

**The Novels of
Alex La Guma:
The Representation of
a Political Conflict**

**by
Kathleen M. Balutansky**



An Original from Three Continents Press

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“The proposition of art for the sake of art finds no foothold in the atmosphere of racism, violence and crude exploitation which is the day-to-day experience of the South African people.”

—Alex La Guma

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Vanessa, this is for you.

Kathleen M. Balutansky
Charlottesville, Virginia

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Introduction

At the African Scandinavian Writers' Conference held in Stockholm in 1967, Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer, literary critic, and later Nobel Prize winner, delivered a lecture which concluded that "The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to his essence of himself."¹ In the discussion following Soyinka's address, Alex La Guma responded to Soyinka's derogatory statement about writers holding up radio stations and running guns. La Guma declared: "I, as a South African writer, am prepared to run guns and to hold up radio stations, because in South Africa that is what we are faced with, whether we are writers or whether we are common laborers."²

Essentially, Soyinka's and La Guma's notions were not contradictory, but the vehemence of La Guma's response underlines the difference in their conceptions of what constitutes the writer's essence of himself. Further, La Guma's response was not mere literary rhetoric; it was the statement of a viable, if desperate, alternative for a man who had spent his entire life working actively toward ending South Africa's policy of cultural, political, and military repression of Blacks, Coloreds,³ and Asians. Furthermore, La Guma's words reflect the imperative that all militant opponents of Apartheid felt in the wake of a decade of the most repressive and violent measures taken by the White supremacist government.

In South Africa, a writer cannot be removed from his or her political reality. Alex La Guma's emphasis on this fact has to be understood not

only in terms of the total permeation of Apartheid in the lives of all "non-White" South Africans, but also in terms of his own personal position as an avowed fighter against Apartheid. This is an important distinction because it characterizes La Guma, not only as a Black (or Colored, according to South African governmental race classification) South African writer whose fiction depicts the abuses of Apartheid, but mainly as a conscious writer and activist whose ideology has led him to choose an esthetic that focuses on the collective experience of oppression and struggle rather than on individual experience.

Throughout his adult life, La Guma joined, organized, and led the most vital organizations that first resisted and then fought Apartheid. A brief overview of the past thirty years of South African political history provides a clear picture of La Guma's involvement in this struggle and a better understanding of the extent to which his fiction is a part of that struggle.

As the son of James La Guma, an active union organizer, member of the South African Communist Party, Colored secretary of the Cape Branch of the African National Congress (ANC), and president of the South African Coloured Peoples' Congress, Alex La Guma was raised in an atmosphere of fierce political conviction and active participation. His biographer, Cecil Abrahams, tells of the importance of the father's influence in the development of the son's political consciousness.⁴

Alex La Guma's own active political life began in 1946 when he organized a strike for better working conditions and wages in a metal box company for which he worked. This activity cost him his job. In 1947, while working at odd jobs, he joined the Young Communist League. After the victory of the Nationalist-Afrikaner Party and the resulting escalation of the repressive laws and strengthening of Apartheid in 1948, La Guma became a member of the Communist Party of South Africa, which was banned in 1950. That same year the new government passed the Group Areas Act, which had two main goals: to segregate areas for occupation by race, and to control ownership and use of the land. This effectively removed whole segments of Black, Asian, and Colored populations from their homes, work places, and traditional life-styles.

Further, the new government was amending and strengthening many other pieces of legislation, which had the effect of radicalizing the resistance movements. While the government was celebrating the 300th anniversary of Van Riebeeck's sailing into Table Bay,

The leaders of African, Coloured and Indian peoples . . . for the first time had begun to plan joint political action against all discriminatory legislation.⁵

During the era of protest that the Defiance Campaign began on June 26, 1952, La Guma was very active, first as a member of the executive committee of the South African Coloured Peoples Organization (SACPO), and later as the organization's chairman.⁶ As Cecil Abrahams puts it:

As Chairman of SACPO, now known as the Coloured Peoples Congress (CPC), La Guma's public speeches and protest activities came under careful scrutiny by the police. He gave leadership in attacking the government's 1955 Race Classification Bill and the 1956 South African Act Amendment Bill which removed Coloured voters from the common electoral roll. He protested the Cape Town City Council's decision in 1956 to segregate the beaches and he led the bus boycott of April and May 1956 when the Cape Town municipal authority decided to segregate the buses. . . . On December 13, 1956, he and 155 anti-racist leaders throughout South Africa were arrested and charged with treason against the State.⁷

South African historian Freda Troup presents the historical significance of the trial:

With all the dramatic trappings appropriate in a Minister of Justice who had been a Hollywood extra in his time, arrests began of 156 people: men and women of all races, many bearing well-known names, many leaders of the Congress Alliance. They were flown to Johannesburg to stand trial on allegations of treason. They included Lutuli, Sisulu, Matthews; Tambo and Mandela of the Youth League; Dadoo and Naicker of the SAIC; Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi and others of the Women's Federation; trade unionists, among them the Levy brothers, Morrison and September; clergymen Catala and Thompson. . . . The trial was to last over four years until, in March 1961, the court found all thirty accused not guilty and they were technically free to resume their interrupted lives. The trial was a watershed in South African legal and political history.⁸

The collective effect of this "marathon trial" was to create a real disturbance in the anti-Nationalist groups that suffered from a lack of leadership, but the individual effect was no less destructive. Although all the accused were eventually acquitted, their lives were irreparably disrupted, their livelihoods lost, and their political futures jeopardized. For La Guma as well as all the others accused, the onset of the Treason Trial was the start of long periods of house arrest, imprisonment, police harassment, and banning.

La Guma was not detained throughout the entire trial and was able to continue his weekly column "Up My Alley" for the Cape Town newspaper, *New Age*. He was also able to pursue work on several short

stories and his first long work, *A Walk in the Night*, which, in its conflicting interplay of narrative and metaphor, subtly reflected the author's ideological optimism in spite of its poignant portrayal of repression. In reality, La Guma's optimism was understandable, for, in spite of Nationalist repression, anti-Nationalist protest was mounting. The leadership of the various Congresses and other groups were going through a period of redefining their goals, trade unions and women's groups were provoking riots, and there was a general feeling of unrest.

For instance, many militants found the ANC to be too pacifist in the face of repression; the differences of opinion among the leadership led to the formation of the strongly Africanist Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which considered sabotage and other more violent measures in order to respond in kind to the measures being taken by the government. The period of non-violent protest seemed to end with the Sharpeville shooting of March 21, 1960, when a non-violent protest organized by the PAC resulted in the killing of 64 and the wounding of 186, mostly women and children who were shot as they fled.⁹ Historian Gail M. Gerhart points out that some eyewitnesses testified that the crowd, far from being amiable, was "hostile, aggressive, and volatile."¹⁰

According to Abrahams, La Guma completed *A Walk in the Night* before April, 1960¹¹—that is, approximately at the time of the Sharpeville shooting. The freshness of the event seems to account for the intensity of La Guma's description of the hostile crowd in *A Walk in the Night*, while, later, he is able to emphasize the innocence and even the joviality of the crowd in a stylized description of the Sharpeville massacre in *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*.

In the aftermath of the Sharpeville shooting, the government declared a State of Emergency and banned the ANC and the PAC under the Unlawful Organizations Act. Most anti-Nationalist militants were jailed, including those still involved in the Treason Trial. La Guma was arrested along with thousands of other opponents of the regime and he was imprisoned for seven months. However, neither La Guma nor the other militant opponents of Apartheid were deterred by these measures; the protests and demonstrations continued, leading to a period of increased violent protest and mass repression, which ended with the July 1963 police raid of the underground Umkonto We Sizwe headquarters at Rivonia, and the much-publicized Rivonia trial.¹² The PAC also organized an underground movement called POQO which remained strictly Africanist and was involved in smuggling militants out of South Africa for "training and sabotage and guerrilla warfare . . ."¹³ It, also, was virtually destroyed in June 1963 with the arrest of thousands of suspected POQO and PAC members.

La Guma's participation in these events is not documented, but

Abrahams tells us that from 1962-1963 La Guma wrote his second long work, *And a Threefold Cord*, a novel that describes the miserable conditions in the slums of Cape Town. According to Abrahams, part of the novel was written in prison, where La Guma was detained for five months until December 1963, when he was released and put under a five-year house-arrest order.¹⁴

In *And a Threefold Cord*, La Guma focuses on a small slum community on the outskirts of Cape Town, and he successfully integrates in his narrative the real aspects of police repression, portraying not only the immediate debasing effects of the police raids, but also the long-term dehumanizing and alienating effects of the Apartheid laws and their brutal implementation. Yet he also depicts the increasing unrest of the people in his portrayal of Charlie Pauls' growing realization that White South Africans will not willingly do away with Apartheid and its gross inequalities, and that non-violent protest can no longer be considered the solution to the problem. In this novel, as in his previous one, La Guma's militant optimism forcefully emerges from his integration of metaphoric patterns that counter the dismal portrayal of repression and suffering.

While under house arrest, La Guma continued to write and, as a result, finished *The Stone Country* by the end of 1966. This novel seems obviously to be a record of La Guma's own prison experience; indeed, La Guma told Abrahams that he wrote the novel in order to release the tension of that experience.¹⁵ More importantly, however, the novel represents more than a mere record of what La Guma observed while in prison. *The Stone Country* is structured as an allegory, a form that suits his topic well: in the novel, George Adams tries to achieve in his prison section what many militants were attempting in the larger prison of South Africa.

The novel presents Adams' unflinching resolution to continue his work of opening the eyes of the masses, an endeavor that replicates the efforts of thousands of opponents of Apartheid whose work continued throughout the Verwoerd regime's era of increased repression. Yet the structural weaknesses of the novel are evidence of the strain La Guma suffered throughout these years. In spite of its portrayal of the determined will of the militant, the novel projects a sense of uneasiness. Indeed, *The Stone Country* seems to record a pause in La Guma's ideological development, to register his anxiety and restlessness in the face of the virtual destruction of the anti-Nationalist underground. The effective constraints of the ban against La Guma's works in 1962 had already alienated his writing from its South African readership; now his militant career, too, had reached an impasse. Thus, by the end of 1966, La Guma's future both as militant and as writer was unsettled and

bleak, and *The Stone Country* seems to testify to his resulting mental distress.

In September 1966, Alex La Guma and his family were given permanent exit visas and left immediately for London, where he joined the ranks of exiled ANC members actively working for the overthrow of the Afrikaner regime, then under the leadership of Johannes (John) Vorster.¹⁶ *The Stone Country* was published in London in 1967, and between its publication and that of his next novel, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* in 1972, La Guma busied himself in various occupations: he gave numerous talks and lectures that exposed the abuses of Apartheid and promoted the ANC's struggle against it; in 1970 he traveled to India to receive his 1969 Lotus Prize for Literature; and he assumed the chairmanship of the London District of the ANC the same year.

In *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, La Guma produced his most vivid and personal account of the life and activities of the "freedom fighters" of South Africa. The novel is defiantly political: more clearly and consistently than in the previous novels, La Guma presents, both in the narrative and in the novels' structure, the inevitable outcome of the dialectics of the South African conflicts. The book traces the dilemmas of three types of fighters: those who die in prison cells, tortured by the security police; those who risk their lives while continuing the underground erosion of the system, knowing that their fate may, at any time, become that of the first group; and those who choose to go abroad for training in order to return as guerrilla fighters and face an almost certain death. The bleakness of these choices gives the novel the poignancy of a eulogy, and this is heightened by its epigraph, "In memory of Basil February and others killed in action, Zimbabwe, 1967." Nevertheless, after the hiatus of *The Stone Country*, this latest novel displays a resurgence of La Guma's ideological optimism. Once again, he is able to use the interplay of narrative and symbolism to offer a living portrait of the dedicated opponents of Apartheid in the midst of their tribulations, while at the same time creating images that anticipate the victory of the fight.

Unfortunately, victory did not come as quickly as La Guma had anticipated, and the struggle continued long after 1972, as it continues into the late 1980s. As a result, La Guma's political and literary activities increased, as he attended political and literary conferences, meetings, and congresses. He went to Tashkent in Soviet Uzbekistan, to Chile (under Allende), to Vietnam, and also to Tanzania in 1970 where he stayed as writer in residence at the University of Dar es Salaam.¹⁷

Meanwhile, in South Africa, the Nationalist Party under Vorster continued and increased its destructive laws and repressive measures,

the most odious of which were the reinforcement of the Bantu system (creating a lower standard of education for Africans), and the Homelands Constitution Act of 1971 (relocating whole communities into isolated and deserted parts of the land). As the fight against Apartheid continued, organizations evolved and developed inside of South Africa, with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and, later, with the South African Students' Organization (SASO) under the leadership of Steve Biko.¹⁸ The movements led by the students grew in fervor and triggered protests and demonstrations that culminated in the Soweto riots of 1976.

The following year, while he was working on his last novel, *Time of the Butcherbird*, La Guma was chosen to replace Jusef El Sebai as secretary-general of the Afro-Asian Writers Association; El Sebai had been assassinated in Cyprus.¹⁹ In 1978, La Guma took up residence in Havana as the Caribbean representative of the ANC; he remained in Cuba until his death of a heart attack on October 11, 1986.

Time of the Butcherbird, published in 1979, is steeped in the political tensions of its time. It reflects the repressive aftermath of the Soweto riots and the violent reaction to the mass removals and the government's seizure of profitable land and removal of "undesirable" communities from their proximity to designated "White Areas."

It is in *Time of the Butcherbird* that Alex La Guma achieves the most successful rendering of his esthetics of dialectical patterns. The pattern of the narrative, the presentation of the personal conflicts of the characters within the larger political struggle, the hostile interference of the landscape, and, finally, the dialectical reversals and confrontations of the symbolic frame of the novel all act upon each other to enhance both the tension of the conflict and the imminence of its resolution. The masterful achievement of this novel is to keep the reader at the center of the turbulence until the end of the novel, at which point he or she is pushed outside the narrative frame into the symbolic "time" that La Guma creates.

The five novels on which this study focuses chart clearly the development of this esthetics. An overview of La Guma's political involvement in the South African liberation movements shows that, in his fiction, La Guma the activist and La Guma the writer are inseparable, both because of the nature of his experience under Apartheid and, to an even greater extent, because of his unflinching determination to pursue his work against the racial policies of the White supremacist regime.

Thus, when La Guma responds as he does to Soyinka's demand that the African writer "respond to his essence of himself," he is in fact telling Soyinka that, for some Africans, especially those involved in a struggle against oppression, "essence" may demand an esthetics of

conflict, focusing on the collective experience of oppression and struggle, rather than an esthetics grounded in the individual experience. This distinction is very important in the study of La Guma's novels, for it establishes the basis by which his esthetics of conflict and collective modes of experience runs against the mode of the South African novel, which, like the Western novel, has developed in the post-Rousseauian tradition of individualistic liberal esthetics.

The critics of South African fiction in English disagree as to certain aspects of its tradition, differing as to the nature of its development, the identity of its major practitioners, and, predictably, the importance of the race of the novelist.²⁰ However, these distinctions are mostly relevant to a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the South African literary tradition as a whole. For my purposes, it suffices to note that this tradition is essentially a colonial tradition inherited from Western civilization, with its legacy of individualistic liberal esthetics.

In the early years of the colonization of the South African peninsula, the predominant literary mode in poetry and prose was the adventure romance. The tradition of liberal realism began with the publication of Olive Schreiner's novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, in 1883, and throughout its development this tradition has remained essentially the same. However, in order to avoid oversimplification, one might note, for instance, that 20th century novelists such as Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, and J.M. Coetzee have made great efforts to avoid the influences of colonialism (or even paternalism) in their fiction. Although Paul Rich sees this impulse as constituting a "revolt" in the novels of these three writers,²¹ they nevertheless remain subject to their liberal tradition and their fictions remain grounded in an esthetics of individualism. As Michael Vaughan explains:

This aesthetics is grounded in an ontology of the individual person. The individual person—the basic unit of humanity—has a being which is freedom. This means that the individual person, as an exemplar of human nature, has the free possession of certain fundamental human faculties—sensuous, intellectual, and moral. Of course, it is not always possible for these faculties to be freely expressed. Social laws, codes, and habits may prevent this expression, and thus pervert the proper exercise of these faculties.²²

In the fiction of Gordimer, Brink, and Coetzee, this is true because their main concern is with the individual sense of spiritual bankruptcy and cultural rootlessness.²³ This is also true of the fiction of several Black South African writers whose esthetics are closer to that of the aforementioned White writers than to that of Alex La Guma. For, although all Black South African writers must look at life under Apartheid from the same side of the color bar, most nevertheless show either

the strong influence of the literary practices taught in missionary schools, as in the case of Thomas Mofolo (*Chaka*, 1925), or a sophisticated understanding and acceptance of the form of Western fiction, as in the case of Ezekiel Mphahlele, or both. In Mphahlele's case, the reflections in *The African Image* are informed by the same individualistic esthetics that underlie E.M. Forster's concept of the various aspects of the novel.²⁴ Viewed in this light, the esthetics of La Guma's novels seem quite clearly to be in diametrical opposition to the esthetics of South African fiction in English.

Interestingly, Vaughan's study of the divergent esthetics in the works of White and Black South African writers, as exemplified in the choice of motifs in the novels of J.M. Coetzee and in the stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, is a helpful comparison, revealing that the young Black writers of the journal *Staffrider* have developed a "populist realism"²⁵ in which their focus on behavior and situation, rather than on introspection, is similar to that of La Guma. This tendency is also evident in the writings anthologized in Mothobi Mutloatse's edition of South African contemporary writings.²⁶

My interest in La Guma's novels in this literary context evolves from the fact that, as a Marxist militant, his fight to rid South Africa of its White supremacist regime is necessarily inspired by an ideology that discounts the soul-searching implied by Soyinka's concept of an individual responding to "his essence of himself." However, it is clear that La Guma is also concerned about the quality of life, that he believes that individuals within the collective must be allowed to live a free, decent life in which they can develop their human potential.

This concept in La Guma's novels is presented in Abdul Jan-Mohamed's chapter on La Guma in his book, *Manichean Aesthetics*, in which he explains that the predicament of non-White South Africans manifests itself in La Guma's fiction primarily in the dialectic opposition between the narrative assumption that each individual has the right to live a decent life and the narrative's portrayal of the real deprivation of that right. "The first term of the dialectic is usually tacit," writes Jan-Mohamed, "whereas the elaboration of the second term constitutes the bulk of La Guma's fiction."²⁷

Yet, for La Guma, this basic human desire for a fulfilling quality of life cannot be satisfied—at least not yet—with introspective soul-searching; on the contrary, that quality can only be found in a way of life in which the main concern is for the development of unity, sharing, and caring. These are the qualities of life clearly defined in La Guma's novels, not only as strategies in the fight against the Nationalist Party's dehumanizing policies, but for their own sake as well, as the fundamental elements in the creation of a truly human and humane society.

My interest in this interaction of politics with esthetics in La Guma's novels is neither theoretical nor unique. Indeed, many critics have written on the political concerns of these works: and, among them, Coetzee and JanMohamed have provided the most insightful studies of the novels in relation to their author's political ideology. Unfortunately, however, even in these helpful studies, the analytical scope is too limited for an evaluation of La Guma's fiction as the formal embodiment of abstract ideas. In this respect, even while offering a Marxist analysis of the novel's portrayal of the marginality of "non-Whites" and its effect on them, JanMohamed ignores the Marxist critical insistence on integrating the analysis of form with that of content.

In fact, few of La Guma's critics seem to apprehend what Gary Eugene Gorman sees as a new artistic integrity in South African literature:

This newly acquired respectability stems from the value of the literature both as an expression of artistic capability and a sensitive interpretation of the present socio-political climate in South Africa. . . . African writing in English is achieving a level of artistic integrity which merits further attention.²⁸

However, the truth is that the novel in South Africa has, to a large extent, become the domain of White writers such as Gordimer, Coetzee, and Brink, whose latest novels have received international attention. The paralyzing effects of Apartheid and limited access to adequate publishing facilities cause Black writers to favor poetry, the short story, and lately drama, forms more easily published in South Africa. And, aside from these inhibiting factors, there also remains the problem of tendentious criticism that, in focusing on fiction by Black South Africans, assesses it mainly for its socio-historico-political value. Such criticism is certainly helpful, but it cannot adequately assess La Guma's accomplishment. In analyzing the form and the symbolic structure of La Guma's novels, therefore, this study complements the typical analysis of his works and offers a closer analysis of his esthetic achievement.

In this context, then, the present analysis focuses on both the formal devices that represent the tensions and conflicts inherent in the political imperative, and the literary esthetics that inspire La Guma's novels. Together, these create a fiction that is able to transcend the paralyzing and destructive affects of Apartheid.

Notes

¹"The Writer in a Modern African State," *The Writer in Modern Africa: African Scandinavian Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1967*, ed. Per Wast-