

A Study of South Africa and its Multicultural Communities as focused in Nadine Gordimer's Literary Work

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Abstract

The new perspectives in Nadine Gordimer's writings is analysed in the paper, focusing on her post-Apartheid works. The issues like the concepts of home, relocation, cultural diversity, violence and of the Other are examined, as they are represented as the key factors in defining and understanding South Africa and its multicultural and multiracial communities.

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

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 are from Nadine Gordimer's latest volume of short stories which points towards the response expected by the majority of critics who generally asked in the early 1990s when President Frederik Willem de Klerk openly expressed his notions to end Apartheid, and when the African National Congress won the elections under Nelson Mandela, which was known as the beginning of a multiracial democracy in 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)

Gordimer remarks the modified status of South Africa during his series of lectures delivered in 1994, this modified status 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)

The national identity of post-Apartheid South Africa has been reshaping in the light of global events that write universal history, and in the process of globalization it offers citizens the

chance to escape the confines of their country and bring in or take out elements that are essential for determining the specific attributes of a community. In fact, the opportunity has been provided to extract ingredients from America, Europe and Africa in order “to become that delicious hybrid of West and South” (Temple-Thurston 1999:xi). The standards and requirements of Western civilizations have been attempted to be imposed on this “jagged end of a continent” (Gordimer 1998:278), due to which an attention has been attracted on 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 the local and the international texts by South African writers – either written in English or translated from Africans or one of the African languages – we see that they are overlapped. The first-hand experience of a meaningful community is more than the local; where the Self and the other come into contact during the recovery of a shared space, 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”. Their writings takes into account ‘the rediscovery of the ordinary’ as defined by Njabulo S. Ndebele (1992:434) in 1986 when he noted that “the years the development of a highly dramatic, highly demonstrative form of literary representation appear to have been prompted over by the visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African social formation”.

Now, the replacing Apartheid themes and subject matters in the new South Africa becomes the demanding task. The ‘old guard’, formed of J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach are preferred by some of the literary topics like, the multicultural significance in post-Apartheid South Africa, the writer status, the canalization of violence due to mass-media coverage, the past violent reconciliation, the impact of economic and cultural globalization, the struggle against illness like HIV/ AIDS, sexual liberation, globalization and cultural and national identity loss, displacement, economic exile and migration, the older major concerns represented by violence and discrimination on account of race, gender, or wealth are replaced by the issues, the relationship between the role of ethics in writing or literature and politics . The death of South African literature in his essay is proclaimed by Leon De Kock, “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, the surges of global and transnational flows, means and potentialities manifested the interest in “how issues of national identity are traversed by” (De Kock 2005:76).

The main aim of this paper is to point towards themes that constantly occur in Nadine Gordimer’s writings, along with the analysis of the more recent issues that are addressed in her post-Apartheid narratives.

The Analysis of Nadine Gordimer’s Writings

The bulk mass of the topics and issues are no longer recognized as belonging exclusively to the South African reality. Thus, *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and *The House Gun* (1998) emphasize that violence is basically a heritage of Apartheid South Africa, and it must be related to individual and social accountability to end it; *The Pickup* (2001) targets on the

oriental adventures of a young white South African woman who chooses to move to an Arab country; *Get a Life* (2005) survey the diseased body and life choices.

Nadine Gordimer analyses the concepts of “place” and “home” in relation to the topics of dispersion and relocation, disease and violence. Johannesburg and its countryside, the townships and the forest of the grassland are presented as fruitful sites in post-Apartheid fiction in order to study and understand city-culture and the preservation and conservation of natural environment. Hence in their search for the Self and redefinition of the Other, the “eternal nomad”, the ruthless female politician, the prisoner and the patient are connected and eventually refuse connection to a specific place. Moreover, Gordimer’s novel – *Get a Life* – becomes a popular topic in the Western world: ecology and environmentalism, although she remained silent on South African politics and attracting attention to issues brought forward by globalization, for which she was criticized also.

Memories of Social Space occupied by Exiles

The South African writer connects memory with the social space occupied by exiles, migrants and refugees in their novels and short stories, in order to provide the necessary redefinition of identity which enables them to settle down in the target communities. The reality is superposed by the images produced by memory so that it can be modified to permit adaptation in the new environment. The existence of a nation becomes impossible with eleven official languages based on past memory alone; that is because the returnees and migrants (alien or foreign others) transform the national consciousness which make imprint of their own traditions on the multicultural and multiracial South African society. Gordimer describes minutely about the 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 South Africans who are forced to find refuge within the borders of their own country are the pseudo-exiles (Caravan 2003:140). Their world is defined as their “imagined country” which is placed out of the context of reality by relocation, loneliness and nostalgia. Due to their inability either by to speak the same language or by their incapacity to understand the rules of what they consider the marginal others, their communication get hindered and it becomes difficult for them to 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 is correlated with the social, racial and cultural identity of both the Self and the Other.

A picture of the new South Africa and its usual problems of race, class, bureaucracy, taken from a local to a global level are offered by *The Pickup*. Gordimer used to devote her attention to the specificity of the South African society and the change of setting from post-Apartheid Johannesburg to an Arab country and its villages, deserts and Muslim people was very unusual for her. In addition, an idealistic image of the Other world and its inhabitants is depicted the novel, as Julie Summers, the white South African woman, is fascinated by the traditional values of the Arab family and by the immensity of the desert and who chooses to relocate to her husband’s Arab village. A world of fragmented and “unfixed identities” is portrayed in this novel (Dimitriu Şora 2006:167) and an image of 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” is also portayed . For the postcolonial world, the intercultural marriage is Gordimer’s “silver lining”, just as it was for interracial marriages in colonial period. Stereotypical distinctions is undermined by Nadine Gordimer and the opposition Orient/ Occident is reversed. South Africa is known by political renewal, liberalism, and economic progress, at the beginning of the 21st century, and thus associated with Occidental images, South Africans being known as “European – but they don’t call themselves that [...]” (Gordimer 2001:94).

Violence and the process of Reconciliation in South Africa

Another favourite theme in Gordimer’s writings is 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. Although in the novel *The House Gun* violence is the main topic (1998), and instances of violent acts are also identified in the novel *None to Accompany Me*, where violence is associated 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)

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

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

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.

The primary goal with which The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) was founded in January 1989 was “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” and an “alternative to conflict” (Bruce 2011). Under second crucial step the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was assembled in 1995. The fundamental aim of Commission was to recognize its legacy of political violence and to consider the most effective way to come to terms with its past.

Nadine Gordimer believes that the main task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Amnesty Commission is to expose “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 (Paul 1998). The basic theme of *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 presents her view of the transitory South Africa by linking stories of ordinary people and history itself, 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 psychological transformation of a white South African family, how they pursue the truth and finally understand the mechanisms of violence is illustrated in *The House Gun*. The way by which the South African society is making an attempt to reconcile with its violent past by putting itself on trial is tried by the white couple to come to terms with their son's murder. The presentation of the images of death and violence as random acts not connected to the audience is used to examine the influence of mass media on the young population. However, all the members of a community were involved in the "spectacle of violence", without any exception, and it is strongly anchored in ordinary life.

The issues of health and disease also fascinate Nadine Gordimer. The concepts such as fear (of exposure, isolation and genetic modifications), vulnerability, solitude and public life, body self-image, nature and survival are used to examine 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. Self is made as the mark of the Health, whereas outsiders – as the mark of disease – Gordimer's latest novel depicts and analyses the otherness of the self and provides experiences as well as use it as a metaphor of the state of South Africa. However, the healthy Self may transform into an unhealthy Other due to the presence of a latent particle in healthy body that may become activated later.

The Return to the Older Ones i.e. the Present

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

The old issues have been replaced by the new one in the life of middle-class people. They have to take so many decisions like where to live and travel, what job to take, where to send their children to school. Steve work as a university lecturer in the chemistry department at a local university and not as an industrial chemist in the guerrilla. A firm that represents blacks in property disputes appoints Jabu as a lawyer. Steve and Jabu refuse to become greedy and corrupt as their former comrades. After working so hard to maintain democracy, they found it as a delicate stability which is threatened by poverty, unemployment, AIDS, government scandal, tribal loyalties, contested elections and the influx of refugees from other African countries. As the South African society using crime is portrayed in *The House Gun* by Gordimer: a carjacking, a home invasion, a brutal school hazing. The couple decided to relocate to Australia due to the increasing crimes.

Consequently, Gordimer novels depict the pictures from different stages of South African history since 1950 and she becomes a great portraitist of the South African society.

Conclusions

At last it can be concluded that, the capacity of post-Apartheid literature has been manifested by rewriting and reinventing new identities by arousing profound interest and continuity to generate curiousness through new stories, and also 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)

The formulation of the reinterpretations of post-Apartheid narratives is in accordance to theories of otherness.

A search is done to answers the questions of Postcolonial theory and literature, such as the following: what does the Other mean in these times? Should “Self” and “Other” be seen with inevitably and accentuating differences? After recognizing the Other, is “comprehension of Otherness” possible or is concept 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.

Gordimer’s post-Apartheid writings have been noticed by several critics that found to abandon the “grand narrative” of Apartheid and turn to the ordinary, to “normalization”. Ileana Dimitriu (2009) also notes that, “in detecting a sense of ‘postmodern melancholy’ in the ‘small histories’ of Gordimer’s post-1990 novels”, the conclusion of social and political investigations of South African writer has disappointed various critics, which shows lessened interest in ‘the politics of nationhood’, and has showed interest “in explorations of postmodern multiplicity”. More social than political issues are solved in new South Africa, more races and ethnicities have 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, the realities of South Africa have been clearly demonstrated in Gordimer's work, her concern regarding the conviction that nothing is local anymore – everything must be perceived globally and with the hardships of her fellow citizens.

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