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A Critical Study of Nadine Gordimer's *"None to Accompany Me"*

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The present paper focuses on Gordimer's middle stage of writing by examine her novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994) in terms of their themes, characters, narrative techniques and to observe Gordimer's gradual progress in her writing style, structure, technique, subject matter and suggesting a new personal interregnum. This research paper elaborates the novel respectively to see how Gordimer's post-apartheid novels and this seems to be very much a novel of the transition. In this novel Gordimer sets story in the transitional phase of 'negotiations' prior to South Africa's first democratic election. It represents a phase of increasing literary self-consciousness.

Gordimer is one of the most powerful protest fiction writers of South Africa. Her writings present socio-political, cultural and historical experience of the natives and portray the realistic picture of their oppression. She occupies a prominent place among white South African writers. She belongs to the group of white academicians and radical South African historians. Her basic thematic concern is the exploration of the interdependence of the blacks and the whites keeping aside deep-rooted racial prejudices. Nadine Gordimer also introduces her themes and reactions in snap shot like pictures in her short stories, and then later develops them fully into her novels.

The profound inequalities that existed prior to 1994 in South Africa were products of colonial malpractices perpetrated by the government through the established apartheid policy against its subjects. The policy grew to gain national recognition, inflicting internal and psychological injuries that left victims who were affected in one way or another, directly or indirectly, with memorable fears. As a consequence of this demise, the present chapter focuses on the challenges faced in the post-apartheid South Africa. The debate reflects the role of the Constitutional Court and its authority to carry out judicial review. It also highlights the roles in the administration of justice of the three arms of government. It is a discussion which considers the past and builds on the present in order to establish the future.

Post-Apartheid South Africa

The post-apartheid era in South Africa saw the birth of a new constitution whose values were based on the principles of democracy, justice, respect for human rights and compromise at the same time. The constitution caused the unjust laws enacted by the apartheid government to be repealed and replaced, most of which were highlighted in previous sections and were inconsistent with the principles of natural justice and good conscience (Fick and Agherdien 2005). The Constitution includes the Bill of Rights in which guarantees freedom, equality and the liberation of all South Africans from all forms of racial discrimination.

South African society is moving toward a democratic future, painfully and reluctantly. It is still unclear about the content and structure of that future society. However, what is certain is that the new South Africa will be based on the uncompromising assumption that it will discard the official concern about racial classification and racial hierarchy. In other words, all the structures and institutions of apartheid will either be destroyed or transformed fundamentally. The first issue to be addressed is how justice can provide the genuine equality away from the discredited concepts of racial hierarchy and inequality. The second question is how the administration of justice can regain legitimacy and the respect of the majority of the black population. Thus, the justice must mean that the distinct races, classes and cultures create a pluralistic society in South Africa where all citizens can participate equally in all matters. The objective of constitutional mechanisms was to decentralize power in ways that prevent a participatory pluralist society from emerging and ensure that the political power does not undermine white economic hegemony in a post-apartheid system.

The constitution of South Africa is the result of negotiation which means that it will essentially involve a series of compromises between the aspirations of black nationalism represented by the ANC and the residual desires of African nationalism represented by the government. As Nelson Mandela has argued: "You need a compromise on fundamental issues. If you are not prepared to compromise, then you must not enter into or think about the process of negotiation at all." (4)

African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela hailed a new dawn filled with hope and change for South Africa, a country that had been embroiled in decades of conflict, not only to mend the frayed social fabric of the country, but to create a social and political system in which all South Africans could participate. For South Africa, however, moving past the dark days of Apartheid proved to be no easy feat; for those on all sides of the spectrum, a myriad of negative feelings ranging from mistrust to resentment were met with social and political change. South Africa required compromise and there was no immediate desire to do so for all involved. This chapter explores this compromise dispute by explaining and analysing the social and political problems faced by South Africa during its transition from Apartheid to a free and democratic society.

None to Accompany Me

None to Accompany Me (1994), Gordimer's eleventh novel and the first post-apartheid novel serves as a link between the past and the present era and deals with the political transition from apartheid to

democracy in the country. It started in 1989 as an idea and was completed in December 1993, its writing spanning precisely the time it set out to describe. Although published in 1994 and thus, technically, a post-apartheid novel, it was seen by many critics as "a transitional novel" (Head 1).

While *None to Accompany Me* describes all the significant socio-political events of the early 1990s, it does not explicitly refer to actual historical events or leaders, but rather implicitly fictionalises the events that occurred and the people who lived in those times. In addition, Gordimer can go beyond a mere chronicle of transition from dependence to independence by choosing to concentrate on a particularly limited number of characters and providing psychological insight for each of them, and prove, as the Chicago Tribune excerpt from the back cover of the 1995 Penguin edition states, that

> She is a lucid witness to the transformation of her country and a formidable. Human relations are tested in the midst of a country's struggle for change, so that the novel also deals with the question of freedom in relation to how the self-survives in the process of enormous political and social change. (Sakamoto 227)

A selection of new conditions featuring a transitional course of events taking place in the recently democratised South Africa encapsulates *None to Accompany Me*. Stpehane Ibinga points out, "the novel explores "the myriad changes taking place on the macro and micro levels of social life." (198). The novel describes the changes following the fall of the apartheid regime in terms of the macro level such as the homecoming waves of past exiles and political prisoners or the establishment of new habits, ranging from the relocation of blacks to the public recognition of new relationships across the colour and gender bar in formerly 'white only' suburbs.

There is a profound effect on human existence in the avalanche of social changes taking place in the public realm, and this can be seen at the micro level. To put it differently, because of the important political mutations taking place in the public sphere, family or individual habits also undergo a transformational process. As the reader is exposed to the changes occurring in the public arena and then introduced to the intimate lives of characters, the novel reflects the transformation process of Gordimer's society.

In order to demonstrate how mutually dependent, they are in a country of transition seeking "to create a new, hybrid nation and culture," the private and the political are intertwined (Temple-Thurston 136). The political sphere and other areas of life in *None to Accompany Me*, according to Dimitriu, are

characterised by liminality; nothing is permanent, different states of mind compete with each other and are moulded into new forms (quoted in Szczurek 140).

Besides the political context, the novel's most prominent aspect is its orientation towards the private sphere of two powerful female characters, Vera Stark, a middle-aged white lawyer, and Sibongile Maqoma, a black political friend who represents the emerging elite of black women with key roles in the new administration. The representation of public life gradually shifts towards private life, and the reader realises that Vera and Sibongile's private stories take precedence over their public ones as the plot unfolds. Therefore, the value of the novel lies in its dual point of view: that of the two women trapped in relationships with their partners and families as they search for "fresh" identities in the emerging New South Africa, and that of a nation "caught in its evolution and undergoing change that is as feared as eagerly anticipated." (Brahimi 48)

None to Accompany Me is consists past and present situations or events such as Vera's relationship with Ben before her divorce, her relationship with Otto Abarbanel, the relationship with the Maqomas before they went into exile etc. that define the future of the protagonists. The reader can follow Vera Stark's life, from her adolescent lovers and first marriage interrupted by the war, through the use of flashbacks, which give the novel a remarkably rich and complex composition, to the gradual but inevitable decay of her second marriage. As Szczurek and Ibinga rightfully observed:

> The narrative non-linearity is countered by one of the most commonly used metaphors in fiction to suggest a transition from one state of order to another which spans the entire novel: the metaphor of a journey. (138)

Throughout the novel, this idea is reinforced, starting from its title - *None to Accompany Me*, which expresses the voyager's loneliness on his journey-and going to permeate the entire structure of the book-the titles of the three parts of the novel: "Baggage", "Transition" and "Arrivals" seem to be borrowed from the airport usage repertoire. The political transition is reflected in the individual transition of the main protagonist, "who travels through her past to reach independence, alone and free to continue the political work that has become the commitment of her life like the country (129). In a quest for belonging and a search for identity, the travelling nation and the characters tackle the emerging political context, the two inseparably interlinked.

One of the most significant problems in South African history has to do with the territorial

segregation of the African land by successive acts by the Whites. In *None to Accompany Me*, this familiar theme of space is explored through the characters of Vera and Zeph. The Group Areas Act that imposed residential apartheid in the country was passed in 1950 by the South African government. As a result, the urban areas were divided into zones, with the whites assigned the better ones. Two years later, the Native Laws Amendment Act restricted the right of blacks to live permanently in urban areas, and in 1954, the Land Act imposed a five-hundred-yard buffer strip between any black neighbourhood and the white city it served, creating a captive labour force.

The novel clearly emphasises the conflict between African farmers and rural black farm workers. An Afrikaner farmer whose grandfather was a Boer general, Tertius Odendaal, continues the struggle in a different way by holding on to his three farms. He is prepared to use any means necessary to defend them from the invasion of black squatters, and even attempts to appeal to the government to legally assist him. This is how Vera gets involved because she works for a Legal Foundation in the early 1990s, which

> Came into being in response to the plight of black communities that had become baggage, to be taken up and put down according to the logic of separating black people from white people's proximity. (None to Accompany Me, 12).

It is in this context that Zeph Rapulana first makes his appearance as an individual who is highly capable, independent, accountable and socially aware, but who is not blinded by idealism. Vera initially sees him only as someone who can help her negotiate with Tertius Odendaal, but the character of Zeph develops rapidly as he comes to represent a new class of blacks who know what they want surprisingly well like Sibongile. Violence may not always be avoidable, but a much better job is being done by this new class of blacks to keep it under control. The book also indicates that Zeph's is an identity that is desperately needed to operate in the transition to majority rule.

Regardless of the initial thoughts of Vera, Zeph "acts more like the leader of the squatters than a negotiator" (Brahimi 52), and the result of his actions proves to be helpful for the blacks, who ultimately win their case against Odendaal. It is a positive result for the blacks in general and for Rapulana in particular, as this success enables him to get hold of a cottage in the suburbs. It is in this cottage's annex that Vera will eventually understand her place in the new South Africa and acquire a new identity.

The relationship between Vera and Zeph is entirely set in the context of a powerful renewal.

Together, they experience the political exaltation of the 1990s, which creates an intimate bond between them, "no emotion. could draw two people more closely" (None to Accompany Me, 72) and how the strong current of the present carries them headily" (ibid) can be understood and replaces other forms of attraction that Vera drew towards men in the past. It is this new context that allows Vera to discard her old house and become Zeph's tenant at the end of the novel.

Vera has to give up her house and family as well as her white identity and sexual life to be accepted. "Gordimer said of Vera Stark that "she sees her life's baggage as something she took on and wanted and wouldn't have been without, but she doesn't want it to be dragged around forever with her" (quoted in Bazin, 35), so she gets rid of both forms of baggage by selling the house: historical and private. In other words, Vera came to the conclusion that 'transitory' is personal life, whereas 'transcendent' is political life, and as a result, she chose to commit herself to the latter. Finally, she feels comfortably at home' in the new country as a white person with an appropriate and recognised role to play in creating equality for all in South Africa.

The journey of Sibongile and Didymus Maqoma, a couple who spent several years in exile while continuing their work as overseas activists and are now returning to be part of the New South Africa nation-building. They are confronted with a pivotal historical moment in their lives, like all the other characters in the novel, which will force them to redefine who they are and renegotiate their place in the new political order.

The second important issue in South African history is illustrated by Maqomas *None to Accompany Me:* the effects of displacement on the black people of South Africa. When the novel begins, the black couple returns from exile, "returning heroes", "transients" awaited by singing and dancing crowds at the airport (None to Accompany Me 43). This is a time of "transit to repossession, life recovered" (ibid, 44), a long-awaited homecoming, we are told. Nevertheless, in the new context, the past still looms over with its rivalries, dependencies and friendships; it does not disappear: "The past was there. The weight their lives had was the weight of the past, out of storage and delivered to those who had remained behind" (ibid, 36-37). Sibongile and Didymus, who, like Vera, also have to rethink their whole lives and renegotiate their identities in the new political order, are not only facing the past, but also the present.

Their personal and political commitments are put to the test from the moment they set foot in South Africa again. They have to move into a hotel where other returnees live when they come back from exile. The emerging black political figure, Sibongile, accustomed to the privacy she had in exile, is unable to put up with the temporary displacement from one room to another until her family finds a residence. She is

unsatisfied with the conditions they encounter at home and complains to Didy:

> I can't live like this, I can tell you…At the beginning, years ago, yes. It was necessary. In Dar, in Botswana. But not now! My God! I'm not running for my life. I'm not running from anybody anymore, I'm not grateful for a bit of shelter, political asylum. How long can we be expected to carry out in this filthy dump, this whore house for Hillbrow drunks, this wonderful concession to desegregation, what an honour to sleep under the white man's spunk" (None to Accompany Me 45)

Although the modest temporary accommodation for Didymus is acceptable under the conditions, Sibongile interprets his attitude as "the farce of self-sacrifice when it was not necessary" (None to Accompany Me 46). She cannot comprehend why Didymus ignores "the limitless possibilities of self-gratification placed at his feet by history" (Isidore Diala, quoted in Szczurek 162). While the husband is portrayed as someone who is prepared to suffer in noble silence and to do "whatever is required, as all must", his wife indulges in "beautiful objects" (74). Through these passages Gordimer exemplifies the fundamental differences in attitudes between the two spouses: Sibongile's inclination to the culture of privilege and Didymus's strong stand against it.

The division between Sally and Didy is further widened by a political event, namely the election of Sibongile to the new executive, to the detriment of her husband, who is assigned to write the history of the years of struggle. What Gordimer seems to imply is that women are better equipped and as such, more fit to meet the demands of the transition in New South Africa, while men are not and therefore remaining symbolically in the past.

In society, the novelist reverses traditional views about women. Of course, in a couple like the Maqomas, it is not purely by chance that it is the woman who gets the upper hand in the new dispensation. Sibongile belongs to that general movement in a larger context, which released an enormous amount of female intelligence and energy at the turn of the century that had long been denied to the world. Women can now freely and unreservedly assert themselves by gaining the legitimacy they have been so wrongly deprived of for many years. Sibongile is "an example of those strong African women always evoked by historical tradition, literature and legends, but always as exceptions, who have broken out of the walls that have kept other women in their huts and at their grinding stones" (Brahimi 58).

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These changes influence Didymus, who finds it very difficult to accept that his wife is "one of their chosen ones" (None to Accompany Me, 99). Didymus feels left out when assigned to write the history book project, and the reversal of gender roles in his marriage poses a great challenge to his self-esteem. Between his revolutionary ideology and its opposing forces, he is caught. As Brahimi points out these forces are not just "what his traditional vision of the hierarchy within the marital couple is simplistically called" (58), but also doubts and questions that express an authentic identity crisis: what is left for him to do and what is his role in the future? Didymus is depressed now as "one of the old guards" (79), because he feels he no longer has a place in the present. His revolutionary ideals are deceived by the political direction his country takes and this makes him bitter and passive. Nevertheless, in the end, he accepts the changes and in doing so, he is able to preserve his family's unity. Didy's 'sacrifice' and acceptance at a symbolic level represent the sacrifices every South African will have to make to maintain the unity of the country and to provide the opportunity for a better life in it.

Another interesting character that stands for a new type of individual that makes its appearance in the re-/construction of the South African national identity is the late-born daughter of the Maqomas, Mpho. She is a "sixteen-year-old beauty of the kind created by the cross-pollination of history" (None to Accompany Me, 48-49); a "resolution of the struggle for power in a country that was hers, yet where, because of that power struggle, she had not been b because of that power struggle, conferences, negotiation, mass action and international monitoring or intervention" (ibid, 49). Born in exile, she speaks flawless London English, but not her parents' Zhulu and Xhosa, although she understands them. In describing the personality of Mpho, Gordimer summarises the impacts of displacement

> The oyster-shell-pink palms of her slender hands completed the striking colour contrast of matt black skin. Her hair, drawn back straightened…Congolese style…put of her mouth came a perky London English. She could not speak an African language, neither the Zulu of her mother nor the Xhose of her father. (None to Accompany Me 48-49)

Despite her exile background, she is faster than her own mother, who feels a deep sense of alienation after her return, to adjust to the new South Africa reality. As in the case of Zeph Rapulana, Gordimer seems to suggest that in the new dispensation "mutations" (None to Accompany Me 51) such as Mpho are required and it is not them who need to adapt, but the others who have an old-fashioned mindset.

The family and the couple have evolved at the same time that society and state politics have evolved.

In this regard, we have seen how the marriage of Vera and Ben has crumbled to pieces under the weight of the new context, or how Sally and Didy have undergone a serious test of dedication solely to become more powerful and united than ever before. Nevertheless in democratic South Africa, there is one more form of family that is unexpectedly created and that could very well become a common appearance. This is a lesbian family of two white women: the daughter of Vera, Annie, and the biologist, Lou, who has adopted a black baby. Under the previous political dispensation, considered unconventional and inadmissible, homosexual marriage is now brought to the fore, to be put under scrutiny.

New social phenomena, built on the democratic principle of total respect for individual freedoms, are emerging against the post-liberation backdrop and Gordimer adapts to the new demands of her society. In None to Accompany Me we can observe that Gordimer's characters enjoy the sexual freedom of the post-oppressive times. The category of people who openly reveal and talk about their homosexual orientation is represented by Annie. She goes beyond traditional standards not only by adhering to a lesbian partnership but also by deciding to live in the same household with her partner, making a bold public statement about the new kind of couple that society now allows and accepts.

Gordimer reveals that new sexual orientations such as lesbianism or homosexualism have become legitimised or ordinary practises in the new South Africa; they are now part and parcel of the ongoing process of creating a fresh national identity. As Ibinga points out, "after having for decades stood strongly against racial discrimination, Gordimer remains an advocate of a fair society where injustices and discrimination of any kind are not tolerated" (205). Her references to the most intimate questions seem to show that if the individual is to be freed from social or cultural constraints, the novelist wants to recognise that domestic issues such as sexuality should not be neglected in public debates (Ibid).

In all these ways, *None to Accompany Me* highlights the sense of responsibility that people begin to seek in times of transition; it shows us that it is essential to embark on a journey of self-analysis regarding one's past actions in times after liberation comes, as this is the only way through which identities and societies can be effectively reconstructed. Despite the fact that entire groups acquire a previously denied legitimacy, society will not necessarily evolve in the direction of the greater freedom of individuals without sacrifices from each and every part of the social fabric. The first post-apartheid novel by Gordimer illustrates the possibilities and dangers of the power struggle that took place in the early 1990s, through the diversity and complexity of its characters.

What seems to happen through a thorough and detailed analysis of behaviours,

> interactions and attitudes is that in order to succeed, the new dispensation had to confront and renegotiate its past, get rid of false loyalties, face the corruptibility of power and most importantly, take on the burden of oneself with all the responsibility involved in the process (Szczurek 183).

It might be a long, difficult and treacherous road to take, but the process of national identity reconstruction will only be completed by walking it together as one nation. Thus, in *None to Accompany Me* (1994), Gordimer explores the infinite possibilities the 1990s had to offer: the return of the exiled to the country, changes in political power as well as in gender and race roles, new policies of land distribution or sexual freedom. There is a deep impact on human existence in the avalanche of social changes taking place in the public realm. Due to the important political mutations taking place in the public sphere, family or individual habits are also undergoing a transformative process. Under the pressure of socio-political shifts, identities and places are renegotiated. In a search for identity against the background of the new political context, the nation and the characters embark on a journey.

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