

# History from the Outside: Of La Guma's Dialogics, 'Coloredism' and Other Shenanigans

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## Review Article

*Alex La Guma: Politics and Resistance*

by Nahem Yousaf

London: Heinemann, 2001, 164pp

ISBN 0-32500189-8

*A Passion To Liberate: La Guma's South Africa—Images of District Six*

by Fritz H. Pointer

Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2001, 292pp

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There seems to be a proliferation of book length studies on Alex La Guma's writing lately and, curiously, most of these studies are written by scholars abroad. So far the only book length study written by a South African is *Alex La Guma* by Cecil Abrahams (1985)<sup>1</sup>. Coincidentally, even Abrahams wrote his book while abroad. Of course, one of the reasons for this lack of studies on La Guma's oeuvre within the country, it could be said, is the fact that La Guma's works have, until fairly recently, been banned. The result was that access to his works was extremely difficult if not impossible.

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<sup>1</sup> Other early studies by scholars abroad include Asein (1987), Balutansky (1990) and Chandramohan (1992).

The most recent of these studies published abroad are Nahem Yousaf's (2001) *Alex La Guma: Politics and Resistance* and Fritz Pointer's (2001) *A Passion to Liberate*. Both of them seem to have been initially conceived as doctoral dissertations which were then developed or amended for the purposes of publication. To their credit, both of them attempt to break new ground in terms of their focus on previously overlooked aspects of La Guma's work. Whether they succeed in their endeavours is, however, a moot point.

### La Guma's Dialogism

Yousaf's avowed intention in his study is to provide a Bakhtinian reading of La Guma's novels while using Frantz Fanon's endorsement of violence as an important element of what underpins La Guma's response to apartheid repression. The rationale for a Bakhtinian reading, we are told, is that 'Bakhtin provides a critical language with which to discuss the ways in which fictional and political praxis are combined explicitly in La Guma's narratives' (Yousaf 2001:x). As Yousaf points out, his 'primary interest lies in the dialogism of the novel in the face of the monologism of apartheid (Yousaf 2001:x)'. According to him, La Guma 'deploys a dialogic approach in his fiction in order to elucidate the daily realities of the oppressed majority and the various subject positions his characters may adopt in opposition to the monologism of apartheid' (Yousaf 2001:xi).

To my knowledge, a Bakhtinian reading of La Guma's novels has, prior to this never been done, and, therefore, it would seem that Yousaf's approach is, in this regard, a novelty in La Guma studies. Having said this, however, one needs to point out that Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, on which Yousaf's study hinges is itself still a contentious issue amongst literary critics and is continuously the subject of interrogation as a result of its ambiguity. For example, Sue Vice (1997:45) quotes Hirschkop's argument that 'contemporary critical debate over the meaning of dialogism' stems from 'Bakhtin's own ambiguity over whether it is a relation among utterances or styles, or whether it is a relation between any two intentions or an "authorial" and a "heroic" one'. She adds that it may mean 'the intersection of two or more "contexts" in an utterance, that is, the interaction of the social and historical context of heteroglossia'. The fact that dialogism

is also sometimes conflated with polyphony renders more visible the need for clarity on the use of the term.

Now, given the still unresolved debate on the ambiguity of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism one would have expected Yousaf to explain the sense in which this term is used in his study in the next chapter. Yousaf defies these expectations; instead, in the following chapter entitled, 'Writing and Resistance', he provides the socio-historical context within which La Guma wrote. The problem is compounded in chapter two, on La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, in which Yousaf justifiably and convincingly defends this text from being labeled 'naturalist', for a Bakhtinian reading in this chapter is conspicuous by its absence. Bakhtin is in fact not mentioned at all, not just in the argument *per se* but, also, in the notes. Perhaps it would have sufficed just to acknowledge that a dialogical reading of this text is somewhat problematic—but this would obviously have negated Yousaf's thesis.

Chapter 3, entitled 'Border Crossings: *And a Threefold Cord*', provides a detailed analysis of La Guma's text and convincingly shows how La Guma manages to demonstrate how 'the different and discordant voices ... speak and conflict' (Yousaf 2001:x) in the novel, in its examination of the interaction between Ma Pauls, Uncle Ben and Charlie Pauls who are trying to grapple with their fate which sees them steeped in poverty. Drawing on Charlie Paul's political rather than religious explanation of their poverty, Yousaf (2001:54) concludes that Charlie 'functions as a hero in the Bakhtinian sense precisely because La Guma does not interfere in his coming to consciousness'. This view, rightly in my opinion, contrasts sharply with that of Gerald Moore (1980:112) who sees Charlie's 'recollections' of the rooker's comments as contrived and, thereby, weakening La Guma's attempt 'to show in [him] the dawns of an ideological consciousness'. But once again a Bakhtinian analysis is minimal here.

Yousaf returns to a Bakhtinian analysis in a more sustained way in his chapter on *The Stone Country*, in which he attempts to use Bakhtin's concept of carnival.

According to Yousaf, La Guma uses the prison as a 'political space' in which to launch the transgressive power of carnivalesque to subvert the racially conceptualized hierarchy of apartheid discourse. He cites the de-crowning of the self-avowed prison king, Yusef the Turk, after a mock trial

and a subsequent fight as an example of La Guma's creation of a carnivalesque situation. This argument is further developed in the examination of the role of George Adams whose incomprehension of the prison system and interaction with inmates is read as suggestive of his role as a fool in the Bakhtinian sense. Indeed, in his exploration of the role of George Adams, Yousaf (2001:83) continues to advance his thesis on La Guma's dialogism by arguing that it is precisely Adam's 'incomprehensiveness' that facilitates a dialogical interaction of a polemic nature between him and the other prisoners as he interrogates the monological prison belief system that the prisoners otherwise take for granted. Here he employs Bakhtin's definition of dialogism as the interface between one's consciousness and someone else's consciousness quite convincingly.

Chapter 5, entitled 'Making History: Politics and Violence in *In The Fog of the Season's End*', seems to me to reverse the gains made in the previous chapter in terms of living up to the expectations of the avowed intention, reading dialogism in La Guma's text. Instead, its central thrust seems to be a postcolonial reading of La Guma's novel, using Fanon and Bhabha as a point of departure. The bulk of this chapter focuses on the divergent readings of this novel by critics with whom Yousaf effectively engages. Where the concept of dialogism is picked up, it is cryptically tucked in at the end of the chapter, as if it was just added as an afterthought, and, to be sure, it confuses more than it illuminates. For here monologism and dialogism are interchangeably read to mean undemocratic and democratic respectively; for how else can one read this statement: '... La Guma indicates that the desire to replace a monologic system of government with a dialogic model will prove difficult ...' (Yousaf 2001:109). Having argued that apartheid was monologic in the sense of being deaf to other anti-hegemonic discourses, Yousaf (2001:109) goes further to say 'La Guma advocates an alternative dialogic future for South Africa...'. As can be inferred, the elasticity of the term dialogism as used in each chapter of Yousaf's book justifies the need for some intellectual rigour because of the challenges it poses to the potential readers.

Acknowledging 'the heterogeneity of voices and subject positions that La Guma incorporates' (Yousaf 2001:121) in *Time of the Butcherbird*, is the pretext for Yousaf to launch his reading of dialogism in this novel.

Examining how the different histories between different population groups intersect despite disjunctions in this work, Yousaf (2001:122) rightly argues that La Guma 'does not intend to produce an aesthetics of coalition [in this work] but, rather, to reproduce the circumstances in which the actions and movements of separate and unequal subjects are orchestrated to depict fractured and fractious at the point of breaking down'. Engaging with Abdul JanMahomed and David Maughan-Brown's reading of the novel while taking cognizance of the valid points they make, Yousaf (2001:125) asserts that his reading of 'the structuring [and] characterization of the novel is more open and dialogical than JanMohamed's'. True to his argument, in his examination of the text's dramatization of the tensions between population groups and his attentiveness to the 'constellation of voices and positions' (Yousaf 2001:129) in the novel, Yousaf goes some way towards bringing to the fore the dynamics of dialogism in this work. I am, however, amazed that after alluding to the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony in an analogy between the novel and cinematographic techniques, this idea, which would have strengthened his argument, is not further pursued. For if there is one La Guma novel which acutely lends itself amenable to a dialogic reading, and perhaps even comes closer to embracing polyphony in Bakhtinian terms, it is arguably *Time of the Butcherbird*.

Clearly, then, Yousaf's analysis of the different chapters is not always consistent with his avowed intention, namely, convincing us of the dialogism of La Guma's fiction. I have already referred to the fact that there is no evidence of a Bakhtinian reading of *A Walk in the Night*, let alone an attempt to prove the existence of dialogism in this text. The fleetingly oblique delineation of his analytic tools does not make things any easier for Yousaf's cause. And if one takes into consideration the fact that Yousaf's book was first presented as a doctoral dissertation, then these factors cannot be overlooked. For a dissertation by its very nature requires not only an explicit definition of theoretical paradigms but also, subjects one to the tyranny of theory which compels one to prove one's thesis. How Yousaf could have escaped this tyranny boggles the mind. Even then the publishing of the dissertation in book form opens the final product to a broad range of readership and thereby subjects it to a more rigorous scrutiny. It is with this in mind that one thinks these loopholes in the book could have been tightened.

### **Afro-centric Readings and the Image-making Process**

Fritz Pointer brings another important dimension to the increasing studies of La Guma's oeuvre. Starting from the premise that 'one feature of La Guma that has received little attention is his use of imagery', Pointer (2001:ix) points out that it is for this reason that he has decided to devote his study to La Guma's 'use of imagery as an instrument of analysis and communication'. As is usual with La Guma studies, Pointer commences his book with a brief biographical background of the author, bringing to the fore the socio-historical context that produces La Guma the writer and freedom fighter. Entitled 'Alex La Guma: The Apprentice and The Press', this introductory chapter also examines very tentatively, albeit illuminatingly, La Guma's apprenticeship in journalism and convincingly shows how La Guma owes 'to his journalistic career the gift of synthesizing social issues and visual experience in a compact and vivid manner' (Pointer 2001:ix).

Unlike Yousaf, who is somewhat cryptic in defining the modalities of his Bakhtinian paradigm, Pointer is at pains in his attempt to set out clearly what his conception of image is in the context in which it is being used. 'It is often tempting to think of imagery as mere decoration', Pointer (2001:2) contends, 'but a successful image is not simply an accessory; it evokes setting, mood and theme—the moral message implicit or explicit in a work of art, while it creates vivid impressions of characters, objects and environment'. He goes on to point out that '[in] fact, much of the meaning in the creative fiction of Alex La Guma is in his imagery' (Pointer 2001:2). According to Pointer, putting aside 'specific types of imagery, predicated on some sensory experience, there are four particular purposes to which [La Guma's] imagery corresponds that reveal basic tendencies of his narrative techniques; these are:

- (1) Images that play a vital part in the development of the themes in the stories: man's relationship to man, to environment, to morality.
- (2) Images that play a role in the portrayal of character: including dialogue, interior monologue and behavior.
- (3) Imagery as a means of portraying setting, the chronological and the physical environment, and that particularly La Gumian
- (4) imagery of the desecration of physical bodies (human and non-human; animate and inanimate) (Pointer 2001:2).

In his poignant examination of La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* Pointer (2001:8) effectively demonstrates how this work shows 'the exceptionally close integration of the images into the narrative' as well as how these images are 'firmly attached to the dominant theme of the book', thereby, playing 'a dynamic part in conveying its meaning and deepening artistic effect'. Focusing predominantly, but not exclusively, on a plethora of images of dirt, nausea and vomiting as La Guma's way of delineating 'the idea of physical and moral poverty [of a] rotting South African society' (Pointer 2001:7), Pointer proffers that it is through these images that La Guma subtly but effectively hopes to win the ideological assent of his readers. His analysis prompts him to surmise that the main function of imagery in La Guma's fiction 'appears to be to elucidate certain political and socio-economic themes' (Pointer 2001:2). Pointer's broader impressions on *A Walk in the Night* are epitomized in the following words: 'The internal unity of *A Walk in the Night* is achieved by selection of characters, selection and organization of events, choice of narrative and dialogue, as well as the imagery used to portray this particular setting and physical environment' (Pointer 2001:23). In my view, this is so far the best analysis of the use of imagery in La Guma's first novel.

Chapter two, which tackles as its subject La Guma's second novel, *And A Threefold Cord*, begins by discussing how the dominant image of rain is used by the author to build up the tension in the unfolding of the plot from the beginning to the end. As Pointer (2001:57) puts it: 'The rain motif begins at the beginning of the novel and is sustained to the end .... [The rain] becomes a major factor in the motivation of Ronnie Paul's crime, providing a kind of incentive or psychological explanation for his murder of Susie Meyer'. Perhaps more significantly is the fact that Pointer sees La Guma as having succeeded in integrating this natural imagery into the meaning of the story. There is, however, more to this chapter than this but, I shall come back to the other aspects that Pointer touches on in this chapter later.

'[I]magery is an important vehicle for La Guma in conveying the theme and meanings of his novels, as well as deepening their artistic effects', avers Pointer (2001:133). With this in mind, Pointer argues, with regard to La Guma's next novel, *The Stone Country*, that the image of prison, which is not only the setting of this work, but also, the dominant image in this text, is a metaphor for the South African situation at the time La Guma is writing.

As he aptly puts it: ‘... a dominating image of *The Stone Country* is that life in a South African prison is a mirror image, a lucid reflection of life in the larger social-political reality of South Africa’ (Pointer 2001:126). In line with the suffering and agony of the prisoners, Pointer argues that, perhaps more than in the other La Guma’s novels, *The Stone Country* underlines ‘the desecration of human bodies as a metaphor for the South African situation’. (Pointer 2001:171)

With regard to *In the Fog of the Season’s End*, Pointer (2001:206) proffers (rightly in my opinion):

It is, in fact, in the quality of imagery of the setting or physical environment rather than in its frequency that *In the Fog of the Season’s End* marks very real progress and shows Alex La Guma at the peak of image-making power. Here the images are remarkably wide in range and varied in tone. The earlier works formed a closed stylistic universe, and the imagery in each was fairly homogenous, although it differed greatly from one book to another. Here we have a multiplicity of styles and corresponding diversity of images within one novel.

This ‘fantastic richness and diversity of La Guma’s imagery’ (Pointer 2001:224,237) culminates in ‘the image pattern of *Time of the Butcherbird*’, which, according to Pointer, ‘strikingly accounts for [the] pluralistic, intra-national struggle within South Africa, as each national group fights the other two in different ways’. Needless to say, then, Pointer seems to have captured the significance of imagery in La Guma’s oeuvre with admirable lucidity. But, as already intimated, there is more to Pointer’s book than the focus on La Guma’s imagery and it is to the other aspects that I now want to turn.

More than anything, *A Passion to Liberate* attempts to provide a critique of the ideological underpinnings of La Guma’s fiction. Pointer takes great pains to make known his objections to the Marxist paradigm that informs La Guma’s writing. This is more obvious in his examination of *And A Threefold Cord*. In Pointer’s view, La Guma unjustifiably gives ‘a measure of importance [to] class consciousness’ to such an extent that he (Pointer) finds the use of this theme in this novel ‘monotonous and repetitive’ (Pointer 2001:87). He goes on to argue in relation to this work:



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In fact, the intensity of the message is so concentrated, so narrowly focused on the Marxian concepts of class consciousness and class unity that it threatens, perhaps by design, to obfuscate entirely the racial and color dimensions of oppression in South Africa and the world (Pointer 2001:88).

This claim seems to downplay the author's attentiveness to both race and class contradictions at play in this novel, as well as the unobtrusive nature of la Guma's implied message in the text. The overemphasis on this point is in fact as good as suggesting that La Guma is churning out socialist propaganda. Hence in the next statement Pointer's lamentation of the way in which 'La Guma promulgates his ideological bias' leads him to the following statement:

It is not just an economic system (capitalism) against which African people struggle, as many Marxists (including La Guma) would like to have it; rather, in South Africa, color and race—and not class—is the real determinant of status. A purely class based interpretation of South African society does not square with an African's most infantile awareness of reality (Pointer 2001:88).

The unfair criticism against La Guma's Marxism continues but his ideological leaning is now, with the enlistment of W.E.B. DuBois, attributed to a supposedly inherent identity crisis in the 'Colored' community that inclines them to gravitate towards this ideological position. Pointer's (2001:91) argument deserves to be quoted at length here:

The history of the South African Colored is also the history of this strife, to merge his African self with his European self. This dichotomy encourages the amorphous Marxist ideology that informs La Guma's works and particularizes his character's' intellectual physiognomy, despite the lack of references to their specific ethnicity. The South African so-called Colored becomes a communist or Colored nationalist because it seems for reasons of an identity imposed on him and which he has subsequently assumed, he refuses to become a Pan-African or African nationalist.

This reading of an ostensibly ‘Colored’ ideological inclination in monolithic terms is soon brought closer to home, in line with the logic of the presentation of the argument. Here is Pointer’s conclusion:

There are two social realities: La Guma is a Colored and he is a communist. As a so-called Colored, in DuBoisan terms, his consciousness is divided; thus, restricting and limiting his potential commitment to African nationalism and Pan-Africanism (Pointer 2001:93).

Pointer’s tendentious and simplistic critique of La Guma’s ideology forms the bulk of the argument and threatens to undermine the useful analysis of the imagery.

It soon becomes clear that there is a specific agenda to Pointer’s objections and this is an Afro-centrism that seeks either to confine La Guma to ‘Coloredism’—‘one obvious responsibility of a Coloured writer like La Guma, is to clarify the ethos of a self-aware, Coloured population’ (Pointer 2001:xxviii) or to convert him to African nationalism that is devoid of Marxist ‘impurities’. For, in an argument that is reminiscent of Ayi Kwezi Armah’s famous statement that ‘Marxism is the whitest of philosophies’, he enlists Lewis Nkosi’s<sup>2</sup> (1975:97) statement on La Guma’s commitment to socialist ideals:

La Guma’s fierce and uncritical commitment to communism blinds him to the fact that communism is simply another brand of white nationalism, if not, the Kremlin and Peking would certainly be closer together. Neither capitalism nor communism is designed for African people; both have ruling classes that oppress and exploit the masses of their people. And intellectuals and writers are fed and filled with the ideals and principles of both systems. For these they fight and die, screaming and regurgitating these ideals as if they were intoxicated ...[!].

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<sup>2</sup> Nkosi (1975:110) who was with La Guma on the latter’s first visit to the Soviet Union had argued: ‘Alex La Guma is a man fiercely and humourlessly committed to his ideology—communism. I was surprised to discover how conservative and uncritical he was in his commitment...’.

What is surprising is that Pointer's reaction above is prompted by the fact that La Guma imbues Charlie Pauls with what is arguably a nascent class consciousness, instead of exploring his 'color consciousness' via the interior monologue technique as Pointer would have it (Pointer 2001:98). Moreover, in his persistence that La Guma should have focused on colour consciousness, Pointer's critique borders on the inanely prescriptive and betrays somewhat his version of an African-American reading of the South African historical context.

Marxist ideology is not the only aspect of La Guma's fiction that Pointer finds unpalatable. Instead, Pointer's critique is extended to include La Guma's depiction of African women in his novels. Admittedly, this is an aspect of La Guma's writing that has been glossed over; whether this is by design or it is just oversight on the part of the critics, is of course a moot point. Describing La Guma's portrayal of African women as 'an open wound, a deep scar on La Guma's portraits', he takes La Guma to task for this depiction which he regards as 'derogatory' (Pointer 2001:102). Indeed, Pointer takes issue with La Guma on this score, in his own words: '[La Guma's] political and social commitment have not been enough to exorcise the demon of race (color) preference and demeaning portraiture of African people, particularly African women' (Pointer 2001:102). Acknowledging that La Guma's African women are humane, compassionate and even revolutionary, Pointer contends that it is not so much what they do but rather how they look that raises problems for him. Pointer provides a few examples from La Guma's novels—ranging from Miss Nzuba in *And A Threefold Cord* to MmaTau in *Time of the Butcherbird*—to decry what he calls the author's 'de-feminization' of African women. The tone of Pointer's (2001:105) argument below aptly captures his sentiments on the issue:

La Guma's stereotypic, caricatured images of African women, as huge, as massive black currant jelly, as vast mounds, and all other metaphors, images and myths, he uses to satirize, nay desecrate the physical appeal and beauty of African women, false though they may be, become central in determining political and cultural values, criteria and standards of beauty, and general attitudes towards African women.

It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that after comparing this to La

Guma's portrayal of 'Colored' women he opines that this author's depiction of African women smacks of 'Colored racism' (Pointer 2001:107). On this basis he concludes, 'one can say La Guma is a man who is committed, but in whom the cancerous poison of the white supremacist monster comes out, as if in an act of creative exorcism' (Pointer 2001:109). And in line with this conclusion he advises: 'As the African revolution matures, writers like La Guma must put away those terms and identities which belittle this struggle and are suggestive of an identity crisis, and ideological infantilism' (Pointer 2001:111). The remedy to this apparent 'ideological infantilism', according to him, and he is at his prescriptive best here, is that writers such as La Guma 'should embrace unequivocally, in spirit and in pride, an African identity' (Pointer 2001:112). For in accordance with Pointer's logic, "'African" is the only identity, it seems to me, that brings dignity, that speaks of a history, a land, a people, a culture' (Pointer 2001:111).

Interestingly, Pointer's endorsement of Afro-centrism precludes him from subjecting his own ideology to the same kind of scrutiny, the same degree of interrogation that he directs at La Guma's Marxist discourse. Instead his own standpoint hinges on some organic mythical mysticism that is taken as a sacrosanct given to which La Guma is expected to subscribe. For how else would one describe this statement from Pointer (Pointer 2001:175):

Africans, *I read somewhere*, are the 'children of the sun', God's original creation. Their very blackness is religious, a blessing and honor (e.a.).

The anomaly of quoting from an unidentified source ('I read somewhere') in an academic book does not even warrant a comment! The issue I am trying to raise about Pointer's book is that the point about La Guma's Marxist leanings is rather too belaboured. His attitude to La Guma's ideological orientation is succinctly epitomized in his own words: 'The multiracial communism fostered by La Guma's theme-images is untenable, if not, at times, *detestable*' (e.a.) (Pointer 2001:132). Pointer may have been trying to move away from what he perceives to be solidarity criticism on the part of La Guma critics, but the result is that his useful study of the significance of image in La Guma's writing is overshadowed by his tirade.

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