



# The Achievers Journal

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## Reading Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* in Post-Apartheid South

### Africa

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#### Abstract

*This paper aims at defining the concept of Apartheid and then have a comparative study of the situational state of South Africa during Apartheid and Post-Apartheid periods, for which La Guma's A Walk in the Night serves as the basis.*

Keywords: apartheid; post-apartheid; racism

This paper is a reflection of artistic display of South African novelist Alex La Guma in his novel *A Walk in the Night* written in 1962, about his experiences regarding Apartheid oppression system meted out on blacks, also called non-whites, by their white counterparts in South Africa. Apartheid as explained by the Afrikaans denoting 'apartness' was a principle that was inhumanly championed by the National Party (NP) administration under the leadership of Daniel Francois Malan, taking effect in South Africa in 1948. This cruel system demanded for varying considerations of the various racial and ethnic classes in South Africa. Apartheid, in basic principles, was only a little bit severe from the system of segregation of the South African governments prior to the Afrikaner Nationalist Party taking effect in 1948. The only variation is that apartheid makes separation part of the law: "Apartheid cruelly and forcibly separated



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people... punished those who disagreed... was introduced in a period when other countries were moving away from racist policies” (South African History Online, 2018). This means that segregation predates Apartheid in South Africa. In short, Apartheid means racial segregation made into law, and racism, simply, refers to the belief of being superior over another person due to skin difference.

Alex La Guma, a South African novelist was born in 1925 at District Six, Cape Town of South Africa. His novel *A Walk in the Night* is formed in District Six of Cape Town, towards the end of 1950s. The severe attitudes and actions of the unjustifiable Apartheid System, which the black communities of South Africa had to taste has been explored in the present study.

As the power of leadership and economic ownership as well as military influence were in the hands of the whites, the blacks suffered discrimination at a variety of levels ranging from oppression, hunger, unemployment, less economic opportunities to abusive methods of treatment by the police etc. These hate elements were suffered by Michael Adonis and Willieboy symbolizing the black race of South Africa. The situation of the non-whites inspired Alex La Guma to expose how they suffered such maltreatments being the embodiments of Apartheid system of the then South African government in his novel *A Walk in the Night*.

The blacks of South Africa felt, at different levels, the effects of racism in the country. Alan Paton (in Jack, 1961, p.66) is of the opinion that “the policy (of racial segregation) of our rulers is killing the novel by dividing life into unknowable segments.” This means that differences in color exist in South Africa in such a way that there is a crack between the races so much so that no one earns the respect of the other even in the daily life pursuits. There is a big barrier between us (Africans) and the Whites. We are looking at each other through a keyhole all the time ( Mphahlele , 1974, p.14). The writer means that division between South African populace is so high that they see one another with contempt. According to Alex La Guma who was one time



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exiled from the country, “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” (6).

By this it means that South African writers recognize the fact that racial separation is an essential artistic predicament in their artistic writings and it is so rigid and firm that hope for the realization of unity among the races is loose. Alex La Guma bursts out revealing his resentful mind in an interview with Abraham Cecil regarding harsh treatments over the non-whites, which also militate against the artistic developments of the writers of the region, necessitating him to call the novel *A Walk in the Night* thus:

One out of many reasons why I called the book *A Walk in the Night* was that to the best of my knowledge the blacks were trying to achieve their identity against the racism and that these people had been walking day and night and struggling to recognize themselves as true citizens of their country for which they wanted to contribute to its development, so that they would have freedom to get out of an artificial imprisonment- La Guma (49).

Here, La Guma makes a pitiful declaration about people sensing inferiority complex and oppression in the society they belong to. Their houses initially in cities and towns are demolished to satisfy Apartheid cruel policies, whereby forcing them migrating day and night to artificially created black homelands. They are of course dreaming to enjoy and contribute to the development of their country as legitimate citizens, but still find themselves struggling day and night for freedom of identity and rights. Surely, no one can argue with the fact that the characters we meet in this novel are trapped in a severe situation. They live in District Six, a Cape Town slum, where everything is in a state of dilapidation and decomposition. La Guma states in a clear manner that the dirty rented houses and shanties of the urban working class generate crime and



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random violence. As a result of tension in the survival of the blacks, two people were killed in the course of the story—a young thug named Willieboy and a throw-to-soil Irish actor called Doughty—and neither deserve death; they are only victims of a cruel, snobbish socio-political system that routinely destroys the lives of the disadvantaged class of South African citizens.

The plot of the story begins by exposing to readers, how a coloured worker in a sheet metal factory in the name of Michael Adonis, is expelled from his job upon reacting to a white foreman- Scofield, who refuses to allow him to take a few minutes off his work for urinating. It is clear that the story deals with a clever but sad moral violence of Michael Adonis. Through a chat with his friend Willieboy at the café, Michael Adonis tells the reader how and why he got sacked from his job by saying: “Any time a man left work for urine, he began to fume by calling Jesus Christ. For him to sacrifice a minute, he would play deaf ear than to allow you go even if man would wet his pants” (4).

This reveals the physical and mental exploitations of the blacks. When they are at work, the white men lack that human feeling and concern to even allow them go and urinate. What Scofield wants is only the service. He doesn't care even if Michael Adonis is going to wet his cloth. He feels the vacuum Michael Adonis will create for going to piss will only be at his loss of service. And when he is sacked from his workplace, he ends up being a criminal.

Further, when Michael Adonis visits one restaurant in order to eat, as he is coming out, he is stopped on the road by two Afrikaner policemen. They start searching him for dagga (marijuana) in a very degrading manner. One of them asks him ‘Where’s your dagga?’, ‘I don’t smoke it’ (11). Smoking of marijuana is associated with the non-whites because they are seen as having nothing to do with their lives than to smoke and create troubles in the society. This indication further confirms the manner in which the white men in the society live with the non-whites. There is no point of respect for the non-white races about their human identity and as such they



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have to suffer contemptuous approaches being non-whites. The whites perceive the color black to be connected with evil and wickedness. Coincidentally, during the search for dagga, the policemen see money in Adonis' pocket and intentionally construe him as a thief:

Jong, let's see your pockets, the first one ordered. Quick (11)!

Michael Adonis begins to empty his pockets slowly, without looking up at them, but reacting by calling them: "You mucking boer, you mucking boer" (11).

Going by this, it is pitiful that every evil is attached to black in South African Apartheid administration. The blacks have no peace not only at their workplaces, but on streets and by the front of their dirty, unfavorable houses. Michael Adonis symbolizing the black race is accused of possessing unlawful drug and theft simply because he belongs to the underprivileged class of the South African citizens, which is a clear segregation element.

The social fabric of South Africa during Apartheid negates the non-whites from inhaling and feeling the good sides of it. The blacks are only seen at dirty centers and low-cost restaurants in the name of enjoying themselves. They visit pubs, but the types associated with evil practices is described as:

... a place where the "lost" and those in a state of "despair" as well as "cowards" gather to take in glasses of wine while leaning against polished mahogany counter to take relief from the intensified labors being immaterial souls. They would get some hope there and would take into consideration some acts of kindness and it also served as a place where murders were created (12).

Taking into consideration the quotation above, one is made to understand that this place is a centre where "despairing", "lost" and "cowards" gain a so called courage from which they resolve their emotional imbalances through taking in wine as a means of enjoying themselves and apart from this the pub is also a hub of scheming good and bad things. Furthermore, the "disillusioned" i.e. those who have lost hope and in despair or are lost in their thinking may have



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a temporary pleasure. However, in some sense, it can be an avenue of hope, since the gathering of these blacks might result in something positive, for example, about how they will mobilize themselves to struggle for their freedom. The blacks are further segregated from enjoying the same amenities with their white counterparts in so many instances of life. For example:

With a view to stopping races from intermingling in daily life, laws established separate amenities like post offices, recreational places, and mode of seating. The separation, also, include travel sections in trains, toilets and graveyards for each group. The legal sanction did not allow white and black children to play together; they did not share their minds in the park and white child never talked to a black child. Both blacks and whites entered buildings through different doors, stood separately at counters and suffered entirely different punishments for criminal acts (Lassie Smith, 2018).

This means that both colored and blacks have to go their own ways in their motherland in terms of daily life struggles and recreation. They are not allowed to intermingle with the whites simply because they are looked down upon based on racial differences. The worst part of it even punishment is different, whether or not they supposed to suffer the same weight of punishment- the leniency goes to Whites' children. In the South African Apartheid regime, even mixed marriage is prohibited by Whiteman unfair Immorality Act of 1950 thus:

The apartheid laws, also, prohibited mixed marriages. Sexual relations were banned by 1950 Immorality Act. This law led to police attacks on houses where mixed marriages were agreed to happen. Trebor Nooh was doomed as born to crime just because he was born to white Swiss father and black native mother (Lassie Smith, 2018).



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By this, it shows that the hate elements do not spare marriage relation. Such relation is not required by the Apartheid system of South Africa. It means that the Whites do not want to share blood with the Blacks so as to avoid that biological genesis.

Act 25 of 1945 blocked the rights of blacks to worship at places or churches of their own wish. It spelt out that attendance of Bantu at any churches other than those set aside for them shall stop. Their presence at the vicinity of those places create nuisance to the residents of the area and that Africans should be prevented from going to churches located in the whites' part because of their so many numbers.(Peter Randall,1972).

Apartheid is such a terrible system that does not set aside even the religious practice in South Africa. The blacks, Coloured and Asiatics are under restrictions, in some cases, due to their numbers, and in others, due to their racial differences from the Whites. According to this unfavorable Act, their presence at the restricted church premises serves as "nuisance" to the residents of those areas. Thus, the Whiteman mentality during apartheid era does not give any prominence to the worship of God. In other words, God's supremacy is never given any significance. What worries them is the display of their callousness and that Whiteman's snobbish coupled with the air of superiority complex. It is inhuman to deter a person from going closer to God and at the same time prevent him from forwarding his spiritual demands.

The election of Nelson Mandela as the first black President of South Africa in 1994 marks the end of Apartheid administration - a system of extensive racially-based segregation to impose an almost entire separation of different races in the country. By the time they are in transition into democracy in 1994, socio-economic conditions of South Africa are uncalled for, especially amongst blacks. **Nelson Mandela's** regime encounters a great accusation in phasing out the legacy of apartheid and making the lives of South Africans better.



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Yet, into democracy for twenty-two years, a number of complaints do emerge on whether blacks have made any progress in their socio-economic condition or not. Many people minded in politics, the media, academia, and the general public as well as Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are of the opinion that the country's economy is in the hands of the whites – while blacks lack ownership or control still. Socio-economic condition still remains the problematic area that militates against normal standard of living regarding South African citizenry, more especially the blacks. Based on statistics by the national data agency, Statistics South Africa (SSA), South Africans have been pushed to poverty line in their survival.

However, South Africa's failure to improve the socio-economic condition since 1994 when the African National Congress took over power has been due to a number of factors. The country's financial difficulty traces its history from the 2008 global financial crisis amidst whose effects the country hosted 2010 FIFA World Cup. The other factor has been the country's failure to implement the 2010 Development Plan. And for these reasons "South Africa is going to miss the goals it set for itself in the plan, including its aim to reduce poverty from 39% in 2009 to 0% in 2030 and eliminate hunger (Lynsey, 2017)".

But, objectively, putting unemployment and poverty aside, it is pertinent to look at South Africa as a whole and see what advancement it has acquired over the past twenty-two years. There are a number of key areas that must draw the reader's attention in gauging whether Blacks have made any progress in Post-Apartheid period. In the field of education, one must believe that a significant change has been attained with the increment of blacks' enrolments into tertiary institutions and universities, while the number of the whites is reduced thus:

As regards to education, enrolment in tertiary institutions has indicated significant advancement since 1994. Of the university graduates in 2011, 63% remained black, if compared to just 28% in 1995. Chances to higher education were improved, with total university enrolment between 1995 to 2012 increasing from 570,000 to 945,765. Enrolment of African students has improved markedly, while





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white enrolment has decreased. Because of much more access to education, the black middle class continues to grow for the first time in 2008 (Phumlani, 2017).

The business industry has no doubt been dominated by the whites while in apartheid, since the blacks are troubled with displacement movements from cities and towns to artificially created homelands; how could they have the chance of conducting businesses, except only on small scale. Some of the black key-figures in business face many irregularities, however, in Post-Apartheid era; things have started to change thus:

In post-apartheid, the list of blacks both men and women across the range of industries exalted greatly to more than 78% of new businesses formed since 2002. Such growth was impossible under apartheid cruel principles. 1996 and 2012, real per capita profit realized for the entire country advanced by 24.7%. During that time, it extended by 90.2% for blacks. Such impressive numbers cannot be looked down upon (Phumlani, 2017).

In terms of standard of living, the blacks have still witnessed some improvement compared to how it was before. With the leadership in their hands, developments have also been encountered, since key offices have gone to blacks. In other words, blacks have now attained the positions of judges, membership in medical business, shareholders in stock exchange as well as few appointments in lawyer-ship.



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