

*SAFARA*

**REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE  
LANGUES, LITTÉRATURES ET CULTURES**



**N°11 janvier 2012  
ISSN 0851-4119**

**UFR de Lettres & Sciences Humaines,  
Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, BP 234, Sénégal**

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## **REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE LANGUES, LITTÉRATURES ET CULTURES**

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ISSN 0851-4119



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**Safara, UFR de Lettres & Sciences Humaines, Université  
Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, Sénégal, n°11, janvier 2012**

*Transtextuality in South African Fiction:  
The Novels of Alex La Guma and André Brink*

**Khadidiatou DIALLO\***

**Abstract**

*This article seeks to analyze the transtextual network that binds the novels of Alex La Guma and André Brink in order to explain and demonstrate that the similarities and particularities noted in the thematic and aesthetic representation they made of racial discrimination is, actually, a multi-layered denunciation of such an evil. In this way, it explores the paratextual design and the intertextual parallelism that frame the message of commitment and transethnicity of both authors.*

**Keys words:** Transtextuality, paratextuality, intertextuality.

**Résumé**

*Cet article est une analyse des relations transtextuelles que partagent les romans d'Alex La Guma et d'André Brink dans le but d'expliquer et d'affirmer que les similitudes et spécificités dans le traitement thématique et esthétique qu'ils font de la discrimination raciale en Afrique du sud est, en réalité, une critique caustique et multidimensionnelle de cette tragédie historique. Ainsi, cette étude examine le paratexte et les réseaux intertextuels par lesquels les deux auteurs encodent leur message d'engagement et leurs idéaux transethniques.*

**Mots clés :** Transtextualité, paratextualité, intertextualité.

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### Introduction

One thing that catches attention after reading works by South Africa's literati is the recurrent treatment of the issue of apartheid. A wide range of literary works expose the same concern about the contradictions and abuses that were the order of the day under the Nationalist regime.

Like many other figures, La Guma and Brink made caustic representations of the realities of the political regime that was running the country. By portraying the multifarious effects of such a system on the lives of individuals and groups, they are conscious that writers can be sometimes rebels who fight for "...human values – against everything which threatens the human – against everything which is essentially inhuman"<sup>1</sup>, like promoting a culture that separates people on a race basis.

Although "historically and legally separated" as coloured and white, La Guma and Brink share the conviction that South Africa must be freed from the arbitrariness of political power, a conviction framed in their productions through different perspectives.

Following the principle upheld by Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva that texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed, it is no wonder that the writings of La Guma and Brink be sunk into the realities of South Africa under apartheid and present, to a certain degree, the same thematic and aesthetic reference. Thus, it will be enthralling a task to probe into the narrative shape and assess some techniques that sustain the representation of apartheid in order to show that it is a multifaceted denunciation of the lot of those who have borne the brunt of oppression.

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<sup>1</sup> André Brink, "Writers and Writing in the World", *Writing in a State of Siege: Essays on Politics and Literature*, New York: Summit Books, 1983, p. 51.

In this essay - concentrating on a work by each writer (*In the Fog of the Seasons' End*<sup>2</sup> and *A Dry White Season*<sup>3</sup>) and leaning on Genette's theory of transtextuality - I seek to demonstrate that the parallel depiction of racial discrimination in La Guma's and Brink's works is, actually, a multivoiced indictment of the same arbitrary ideology. By spotlighting the paratextual and intertextual similarities and differences in the representation of South Africa, I hope to show that this transtextual depiction of the same issue suggests the meanings and impact of the two authors' commitment to debunk the system.

### 1. Paratextual Framing

In *Palimpsestes*<sup>4</sup>, Gérard Genette defines transtextuality as a network of implicit or explicit relations that binds one text to another. Transtextuality is composed of five branches: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality, all of them defining the different levels of textual dialogism. These models of literary cooperation are found in the novels of André Brink and Alex La Guma, although paratextuality and intertextuality are among the approaches that help the most both authors in their endeavour to map out the hideous face of apartheid.

Paratextuality refers to all the elements that are at the outskirts of a piece of literary work, the textual drawings that accompany the work and which bear some "suggested" link with the story. "More than a boundary or a selected border, the paratext is, rather, a

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<sup>2</sup> Alex La Guma, *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, London: Heinemann, 1972. All references to this novel are taken from this edition. In the text the title is abbreviated as *The Fog*.

<sup>3</sup> André Brink, *A Dry White Season*, New York: Penguin Books, 1984. All references to this novel are taken from this edition. In the text the title is abbreviated as *A Dry*.

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes : la littérature au second degré*, Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1982.



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threshold. It is a “zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction [...]”<sup>5</sup>

In *The Fog* and *A Dry*, the paratext takes the form of a quotation, a text commonly known as “epigraph” which “determine[s] and shape[s] readers’ expectations as they enter the text”<sup>6</sup> and encloses clues that can lead to a full understanding of the story. In the first novel, the reader finds an “allographic epigraph”<sup>7</sup> borrowed from the poem of Guinean Conte Saidon Tidiany, *Martyrs*. It reads like this:

Banquets of Black entrails of the Black,  
Armour of Parchment of wax,  
Fragile and Fugitive when facing the burning  
stone,  
Will be shattered like the spider web,  
In the Fog of the Seasons’ End. (*The Fog*, i)

By its strategic place, this citation from *Martyrs* should, normally, arouse the curiosity of the “competent”<sup>8</sup> reader. The gist of the story in *The Fog* is a sensitization about the imperative of armed struggle in the colonial context of apartheid. As such, the meaning of the narrative is in line with the connotations of the epigraph. Indeed, in the poem, Tidiany alludes to the sufferings and shackles of bondage that have, for a long time, enslaved and killed blacks – “Banquets of black entrails of the Black” - , an oppression exerted by the ferocious and brutal white Oppressor – “Armour or parchment of wax”. But such a violent power from whites makes blacks become vulnerable – “Fragile and fugitive when facing the burning stone” - , which, however, progressively crumbles face to the dauntless black martyrs – “like the spider web”- ; this signals

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<sup>5</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Threshold of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Ngugi Wa Thiong’o*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 151. [“The epigraph is most often allographic, that is [...] attributed to an author who is not the author of the text.”]

<sup>8</sup> To refer to Russian Formalists.

the end of a long season of affliction- “In the fog of the seasons’ end”. The significance of the fogged existence of the oppressed groups, hinted in the poem, is further disclosed by Fritz Pointer:

*In The Fog of the Seasons’ End* suggests that, even as African people struggle for true independence and their humanity, in these final days of colour and racism, the end may appear cloudy and often obscure. Still at the end of the seasons, in the words of Dr Martin Luther King, ‘we, as a people will get to the promised land’. This is a very functional and optimistic image, one that plays a wonderful role in the thematic development of this novel.<sup>6</sup>

In this way, the meaning of the intertext is very accurate in the light of La Guma’s desire to sensitize people against the violence of racism and discrimination. The epigraph-text bears a semantic link with the themes discussed in *The Fog* because not only does it reinforce the message encoded in the events but it allows a better understanding of the attitudes and reactions of characters like Beukes or Elias. Finally, the extract from Conte’s poem adds to the symbolism of La Guma’s novel: *The Fog* deals with the determination of daring figures who strongly believe that behind the cloudy sky of South Africa lies a gleam of hope for a better future.

In the same vein, the image of the “season” is used as a metaphor in the allographic epigraph that welcomes the reader in *A Dry*. Sharing the same motive with La Guma, Brink resolutely uses other literary elements from pre-existent works so as to remould the collective consciousness of his community, warped by arbitrary beliefs, but also to better voice his fierce determination to rehabilitate the social and political condition of his country. *A Dry* unfolds a poignant and realistic account of the backlashes of repressive policies on Apartheid-run South Africa. “Depicted as a massive totalitarian state with an elaborate apparatus of paid or terrorized informers and a highly organized system of torture and intimidation [...] South Africa is revealed to Ben du Toit as a self-

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perpetuating terror machine.”<sup>9</sup> In this respect, in *A Dry*, Brink calls to Mongane Wally Serote, a black Soweto poet, to set the tone of the story through the epigraph. It has this form:

It is a dry white season  
dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out  
and with a broken heart they dive down gently  
headed for the earth  
not even bleeding  
it is a dry white season brother,  
only the trees know the pain as they still stand  
erect  
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,  
indeed, it is a dry white season  
but seasons come to pass (*A Dry*)

Like Brink and La Guma, Serote was among the most committed and undaunted artists who was spurred by a dream of equality and justice. The epigraph is woven around the metaphor of the “dry white season”, that hints at the harshness of the “seasons of apartheid”. These lines at the threshold of the novel already connote the inhuman situation generated by the racist regime in South Africa, where Non Whites like Gordon Ngubene or Jonathan do not live long because of the repressive apparatus of the government - “dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out. Still, these terror policies meet the resistance of valiant black fighters who, though vulnerable, stand up firmly - “only trees know the pain as they still stand erect, dry like steel”: indeed, however dry and harsh as white racism may be, “seasons come to pass”.

Therefore, the epigraph suggests the “age of iron”<sup>10</sup> upon

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<sup>6</sup> Fritz Pointer, *A Passion to Liberate. La Guma's South African Images of District Six*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> André Brink,  
([http://www.galenet.com/servlet/litRCVrsn:300p:containslocID:wisc\\_madison&srch](http://www.galenet.com/servlet/litRCVrsn:300p:containslocID:wisc_madison&srch)), accessed 4/20/2004.

<sup>10</sup> To refer to John-Maxwell Coetzee in *Age of Iron*, New York: Penguin, 1990.

blacks but also whites (like Ben du Toit) who are pegged as dissident.

Thus, not only do the epigraphs in La Guma's and Brink's novels constitute another evocative way to represent life under apartheid, but they are "a text" that can help the reader better grasp the temerity of black resistants and the experiences of characters. Apart from justifying the choice of titles in both novels, they are a symbolic expression of the ideals of both prose-writers.

The symbolic connotation of the paratext is much more articulated through the use of dedications in *The Fog* and *A Dry*. Analyzing this element of intertextuality urges to probe the meanings of the text through which an author dedicates to or names his work after someone or a group of people. Gérard Genette has this definition of the technique: "[...] the dedication, [...] is the proclamation (sincere or not) of a relationship (of one kind or another) between the author and some person, group, or entity."<sup>11</sup>

In *A Dry*, the reader meets an "anonymous" dedication, as it relates to a person unknown to him. It reads like this: "For Alta who sustained me in the dry white season". Certainly, the dedicatee is close to the author because, through the comment "who sustained me in the dry white season", the reader can infer that there is a relation of compassion<sup>12</sup> that tied the latter to the dedicatee, Alta. Indeed, like the main figure in his novel, Brink underwent the wrath of the police of apartheid. He avers in an interview:

I've been under constant surveillance: all my mail is opened, and my phone is tapped [...] But I have been called in for interrogation, I've had my house searched, I've had notes and things seized.

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<sup>11</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Threshold of Interpretation*, op.cit, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Although the dedication, in this case, is "elusive and indefinite about the relationship, depending on the reader (and perhaps the dedicatee himself) to pin it down." (Genette, *Paratexts*).

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So they certainly keep one aware of their presence.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, the small text that meets the reader in the hall of the novel and which seems to have merely a decorative function, is, actually, knotted semantically to the events unfolded by the story. This connotative weight of the dedication is more accented in La Guma's *The Fog*. Here, the dedication "To the Memory of Bazil February and others killed in action, Zimbabwe 1967", is more than a text posted and suggesting some vague relation with the author: it works as a resounding way to expose, at the outset, the violent and grotesque nature of a system which urges resistants like Isaacs or Robert in *A Dry* or even Baby and Alia in Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, to go abroad and train for military action. In this way, the dedication foretells the relentless protesting actions of rebels in both novels. And the reader can progressively step into the narrative and construct its full meaning through the "lens of the paratext" and discover that the sacrifice of February recalls that of Elias in *The Fog* and Ben Du Toit in *A Dry*.

Therefore, resorting to such paratextual design in *The Fog* and *A Dry* bears its relevance in the exposition of life under apartheid. It heightens the aesthetic weight of the stories and functions as a comment on the thematic line of both novels. By the relationship of solidarity and compassion it conveys, the dedication gives the reader another opportunity to appreciate, once more, the commitment of Brink and La Guma to debunk the system.

As much as with the dedication, the prologue (or foreword) and the epilogue are other accurate paratextual devices that hold clues of the backlashes of racial discrimination in South Africa. These elements of transtextuality are generally favoured by writers who, at some point, feel the necessity to provide some reasons that have triggered the act of writing. Brink and La Guma also use these narrative techniques in their respective works in the view to enhancing the relevance and urgency to use their pen to indict the apparatus of coercion in their country.

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<sup>13</sup> André Brink in an interview with Jim Davidson, *Overland*, 94-5 (1984): 24-30.

*The Fog* is La Guma's only novel that opens with a prologue. It is an important and symbolical part of the story because it announces the tensed and violent events that will be unfolded in the reading process. Indeed, by exposing what can be regarded as an ideological confrontation between the Mayor (an epitome of apartheid) and the unnamed prisoner (whom the reader discovers later as Elias and symbol of the resistance wing), the prologue betokens a pathetic and thrilling story of domination and rebellion. The following exchange is an expression of the stark opposition between oppressor and oppressed:

'I do not understand the ingratitude of your people' [...]. 'Look what we, our Government, have done for your people. We have given you nice jobs, houses, education. [...] We have allowed your people to get education, your own special schools, but you are not satisfied. No, you want more than what you get. (*The Fog*, 4)

This plea of the Mayor is rebuffed by the prisoner through this averment:

You want me to cooperate. You have shot my people when they have protested against unjust treatment; you have torn people from their homes, imprisoned them, not for stealing or murder, but for not having your permission to live. Our children live in rags and die of hunger. And you want me to co-operate with you? It is impossible. [...] You are going torture me, may be kill me. But that is the only way you and your people can rule us. You shoot and kill and torture because you cannot rule in any other way a people who reject you. (*The Fog*, 5)

As it can be noted, "the prologue functions to state the two ideologically divergent positions."<sup>14</sup> This technique is all the more

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<sup>14</sup> Nahem Yousaf, *Alex La Guma, Politics and Resistance*, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001, p. 93.

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significant as the plot of *The Fog* is "illuminated by the theoretical justification of violence as inevitable and even desirable."<sup>15</sup> In *A Dry*, Ben's father-in-law too repeats, here, the same hackneyed view of whites's 'generosity' towards the Non-White groups in South Africa:

"Don't you realise what the government is doing for blacks? One of these days the whole bloody lot of them will be free and independent in their own countries. And then you have the nerve to talk about injustice!" [...] You give it another good think, Ben [...] We've got nothing to be ashamed of before the eyes of the world, my boy." (*A Dry*, 212)

Likewise, the story in this novel opens with a foreword, a preface in which the object of the book is disseminated; it is where the reader learns that the story of Ben du Toit and his investigation on the murder of Gordon and Jonathan Ngubene by the police is related by a "he" narrative voice who is an old friend of Ben. A journalist, the anonymous narrator explains in the foreword, that he is, somewhat bound to collect and weave together the scattered threads of Ben's story into a coherent narrative, the ultimate aim of which is to question "the well-established ethical and social values of the Afrikaners community he belongs to."<sup>16</sup> The prologue reveals that Ben du Toit wanted to thwart the intention of Stolz and the other police sleuths "to wipe every sign of [him], as if [he'd] never been here." (*A Dry*, 13) In fact, "throughout the apartheid years whole territories of silence were created by the nature of power structures that order the country and defined the limits of its articulated experience. Some of these silences were deliberately imposed,

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<sup>15</sup> Balasubramanyan Chandramohan, *A Study in Trans-ethnicity in Modern South Africa: The Writings of Alex La Guma, 1925-1985*, Lewiston: Mellen Research University Press, 1992, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Baydallaye Kane, "The Fragmented Story of a Dual Journey: Reading The Present through the Past in Andre Brink's *An Instant in the Wind*", *Langues et Litteratures GELL*, Saint Louis: Presses Universitaires de Saint Louis, janvier 2009, n°13.

whether by decree or by the operation of censorship and the security police.”<sup>17</sup> Faced with all the intimidating and terror-based policies of the regime, the “he” narrator has no choice but to become the voice of his friend Ben, already silenced forever by the security police; his death is summarily announced in a local newspaper and posted right on the first page of the foreword: “Johannesburg teacher killed in accident, knocked down by hit-and-run driver. Mr Ben du Toit (53) at about 11 o’clock last night, on his way to post a letter, etc. Survived by his wife, Susan, two daughters and a young son” (*A Dry*, 9) In this wise, what drives the most the narrator to arrange Ben’s notes into a story is drafted in the epilogue, another crucial paratextual element that accents the meaning already suggested in the prologue: “to report what I know. So that it will not be possible for any man ever to say again: *I knew nothing about it*” (*A Dry*, 316). His account works as a reveille that is meant to wake the awareness of the Afrikaner community.

Everything considered, these textual threads - titles, chapter titles, prefaces, caption, notes, dedications, epigraphs, etc. - that Genette takes as “peritext” are the narrative techniques that tie the strands of the two authors’ narratives together, and they have a major effect on the interpretation of the commitment of La Guma “to restore reason to an errant humanity”<sup>18</sup> and that of Brink to question the well-established ideology of racism and change the mindset of the white community in South Africa. This engagement of both writers to make their narrative a source of hope for better forms of life, is strongly felt through the parallel and sometimes different images they draw of the smutty world of the ghetto but also of the gamut of awe-inspiring policies meant to ensure the hegemony of the regime.

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<sup>17</sup> André Brink, “Reinventing a Continent (Revisiting History in the Literature of the New South Africa: A Personal Testimony)”, *World Literature Today*, ([www.jstor.org/stable/40151846](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40151846)).

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Omo Asein, “The Revolutionary Vision in Alex La Guma’s Novels”, *Phylon*, (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/274434>), Accessed: 18/10/2008.



**2. Snippets of Intertextuality.**

Roland Barthes asserts that “all in a text has already been written”<sup>19</sup>, to suggest that there is a kind of tacit or unsaid relationships between former and recent texts or texts of the same generation. Barthes further posits that texts (as signs) do not “originate from [their authors'] own unique consciousness but from their place within linguistic cultural systems.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the literary productions of writers like André Brink and Alex La Guma are cast in some socio-political background, “a larger cultural and social textuality [that of apartheid] out of which they are constructed.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, *A Dry* and *The Fog* echo the South African society's “dialogic conflict over the meanings of words.”<sup>22</sup> The two novels bear intertextual interconnectedness and their “language inevitably contains common [and divergent] points of reference”<sup>23</sup> in the multifaceted representation they make of the “invisible ubiquitous power” of apartheid (*A Dry*, 237), of the humdrum and violent world of the ghetto, and, above all, of police brutality over non-white communities.

A major theme in Brink's and La Guma's writing is the description of the dramatic and corrosive transformation of their country by the implementation of racist policies, the many-sided impacts of which are exposed under different narrative perspectives.

In *A Dry*, by progressively unwrapping the insidious activities of the clique in power, Ben du Toit, notwithstanding the opposition of his family and class, and regardless of the police's mischievous actions, discovers the conditions of the assassination of Gordon and

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<sup>19</sup>Roland Barthes, quoted by Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, London: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Mikhaïl Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: Texas University press, 1981, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ross Murfin & Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Boston: Bedford Books, 1998, p. 176.

Jonathan. In the same vein, he meets the real face of the political system which runs his country, the brutality of its agents motivated and sustained by the unjust and biased views they had hitherto of the 'other'. In the following lines, Ben muses over the implications of this dialectics of "the self" and "the other" in the colonial context:

"My people". And then there the "others". The Jewish shopkeeper; the English chemist; [...] And the Blacks. The boys who tended the sheep with me, and yet were different. We lived in a house, they in mud huts with rocks on the roof. [...] But it remains a matter of "us" and "them". [...] But suddenly it is no longer adequate, it no longer works. [...] I stood on my knees beside the coffin of a friend. I spoke to a woman morning in a kitchen. [...] And that mourning had been caused by "my people." [...] What had happened before that drought has never been particularly vivid or significant to me: that was where I first discover myself and the world. And it seems to me I'm finding myself on the edge of yet another dry white season, perhaps worse than the one I knew as a child. What now? (*A Dry*, 163)

This journey of the protagonist into "the other" and back to "the self" (which will be illustrated later) allows him to reconsider his own "self". In this quotation, we have an "I" narration mode, through which Ben exposes the realities of cultural/racial differences. Let us specify that the narrative design of *A Dry* is made up of a patching of official documents (statement of the witnesses at the inquest into Gordon's death), the account of events and of Ben's personal notes, which obscures the presence of the author. This frequent shift in the narrative voice is an effective way to expose the turmoil of Brink's protagonist caused by police harassment.

In the extract from the story, the "he" narrator lets the floor to Ben who engages in a deriding judgement of his community's action towards blacks and the country, in the framework of apartheid. From the outset, the protagonist accents the strife that set racial groups apart: "My people" and "the other." The denigration and the

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rejection of blacks (the “other”) is further implied in the short nominal sentence, “And the Blacks.” The sharp and striking aspect of this sentence serves as a strong way to suggest the racial strife that exists between whites and other groups and the dramatic plight of the latter that are at the receiving end of racism. In this way, along with Ben, the reader can feel, through the lexical and structural shape of the passage, that blacks are the most oppressed and trodden down part of the community, an exploitation that is not only based on race but is “actually shaped by perceptions of religious, linguistic, national, sexual and class differences.”<sup>24</sup> Blacks or “the boys” have been tightly bound by a racist system which demands that they always be the lackeys of whites. Such a situation fortifies and reveals the true nature of the apartheid power structure. The death of “his friend” stirs the awareness of the character who realizes that his “own people” are the root cause of a “dry white season” which is daily smothering the “other”. In fact, the technique of *mise en abyme*<sup>25</sup> is highly relevant in the passage because it further highlights the seriousness of the plight of South Africans but also it shows that the country itself was weighing down under such a corrosive and foggy atmosphere.

Likewise, Alex La Guma is highly preoccupied by unveiling the perilous policies set up by the political machine. In a descriptive style, his narrators, in all his novels, have a religious patience in detailing the social trauma bred by racial discrimination. Like *And A Threefold Cord*, or even *The Stone Country*, *The Fog* combines irony and satire to debunk apartheid. In the following passage, we have a narrative voice, somewhat close to the author, who doesn't hesitate to deride the sham domination of whites over blacks. It reads:

When African people turn sixteen they are born  
again or, even worse, they are accepted into the

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<sup>24</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 122

<sup>25</sup> It is a narrative technique that designates the embedding of a text into another. In the quotation, the device consists in repeating the title of the novel into a part of the story, which is another way of highlighting the horrendous policies of apartheid.

mysteries of the Devil's mass, confirmed into the Blood rites of a servitude as cruel as Caligula, as merciless as Nero. Its bonds are the entangled chains of infinite regulators, its rivets are driven in with rubber stamps, and the scratchy pens in the offices of the Native commissioners are like branding irons which leaves scars for life. (*The Fog*, 80)

The passage, wrapped up in an ironical and metaphorical language, demonstrates how a totalitarian regime such as South African apartheid, functions as the "Devil" in its policies. In this way, it unfolds the multiple laws and regulations that constitute its backbone but more, the numerous "permissions" that must be granted to Non-whites in order "to exist". All these sundry rules and permissions - "the permission to be in this place; the permission to travel"- that cordon off the daily life of people from the ghetto are, indeed, "irons which leave scars for life." The image of "iron" is very telling of the violence meted out to blacks and coloureds: it echoes the drought and whiteness of the season that afflicts local communities in Brink's novel. The whiteness of the season symbolises death, the whiteness of the skeletons of the animals killed by the drought (apartheid). Coetzee's protagonist, Mrs Curren, in *Age of Iron* describes the season as: "the age of iron". She says: "What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite? [...] Are there not still white zealot preaching the old regime of discipline, work, obedience, self-sacrifice, a regime of death, to children some too young to tie their own shoelaces? What a nightmare from beginning to end!"<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the drama of such an insidious and rampant power lies in the fact that it not only corrodes the lives of Non Whites but more, it destroys totally those of its upholders to a point that life in South Africa is "so much like life aboard a sinking ship, one of those old-time liners with a lugubrious, drunken captain and a surly crew and leaky lifeboats."<sup>27</sup> Isaacs, a resistant in *The*

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<sup>26</sup> John-Maxwell Coetzee, *op.cit.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22-23.

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*Fog*, feels “almost sorry for these people who believed themselves to be the Master Race, to have the monopoly of brains, yet who were vindictive, selfish and cruel.” (*The Fog*, 115). That is what spurs Diala to write that “the dissident writer’s crucial responsibility is significantly not merely the political liberation of blacks but the redemption of the Afrikaner from the ideology of the apartheid.”<sup>28</sup>

This “deranged, divided age” (*A Dry*, 196), this “political doctrine of separate existence, a doctrine which has no parallel in any other country of the world”<sup>29</sup>, deeply affects and afflicts characters like Beukes, Elias or Ben who sadly realize that the upholders of the racist regime have largely succeeded in causing strife between members of the oppressed community. In *A Dry*, Ben, in a moving and metaphysical approach, ponders over the inhuman social relationships generated by policies of separation. We read in one of his journal extracts:

Whether I like it or not, whether I feel like cursing my own condition or not – and that would only serve to confirm my impotence – *I am white*. This is the small, final, terrifying truth of my broken world. I am white. And because I am white I am born into a state of privilege. Even if I fight the system that has reduced us to this I remain white, and favoured by the very circumstances I abhor. Even if I’m hated and ostracised, and persecuted, and in the end destroyed, nothing can make me black. And so those who are cannot but remain suspicious of me. In their eyes my very efforts to identify myself with Gordon, with all Gordons, would be obscene. (*A Dry*, 304)

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<sup>28</sup>Isidore Diala, “André Brink and Malraux” *Contemporary Literature*, Spring 2006, 47:1 ([www.jstor.org/stable/4489149](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489149)), accessed 03/01/2001.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Paton, *Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983, p. 30.

These pathetic words of Ben are expressive of the trauma that can result from a well thought-out and law-backed up power like apartheid, a power which calcifies tribal/racial divides, a power in which groups each “excludes the other, distrusts the other, fears the other, and hates the other.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in Foucault’s view, power “manifests itself not in a downward flow from the top of the social hierarchy to those below but extends itself in a capillary fashion – it is part of daily action, speech and everyday life”<sup>31</sup> of South Africa.

Actually, one fundamental feature of such a barren regime is the degradation and impoverishment of the characters’ social framework. Brink and La Guma, through their novels, are adamant to unveil the filthy and dangerous nature of the ghetto. In this way, detailed and realistic representations of space loom large in *The Fog* and *A Dry*. This can be easily understood if we consider that:

The aim of the realistic writer is constant: to write, with respect to the *valid norms of his time*, more veraciously and to put reality more directly into words than his predecessors have done. [...] A concrete historical situation, a datable and locatable frame are conditions for the realization of realism.<sup>32</sup>

If it is a truism that La Guma and Brink refer to “a concrete historical situation” (apartheid), it is nonetheless an enthralling enterprise to analyse how both writers “veraciously” draw out ghastly images of the ghetto. In *The Fog* and *A Dry*, the similarities in the representation of the world of the oppressed are under two forms: first what can be referred to as a focalized or *rolling* description and second, a sensorial depiction of space.

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<sup>30</sup> André Brink, “On culture and Apartheid”, *Mapmakers*, *op.cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, quoted by Ania Loomba, *op.cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Mineke Schipper, “Toward a definition of Realism in the African Context”, *Spring* 1985, 16:3, (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/468840>) Accessed 10/05/2010

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The focalized representation infers that the reader perceives the rotten social framework of the story through a character. But this, according to Philippe Hamon, means that the latter will be placed in *the conditions* to perceive things and events. Hamon writes: "Il s'agit de faire en sorte que l'action conduise le personnage à observer un objet, à le décrire pour autrui ou s'en servir. Ce procédé est particulièrement fréquent dans la littérature réaliste." <sup>33</sup> The mechanism of this process of feeling and transmitting some part of the story is further explained by Eric le Calvez:

Le regard du personnage établit une conjonction temporelle entre description et récit, car non seulement le cours du récit n'est pas interrompu brutalement, [...], mais de plus une diachronie interne est réintégrée, correspondant à la durée de l'acte contemplatif.<sup>34</sup>

[The look of the character establishes a temporal conjunction between description and narration, because the flow of the narration is not abruptly interrupted, and more, an internal diachrony is reintegrated, which corresponds to the duration of the contemplative act.]

In the focalised depiction of the ghetto space in both novels, the reader does not feel an abrupt break in the temporality, the narration of events and the description of some dirty areas. This excerpt from *The Fog* showing Beukes in a taxi is a telling example:

They [Beukes and the taxi driver] are in the main street of a ghost town. Along the shadowy pavements under the old iron and wood

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<sup>33</sup> Philippe Hamon, « un discours contraint », *Littérature et réalité*, ed. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1982, p. 64. [The point is to bring a character to observe an object, to describe it for the reader or use it. Such a technique is recurrent in realistic literature.]

<sup>34</sup> Eric Le Calvez, « La description focalisée », *Poétique*, Paris : Editions du Seuil, novembre 1996, n°108, p. 405.

balconies shop windows, boarded up when their owners had abandoned trade in the wake of the general exodus, stared with blinded eyes out into the grimy, sunlit, thoroughfare. The shopping crowds of the past had dwindled noticeably and now people moved along the sidewalks, past the rows of shabby shopfronts, like the survivors of a holocaust. (*The Fog*)

The comparative and metaphorical designs of this segment (respectively “like the survivors of a holocaust” and “a ghost town”) are of lifeblood in the denunciation of the overall destitution of the physical surroundings. Indeed, the reader can feel the decayed milieu through the “eyes” of Beukes. The latter, going to his friend Tommy’s, is the pretext or the “motivating” drive of the scene. The degradation of the characters’ environment is so widespread that the narrator resorts to adjectives - “shadowy pavements”; “grimy thoroughfare” - as connotative clues. Using a focalized representation is very relevant here because it is, actually, a strong way for the narrator to justify the importance of the resistance and, in the same way, to reinforce Beukes in his engagement to do away with the foul regime. That is the reason why, in the novels of Alex La Guma, narration and description join forces in the thorny task of exposing the general and generalized horror bred by racial discrimination.

André Brink takes almost the same aesthetic path as La Guma. His text is fraught with focalized descriptions and many other devices meant to beautifully express the ghastly backlashes of racial discrimination on the day-to-day life of characters. Here is a relevant illustration:

Stanley glanced at him as they slammed the car doors shut, but said nothing. The car pulled off again, following once more an intricate route through patterns of identical houses, as if they were passing the same ones over and over again. Brickwalls covered in slogans. Peeling billboards. Boys playing ball-games. The barbers. The wrecks



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and the charred buildings. Chicken. Rubbish  
heaps. (*A Dry*, 92)

The reader finds, in these lines, a *rolling* or ambulatory description of the road towards the inner city where Ben and Stanley are heading to, a space marked by a row of identical and shabby houses. The particularity of this sequence, compared to the one from *The Fog*, lies in the structural design; it is organized around successive short nominal sentences that offer a sequential picture of diverse parts of the disintegrated physical surroundings. Such a representation allows the reader “to look”, at the same time as Ben, at the areas the two characters pass by on their way. This stylistic option adds vividness to the tableau because it is articulated around the perspective of Ben and also because it helps the reader realize how shocked the latter is by the discovery of this “other world”. Therefore, with a structure built around “the ability to look” (to refer to Hamon) of Ben, the passage further draws the stark difference that exists between Ben's self environment and that of the “others”, where life seems impossible. Such an allegorical image of the dilapidated social atmosphere of the ghetto is acutely dealt with by Nadine Gordimer through these words of Toby, the protagonist in *A World of Strangers*:

By contrast an African township looked like something that had been rased almost to the ground. The mass of houses and shacks were so low and crowded together that the people seemed to be swarming over them as if they had just invaded a deserted settlement. Everytime I went to a township I was aware of this sudden drop in the horizon of buildings and rise of humans; nothing concealed, nothing sheltered – in any but the most obvious sense – any moment of the people's lives.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers*, New York: Penguin Books, 1984, p. 130.

In both *The Fog* and *A Dry*, the ambulatory or *rolling* description of landscape and social environment constitutes a momentous feature of the realistic approach used by the authors to put the apartheid reality into words. This urges Brian Bunting, prefacing one of La Guma's novels, *A Threefold Cord*, to hold that the South African writer

[...] knew and understood the people and their problems, their 'troubles', as they call them, and he wrote of them with intimacy and care [...] It is the very completeness of his knowledge and understanding of his milieu that gives Alex La Guma's prose its incisive bite.<sup>36</sup>

Beside the focalized or ambulatory representation of the characters' space, "sensorial" descriptions take centre-stage in the aesthetic framing of both novels. Indeed, part of the author's realism consists of a strong appeal to some figures' sensory organs. Instances occur at almost every step of the narrative in *The Fog* and *A Dry*. One is when Ben journeys, for the first time, with Stanley into the grimy and desecrated unknown world of the ghetto. The narrator reports:

Ben turned his window down a few inches. An oppressive smell of smoke drifted into the car. The awareness of disembodied sound grew overpowering. And once again, but more intensely than before, he had the feeling of being inside an enormous animal body with intestines rumbling, a dark heart beating, muscles contracting and relaxing, glands secreting their fluids. [...] Never before had he experienced so acutely the total isolation of their respective worlds, and the fact that only through the two of them those words were allowed to touch briefly and provisionally. (*A Dry*, 170-1)

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<sup>36</sup> Brian Bunting, Preface to *A Threefold Cord*, London: Kilptown Book, 1988, p. iii.

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This passage constitutes a veracious expression of the unbearable living conditions in South Africa. Actually, by highlighting the reek that assaults Ben - the smell of poverty and want - the narrator further points at the huge gap that separates the two worlds. Leaning on Ben's perspective - prompted by his action of opening the window - the sensorial description of the physical surroundings is a resounding way for Brink to make his community aware of the extent to which the racist policies implemented by the government have eroded the existence of marginalized groups and have, indirectly, dehumanized whites.

Another example very expressive of sensorial representation of intimate and external space is contained in this part of the story where Ben visits Emily, Gordon's widow:

They [Stanley & Ben] knocked. [...] Emily opened immediately, [...]. There was only one gas lamp burning inside, and the corners of the small front room were in semi-darkness. Against the far wall a few children were sleeping under a grey blanket, small bundles close together, like loaves of bread set out to raise. [...]. A vase filled with plastic flowers. The floral curtains drawn. There was a smoky stuffiness inside, aggravated by a stale smell of bodies. (*A Dry*, 172)

This excerpt presents almost the same syntactic framing as the previous one: with short nominal sentences, combined with an evocative adjectival regime (of the smell and destitution), that are in line with the movement of Ben's eyes. This focalized description that is focused on the sensory image - "There was a smoky stuffiness inside, aggravated by a stale smell of bodies" - is a way for the narrator to arouse the consciousness of the character. In other words, such a journey into the intimacy of the hitherto unknown "other" and his dilapidated world reinforces Ben in his determination to bear the brunt of family and police pressure.

The aesthetic choice to present the characters' environment through olfactory references runs through the narrative of Alex La

Guma, especially in *The Fog*. One telling example is found in these lines:

At that time there were tin shanties everywhere, he thought. [...] Coming back from the town, the smell of rot and stagnant water had been overpowering, but later one had got used to it, to the puddles of dirty water, the mess left by children and animals dotting the pathways like mines in a minefield. Poverty had enveloped the whole scene in a tattered and smelly cloak of rust, decay and destitution. (*The Fog*, 122)

The same descriptive style that encodes the story in Brink's novel is also found in this extract from *The Fog*. Both quotations heavily rely on the reader's olfactory and other sensory organs to render the generalized squalor that is a main feature of the social environment. But while the narrator in *A Dry* seems to favour a staccato phrasal structure, La Guma's text is rather framed with enumerative sentences which expose in detail the rotten and filthy atmosphere. To further demonstrate such situation the narrative voice makes use of comparison - "like a sore or a boil" - and personification - "just stretch of slum clinging to the edge of the town" - which are another eloquent and beautified expression of the fetid surroundings to which the inhabitants finally get "used to."

In this way, both writers draw out horrendous and realistic images of the decayed existence of the marginalized groups under apartheid. Sensorial or focalized representations of the characters' internal and external environment is one aesthetic clue which tie the strands of Brink's and La Guma's narratives together, but also that of many South African writers, conscious that political commitment can bring forth a redefinition of interracial relationships, and a new social contract.

However, this is no easy task because writers like Brink and La Guma were subject to censorship, enhanced, with an iron hand, by a ubiquitous police force. In his article "After Soweto", Brink describes the apartheid police system in these words: "The Security Police is ever alert to suppress or inhibit the truth. Often the

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persecution is brutal and overt. More often it is subtle and destructive on a less exposed level.”<sup>37</sup> In one interview with Cecil Abrahams<sup>38</sup>, La Guma admits that the question of the police was bound to be an integral part of his fictional output, and this is in line with the life-size weight of this crucial branch of the system in the story and textual space.

A repressive justice is the bedrock of any totalitarian regime. And the political situation in South Africa is no exception. Indeed, the Security police are at the core of the terror machine that sees to the stifling of any dissident individual or movement. South Africa is, La Guma upholds, ‘a police state’ (*The Fog*, 24). *The Fog* and *A Dry* bear some similarities and some particularities in the thematic and textual representation of the police officers and their torturing methods, but also of the victims’ reactions.

In *The Fog*, the police agents are the pillars of the vileness of the regime; they terrorize characters who, like Beukes, are panic-stricken whenever in front of policemen. During one of his night rounds, Beukes has this reaction when he sees the police:

Beukes cursed under his breath. In a clearing stood two big police trucks and already there were people crowded behind the wire mesh of one of them [...] Beukes turned immediately and made his way back. His heart beat a little pronouncedly. People who were not white – even the criminally innocent – always reacted that way. There were a hundred and one crimes one might have committed without knowledge. Palpitations of the heart had become a national disease. (*The Fog*, 64)

These “palpitations of the heart” are kept up by such policemen as Sergeant Van Zyl and Grobbelaar, but also Raalt in *A Walk in the*

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<sup>37</sup> André Brink, “After Soweto”, in *Mapmakers*, *op.cit.*, p.153.

<sup>38</sup> Cecil Abrahams, *Alex La Guma*, Boston: Twayne, 1985.

*Night*<sup>39</sup>, or even Captain Joll in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, through whom the violence of the Nationalist exploitative regime comes to a head. The evil forces are responsible for the intimidation, night-time raids, torture and, ultimately, the murder of dissidents. The reader first meets the two police officers in the prologue, as anonymous figures, holding a prisoner. The presence of Sergeant Van Zyl and Grobbelaar haunts the story until when a plain description of them is provided in their favoured activity: torture. In these lines, the narrator graphically expresses their brutality set against the dauntless prisoner, Elias, who refuses to cave in their demands:

Pain was like a devil which had usurped his body. It was wrenching in his wrist and hands and the sockets of his shoulders as he dangled with all the weight on the handcuffs that shackled him to the staple in the wall. It was his body battered and bruised by the pistol barrel, and in his legs, his skinned shins, which would not hold his weight. There was a taste of pain in his mouth where blood had replaced saliva. [...] They each took him under the arms and he was paddled up to the door, out of the room, stumbling, trying to use his legs, grasping with the pain in them, stumbling and flopping like a doll all the way to another room. (*The Fog*, 169-170)

This thorough description of the pain of Elias lays bare the savagery of the torturous practices heaped on him. This minute representation is sometimes wrapped in a metaphorical style. Unlike in *A Dry* where the depiction of police violence upon Jonathan and Gordon is indirectly reported (through Seroke) to the reader, La Guma's scenic approach is much more vivid and it catches the reader's attention. The ultimate aim is to convince the latter of the unspeakable brutality of the police in South Africa. Such a detailed exposition is better felt in the depiction of the eyes (face) of the

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<sup>39</sup> Alex La Guma, *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories*, London: Heinemann, 1968.

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torturers. Indeed, under the perspective of Elias, the reader has a glimpse of the inhumanity that is oozing from the eyes of those that prey upon him:

Elias looked at them, seeing them hazily far away, and saw that they were like rags from which all the water of humanity had been squeezed [...] The young one stared at Elias with eyes that were now flat and expressionless as a reptile's. (*The Fog*, 170-171)

La Guma's literary output, but also Brink's novels to some extent, is glutted with such aesthetic turns that focus on the eyes as an expression of the inner nature of some protagonists. In *A Dry*, the narrator probes into the atrocious nature of the system through this representation of the look of Stolz:

You can not restrain yourself from turning to look. He is still standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame, the orange moving up and down in a slow mechanical rhythm, his eyes cool and frank, as if he hasn't looked away for a second. Strangely dark eyes for such a pale face. The thin white line of a scar on his cheek. And all of a sudden you know. You's better memorize the name. Captain Stolz. His presence is not fortuitous. He has a role to play; and you will see him again. (*A Dry*, 60)

The same technique is used here: the eyes of Stolz are a basic element of his characterization. However, the expression of the face of the character is further expressed by the not signalled direct narration of the thought of Ben, - "Strangely dark eyes for such a pale face" -, a nominal structure that heightens the drama of the passage. Here is Ben introduced to the police agent through the stern face and the frozen look of the latter. Consequently, he can realize that Stolz is a crucial link in the repressive chain elaborated by the police system. Ben is right to think that his presence is not "fortuitous" because he is the one whose sacred mission will be to intimidate and sway Ben away from his perilous quest for truth. But

this is without the courageous Ben who, in spite of a constant harassment, keeps on gathering evidence of the guilt of the system. In this way, throughout the story, Stolz and his ilk work out their determination to stifle any action that is meant to expose the part played by the police in the murder of Jonathan and Gordon but also in that of the rebellious children of Soweto. Therefore, they carry out insidious and underhand doings to undermine Ben's morale and preserve the integrity of *their* nation. Cases of persecutions, as the following, abound in the story:

A new wave of anonymous call, another vandalistic attack on his car, the entire front wall of his home sprayed with slogans, coarse insults on his blackboard, at night the sound of footsteps going round the house. [...] And whenever nothing specific was happening there was the gnawing awareness of that invisible and shapeless power pursuing him. (*A Dry*, 261-2)

Like the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Ben is socially alienated, his family and community charging him with betrayal to the Afrikaner cause. These lines demonstrate, once more, how the police manage to transform Ben into a hermit in the eyes of "his own people." Indeed, he is permanently subject to police attack and such a relentless persecution is suggested by the long asyndetically framed sentence – "A new wave of anonymous call, another vandalistic attack on his car, the entire front wall of his home sprayed with slogans, coarse insults on his blackboard, at night the sound of footsteps going round the house". This aesthetic turn suggests that the sleuths are totally devoted to fighting to the last drop of blood the enemies of the nation.

A more striking expression of police violence is found in this passage from *The Fog*:

Then for some reason or another, a policeman shot into the noise. [...] The firing burst out again like a roll of metal-skinned drums. From the front of the Police Station, from the groups around the trucks, from the turret of the armoured car, the shiny brass cylinders of spent ammunition leaped



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and cascaded for a moment in deadly ejaculations  
and then stopped. (*The Fog*, 104)

The violence of the firing is not only hinted at in the set of sentences but more, in the lexical field and tone of the sequence. In fact, the comparing structure - "a roll of metal-skinned drums" -, the anaphora - "from the front of the Police Station, from the groups around the trucks, from the turret of the armoured car" -, combined with the metaphorical image, - "deadly ejaculations" - suggest the extreme rapidity and savagery of the police forces upon the demonstrators.

Thus, the South African regime and its repressive apparatus, "shoot people as if they are waste, but in the end it is [them] whose lives are not worth living"<sup>40</sup>, Coetzee's heroin says in *Age of Iron*. And the "sin of power", in La Guma's country, is "not only to distort reality but to convince people that the false is true, and that what is happening is only an invention of enemies"<sup>41</sup>, like Ben, who is finally killed by Stolz and his clique, as he keeps on refusing to yield under the latter's pressure.

## Conclusion

Both Brink and La Guma have expressed their discontent and loadstars about the racism and discrimination that have eroded the rainbow nation. Like many of his protagonists, La Guma was totally committed to "run guns and to hold up radio stations, because in South Africa that is what [they] are faced with, whether [they] are writers, or whether [they] are common laborers."<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Brink's "obsessive theme is not merely apartheid. It is the mortal condition,

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<sup>40</sup> John-Maxwell Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, *op.cit*, p. 104.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Miller, "The Sin of Power", quoted by André Brink in *Mapmakers*, *op.cit*, p.173.

<sup>42</sup> Alex La Guma, quoted by Kathleen Balutansky, in *The Novels of Alex La Guma. The representation of a Political Conflict*, Colorado: Three Continents press, 1990, p.1.

and the terror of apartheid's metamorphosis into destiny."<sup>43</sup> Like Ben, Brink is totally devoted to searching and mapping out his truth, a search which might end up in failure, but it is going to be failure that can affirm his humanity, redeems him<sup>44</sup> and alerts the consciousness of his own people.

Through what can be branded a "transethnic characterization"<sup>45</sup>, both writers have been unwavering in their effort to debunk the ideological and repressive apparatuses of apartheid. Brink and La Guma knew that "the writer is in fact an organ developed by society to respond to its need for meaning."<sup>46</sup> They live up to this mission.

In this way, bits and pieces of the racist regime and the social tensions of the time reverberate in their texts<sup>47</sup>. *A Dry* and *The Fog* are deeply cast in the apartheid cultural and social framework, the realities of which they have exposed from different aesthetic perspectives. The transtextual analysis of both novels has shown that the narrators turn to other texts, under various approaches, to disseminate the encoded message of commitment and hope of Brink and La Guma, through "texts" put at the threshold of their respective works. These narrative devices set the novels in the African literary tradition. The epigraphs and prologue/epilogue,

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<sup>43</sup> Isidore Diala, "André Brink and the Implications of Tragedy for Apartheid South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Dec 2003, 29:4. ([www.jstor.org/stable/3557393](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3557393)). Accessed: 03/01/2011.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> This is to refer to the teaming up of figures from different racial or social backgrounds who become bedfellows in the struggle against racial discrimination and arbitrary rule. We have Ben/Stanley/Melanie in *A Dry*; Beukes/Elias/ Henry April in *The Fog*; but also Mrs Curren and Vercueil in *Age of Iron*; finally, Hannah x and Kahapa in *The Other Side of Silence*. This is an ultimate call for a race-blind society.

<sup>46</sup> John Maxwell Coetzee, "André Brink and The Censor", *Research in African Literatures*, Autumn 1990, 21:3 ([www.jstor.org/stable/3819634](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3819634))

<sup>47</sup> To paraphrase Roland Barthes.

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combined with the intertextual representations they made of the implementation and drawbacks of the regime on the lives and physical environment of characters, are another beautified expression of the horrendous nature of the system. Thus through their multi-coloured accounts, *A Dry* and *The Fog* constitute a resounding multivoiced plea for the establishment of a race-blind society.

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