

NADINE GORDIMER: FAMILIAR TALES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: *The paper analyses the new perspectives in Nadine Gordimer’s writings, focusing on her post-Apartheid works. The concepts of home, relocation, cultural diversity, violence and the issue of the Other are examined, as they represent the key factors in defining and understanding South Africa and its multicultural and multiracial communities.*

Keywords: *multiculturalism, otherness, relocation, South Africa, violence*

1. Introduction

“The world of others talked back from what The World was set to make of those others – its own image” (Gordimer 2007:105). These words from Nadine Gordimer’s latest volume of short stories point towards the answer expected by the majority of critics who generally asked in the early 1990s when President Frederik Willem de Klerk overtly expressed his intentions to end Apartheid, and when the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela won the elections, which meant the beginning of a multiracial democracy for the South African society: “Once Apartheid is abolished entirely, do you think there will still be something for you to write about?” (Clingman 1992:137)

In a series of lectures delivered in 1994, Gordimer remarks the changed status of South Africa which is no longer at the margin of the empire but at its centre:

That other world that was the world is no longer the world. My country is the world, whole, a synthesis.” (Gordimer 1996:134)

In this regard, post-Apartheid South Africa has been reshaping its national identity in the light of global events that write universal history, offering citizens the chance to escape the confines of their country and bring in or take out elements that are essential when determining the specific attributes of a community in the process of globalization. In fact, it has the opportunity to extract ingredients from America, Europe and Africa in order “to become that delicious hybrid of West and South” (Temple-Thurston 1999:xi). The Western civilizations have attempted to impose their own standards and requirements on this “jagged end of a continent” (Gordimer 1998:278), which has attracted attention not only due to one of the worst forms of racism in the history of humanity but also with four Nobel prizes for peace and two for literature. Yet, when we read texts by South African writers – either written in English or translated from Afrikaans or

one of the African languages – we see that the local and the international are overlapping. The local is more than a first-hand experience of a meaningful community; it is the recovery of a shared space where the Self and the Other come into contact, exchange places, struggle to avoid erasure of differences, to preserve individuality and to oppose discrimination. In fact, as Michael Chapman (2008:11) underlines, South Africans no longer write “in reaction, back to the centre”. They write taking into account ‘the rediscovery of the ordinary’ as defined by Njabulo S. Ndebele (1992:434) in 1986 when he noted that “the visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation appear to have prompted over the years the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation”.

Thus, replacing Apartheid themes and subject matters in the new South Africa is a demanding task. Some of the literary topics preferred by the ‘old guard’, formed of J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach are: the significance of multiculturalism in post-Apartheid South Africa, the status of the writer, the banalisation of violence due to mass-media coverage, the reconciliation with the violent past, the implications of economic and cultural globalization, the struggle against illness, HIV/ AIDS, sexual liberation, globalization and loss of cultural and national identity, displacement, economic exile and migration, issues that tend to replace older major concerns represented by violence and discrimination on account of race, gender, or wealth, the relationship between literature and politics or the role of ethics in writing. Leon De Kock, who proclaimed the death of South African literature in his essay “Does South African Literature Still Exist? Or: South African Literature is Dead, Long Live South African Literature”, considers that Gordimer has made a “remarkable move outwards, from closely observed turns” of South Africa’s social and historical aspects, manifesting interest in “how issues of national identity are traversed by the surges of global and transnational flows, means and potentialities” (De Kock 2005:76).

My aim is to point towards themes that constantly occur in Nadine Gordimer’s writings, to analyze them along with more recent issues that are addressed in her post-Apartheid narratives.

2. An Overview of Nadine Gordimer’s Writings

The majority of the topics and issues are no longer identified as belonging exclusively to the South African reality. Thus, *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and *The House Gun* (1998) accentuate that violence is primarily a heritage of Apartheid South Africa, and it must be related to individual and social responsibility to end it; *The Pickup* (2001) focuses on the oriental adventures of a young white South African woman who chooses to relocate to an Arab country; *Get a Life* (2005) explores the diseased body and life choices.

The concepts of “place” and “home” are also analyzed by Nadine Gordimer in relation to the topics of exile and relocation, disease and violence. Johannesburg and its suburbs, the townships and the wilderness of the veld are presented as fruitful sites in post-Apartheid fiction in order to study and comprehend city-culture and the preservation of natural environment. Thus, the “eternal nomad”, the ruthless female politician, the prisoner and the patient are connected and eventually refuse connection to a specific place, in their search for the Self and redefinition of the Other. Furthermore, Gordimer’s latest novel – *Get a Life* – turns to popular topics in the Western world: ecology and environmentalism, although she has been criticized for remaining silent on South African politics and attracting attention to issues brought forward by globalization.

2.1 Memory of Home and Exile

In her novels and short stories, the South African writer connects memory with the social space occupied by exiles, migrants and refugees in order to provide the necessary redefinition of identity that enables them to settle down in the target communities. The images produced by memory are superposed over reality so that it can be modified to permit adaptation in the new environment. It would be otherwise impossible for a nation with eleven official languages to exist based on past memory alone; that is why national consciousness is transformed by returnees and migrants (alien or foreign Others) who imprint their own traditions on the multicultural and multiracial South African society. Gordimer depicts instances of the exiles' lives, naming and determining the identifying characteristics to what Said (1986:12) calls "a series of portraits without names, without contexts", explaining images that are "largely unexplained, nameless, mute".

The pseudo-exiles (Caraivan 2003:140) are South Africans who are forced to find refuge within the borders of their own country. Their world is defined by relocation, loneliness and nostalgia, as their "imagined country" is placed out of the context of reality. Communication is hindered either by their inability to speak the same language or by their incapacity to understand the rules of what they consider the marginal Others and adapt to their world. As Homi Bhabha (1997:82) observes, skin is "the prime signifier of the body", the indicator of the Other regarded as "*almost the same but not quite*" (Bhabha 1997:89), and it correlates with the social, racial and cultural identity of both the Self and the Other.

The Pickup offers a picture of the new South Africa and its usual problems of race, class, bureaucracy, taken from a local to a global level. The change of setting from post-Apartheid Johannesburg to an Arab country and its villages, deserts and Muslim people is unusual for Gordimer who used to devote her attention to the specificity of the South African society. In addition, the novel depicts an idealistic image of the Other world and its inhabitants, as Julie Summers, the white South African woman who chooses to relocate to her husband's Arab village, is fascinated by the traditional values of the Arab family and by the immensity of the desert. This novel portrays a world of fragmented and "unfixed identities" (Dimitriu Șora 2006:167), an asymmetrical world of "skewed power relations" (169) in a post-Apartheid South Africa that has to redefine its identity in order to enter the "global village". The intercultural marriage is Gordimer's "silver lining" for the postcolonial world, just as interracial marriages were for the colonial period. In this regard, Nadine Gordimer undermines stereotypical distinctions and the opposition Orient/ Occident is reversed. At the beginning of the 21st century, South Africa is defined by political renewal, liberalism, and economic progress, and thus it is associated with Occidental images, South Africans being described as "European – but they don't call themselves that [...]" (Gordimer 2001:94).

2.2 Violence as a Disease in South Africa

The theme of violence in the process of transition from the Apartheid to the post-Apartheid period and the process of reconciliation with the violent past of the South African society is another favourite in Gordimer's writings. Although violence is the main topic in the novel *The House Gun* (1998), instances of violent acts are also identified in the novel *None to Accompany Me*, where Gordimer associates violence with a repetition impossible to break:

People kill each other and the future looks back and asks, What for? We can see, from here, what the end would have been, anyway. And then they turn to kill each other for some other reason whose resolution could have been foreseen. (Gordimer 1995:305)

There is a strong relationship between the violent Other and the vulnerable Other – generally the victim, but possibly the perpetrator, as well – and it starts from the senseless and excessive outbursts of violence displaying hatred of Otherness in a post-Apartheid multicultural and multiracial South Africa which is described in *None to Accompany Me*. Furthermore, violence and its effects on the vulnerable Other are studied as a phenomenon of inclusion, as everyone in South Africa is inheriting the legacy of Apartheid.

Multiracial societies are more likely to fall victims to conflict than societies with greater ethnic homogeneity, as Frohardt and Temin (2007:402) warn:

Attention should also be given to content indicators, such as a focus on past atrocities and a history of ethnic hatred; manipulation of myths, stereotypes and identities to ‘dehumanize’; and efforts to discredit alternatives to conflict.

Subsequently, such an “alternative to conflict” is the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) founded in January 1989 with the primary goal “to use its expertise in building reconciliation, democracy and a human rights culture and in preventing violence in South Africa and in other countries in Africa” (Bruce 2011). A second crucial step was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) assembled in 1995. The Commission has been considered the most effective way to come to terms with its past and to recognize its legacy of political violence.

In Nadine Gordimer’s opinion (Paul 1998), the main task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Amnesty Commission is to reveal “the complexity of human beings, the complexity of their reactions to different pressures on their personal lives and their political and working lives, and the constant shift in their morality”, as “digging up [...] the truth” is both extraordinary and painful. *The House Gun* was written under the influence of tape scripts and methods used by TRC to obtain the victims’ testimonies. In the novel, Gordimer links stories of ordinary people and history itself in order to present her view of the transitory South Africa where violence has a complicated form imposed both by the legacy of Apartheid and by the process of transition, which made guns become a legitimate way of solving problems.

The House Gun records the psychological transformations of a white South African family, as they pursue the truth and finally understand the mechanisms of violence. The white couple is trying to come to terms with their son’s murder in the same way the South African society is making an attempt to reconcile with its violent past by putting itself on trial. The influence of mass media on the young population is also examined here, as it presents images of death and violence as random acts not connected to the audience. However, the “spectacle of violence” involves all the members of a community, without any exception, for it is strongly anchored in ordinary life.

Nadine Gordimer is also fascinated with the issues of health and disease. The structure of the relationship between the unhealthy/ contagious Other and the caregiver as well as that of the relationship between the professional and personal Self is examined in the light of concepts such as fear (of exposure, isolation and genetic modifications), vulnerability, solitude and public life, body self-image, nature and survival. Health is the mark of the self, whereas disease – as the mark of outsiders – expresses the otherness of the self and provides experiences which are thoroughly depicted and analyzed in Gordimer’s latest novel as a metaphor of the state of South

Africa. However, there is always a latent particle in every healthy body that may become activated and, eventually, the healthy Self transforms into an unhealthy Other.

2.3 The Return to Present

In her latest novel, *No Time like the Present* (2012), Gordimer revisits her characters from the Apartheid novels: a couple formed of a white man and a black woman, once illegal lovers, who fought in the anti-Apartheid movement, are now faced with the post-Apartheid society and with the decision to relocate to Australia.

The new issues of middle-class life have replaced the older ones. They now have to decide where to live and travel, what job to take, where to send their children to school. Steve no longer works as an industrial chemist in the guerrilla, but as a university lecturer in the chemistry department at a local university. Jabu becomes a lawyer with a firm that represents blacks in property disputes. Steve and Jabu refuse to become greedy and corrupt as their former comrades. After having worked so hard to install democracy, they see its fragile stability threatened by poverty, unemployment, AIDS, government scandal, tribal loyalties, contested elections and the influx of refugees from other African countries. As in *The House Gun*, Gordimer portrays the South African society using crime: a carjacking, a home invasion, a brutal school hazing. Due to the increase in crimes, the couple considers to relocate to Australia.

Consequently, Gordimer remains the portraitist of the South African society, her novels being pictures from different stages of South African history since 1950.

3. Conclusions

To conclude, post-Apartheid literature has manifested its capacity to rewrite and reinvent new identities, new stories that have aroused profound interest and continue to generate curiousness, defining the individual as part of the collective and mapping new trajectories to explore. Rita Barnard observes that

despite the fact that two South African writers have been awarded the Nobel Prize, South African literature is still in some ways an emerging field of inquiry and one that continues to require redefinition in view of the changed circumstances in the country. (Barnard 2007:4)

One of the several possibilities of formulating reinterpretations of post-Apartheid narratives is with respect to theories of otherness.

Postcolonial theory and literature have also searched for answers to questions such as the following: what does the Other mean in these times? Should “Self” and “Other” be viewed inevitably as accentuating differences? After identifying the Other, is “comprehension of Otherness” possible or is knowledge of the Other just a form of colonization, of authority, even violence?

The displacement of the Other by the Self in the South African history was imposed by the white population in their attempt to build a new nation in the 20th century. The new South Africa witnessed a repositioning of the Self the moment when eleven languages were officially recognized as national. Thus, multiculturalism and multiracialism have become the centre of political and literary discourses, replacing the issues of racism and discrimination. A radical displacement and replacement of the concept of race and culture has taken place in the 21st

century South Africa and Nadine Gordimer has marked this change on the historic and social map that she has outlined in her post-Apartheid novels.

As a result, several critics have noticed the fact that Gordimer's post-Apartheid writings abandon the "grand narrative" of Apartheid and turn to the ordinary, to "normalization". Ileana Dimitriu (2009) notes that, "in detecting a sense of 'postmodern melancholy' in the 'small histories' of Gordimer's post-1990 novels", various critics express their disappointment that the South African writer has concluded her social and political investigations, "has lessened interest in 'the politics of nationhood'", and has manifested interest "in explorations of postmodern multiplicity". The new South Africa has more social than political issues to solve, more races and ethnicities to tolerate and integrate in this new post-Apartheid, postcolonial, multicultural and multiracial era. On different occasions, Gordimer has quoted Flaubert's (1982:200) observation "I have always tried to live in an ivory tower" and she has always added her own incisive comments:

the poached tusks of elephants, the profits of exploitation of an African resource, a fit symbol of tranquility and comfort gained, anywhere and everywhere in the world, by the plunder of the lives of others (Suresh Roberts 2005:14).

Thus, Gordimer demonstrates her deep involvement in the realities of South Africa, her concern with the hardships of her fellow citizens, and her conviction that nothing is local anymore – everything must be perceived globally.

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