vehicle of creativity. No doubt, post-apartheid realities are beginning to attract the creative impetus of South African writers. The limitation of this study is that none of these new writers’ works are

included in this study. La Guma's short stories however, remain timeless works of fiction that succeeded in capturing the striking vignettes of life in the heydays of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

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