

A providing theme of violence in a walk in the night novel

[Life](#)



THE THEME OF VIOLENCE IN ALEX LA GUMA'S 'A WALK IN THE NIGHT'

Alex La Guma is a colored South African writer whose work was mainly aimed at capping the injustices and ill-treatment that the apartheid system posed on the native blacks and other minority groups. He was born in 1925 in District Six, a neighborhood that was shared by blacks and coloreds (Abrahams 83). This district is also the setting of this story. His father, Jimmy La Guma, was an active political activist and trade unionist by the time La Guma was born. He was very active in different organizations and unions that aimed at bringing change in the apartheid era (Abrahams 15). This is one reason among many others that influenced La Guma to become an anti-apartheid activist when he grew up. A notable thing that made Alex La Guma start to understand the injustice in the apartheid system was what he faced when he went at a circus with his mother. He could not watch the performance properly and when he asked the mother, she told her that that they were at the sits for black people. This touched him and later he decided to take his father's political path (Field 44). In 1946 for example, he led a strike against oppression, exploitation and fascism at the factory where he was working and consequently lost his job. In 1956, he was arrested along with 155 other anti-racist leaders and were put to trial. He was found unguilt and this marked his start on literature. He left South Africa for London in 1966 after spending four years of house arrest. He published a collection of short stories named 'A Walk in the Night' in 1962. It is a collection of stories that expose the evils of the apartheid era (Adhikari 8). One of the major themes in 'A Walk in the Night', a short story that stands as the title of the

collection, is violence. It is the scope of this essay to look at the theme of violence as portrayed in this story with some reference to other short stories from this collection.

Violence, as Gothier (1) puts it, is whenever man is treated as a thing rather than a human being. This means that violence is not only physical. The apartheid system in South Africa, of which this story discusses, perpetuated violence against the black population. This system imparted superiority of the whites over the blacks who happen to be the natives of the land. The very first instance where violence is being portrayed in this story is the firing of Michael Adonis from work. Adonis is fired from work just because he answered back to the white foreman. During the apartheid system, it was not allowed for a black man to answer a white man. It was regarded as lack of respect. This clearly shows that the black man's rights were being violated. In the same way we see the teacher in "The Lemon Orchard" being a victim of violence from some white man because they regarded his education a form of disrespect and challenge against them. One of the white men who harassed the teacher says "we don't want any educated hottentots in our city". And the second one adds "Neither black Englishmen". (La Guma, 129). Black people suffered a lot during this period because they were not allowed to rise above the whites and if they tried, they ended up in trouble like the teacher and Michael Adonis. The apartheid era was a period of great thingfication of black people. But because the blacks had no say during this period, they kept on being dehumanized and thingfied. Adonis, just like the entire black race of this period, is a passive

recipient of violence because there was no room to fight back. This was until the Soweto uprising in 1976 that things began to change (Abrahams 497).

The second instance where violence is portrayed is the killing of Doughty. La Guma's novels consisted of three levels of violence. The first one is where the colonizers are the perpetrators. The second is where the oppressed go against each other and the third one is where of revenge. Michael Adonis did it out of the rage that he had after being fired from his job. This is why after killing him, he was not very sympathetic. He even said ' well, he didn't have no right living here with us coloreds' (La Guma 28). As Pointer (19) puts it, this form of violence was therapeutic; it relieved Adonis' anger and he was freed from the inferiority complex that he had.

The other instance that exemplify violence in this story is the killing of Willieboy (La Guma 83). The merciless and ruthless killing of Willieboy is another sound reference to the fact that the white police was so inconsiderate and violent when it came to killing black people. Policeman hunted Willieboy, treated him violently and kills him only because he was perceived as responsible for the death of the poor old white man who lived in District Six (Bredlid 143). Even the criteria for finding the suspect is questionable. How can the police mark a suspect only by the color of their cloth? This exemplifies the injustice that the black man was facing during the apartheid era. The white police could just beat and even kill innocent people only because they are poor. This is evident in Raalt when he says, " I wish something would happen. I'd like to lay my hands on one of those bushmen bastards and wring his bloody neck'. He wanted to kick a black man just

because he had crushes with his wife and wanted to ease his anger. In this case, the black man is being dehumanized because is being used as an instrument or chemical for easing anger. Even the names that were used to refer to black people during this time were so dehumanizing. Black people were referred to as bastards, kaffirs and bushmen. These names were violent psychologically.

The other instance where violence is evident is the beating of Willieboy by Miss Gipsy (La Guma 53). Beating is a physical form of violence. Although it may be considered that it was a good idea because it aimed at stopping the fight, but it was such a merciless and violent beating that left the boy almost faint. We see here that violence is being transferred to an innocent person. This transfer of violence to an innocent person is also seen when Willieboy's mother beats him when he was young. The mother was just beating him as a form of vengeance to the beating that she suffered from her husband (La Guma 80). This kind of violence is on the second level where the victims victimize each other. Here Willieboy's mother is a victim of a physical violence from her husband and he victimizes Willieboy to ease herself. This is also evident in "Tattoo Marks and Nails" where a character known as "the joker" is being carved on the chest with a knife because he continuously won the card game and took all the water for the cell (La Guma 99).

The last instance where violence is being portrayed in this story is when Willieboy harasses Mister Greene as they were both coming from drinking (La Guma 69). We see Willieboy catching Greene by the front of his coat telling him to give some money. The old man confessed that he doesn't have

money but Willieboy continues to harass him and knocks him down and beats him violently. This violence is a result of revenge. When we see most of the violent behaviors done by black people over each other, it was only a result of revenge for the injustices they suffered in the hands of the whites. In most of La Guma's stories, a lot of violence was out of revenge. For example, in " Blankets", a character by the name of Choker is stabbed three times by an old enemy (La Guma 116). He did this just for revenge.

In conclusion, we can see from the instances given from the story that there was really a lot of violence during the apartheid period. A person could lose a job only because they answered back to a white boss. One could be killed without trial and fellow blacks could treat each other badly in a form of revenge.