

Apartheid in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*

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Abstract

Nadine Gordimer's preoccupation with violence and varying notions of the expiration of guilt, justice, reconciliation and the implication of the transfer of power for both blacks and whites, injects itself into her novels and her *The House Gun* expresses a deep anxiety to the culture of violence in post-apartheid South Africa as part of the enduring legacy of apartheid. This struggle to come to terms with the nation's past has produced certain ethical response to the historical guilt of apartheid. infact, her novel offer fragmentary exploration of the truth and reconciliation commission, which revealed the inability to assume consensual knowledge of nearly all segments of South African society. Through complex representation of violence, landscape and space, and scenes of interrogation, the novel portrays personal and collective trauma that

disrupted the rhetoric and appearance of reconciliation in apartheid South Africa. It also attempts to foreground the enduring ramifications of apartheid. Being widely referred to as South Africa's first novel set entirely in the post-apartheid state, it addresses all the issues that included violent crime in South Africa, the persistence of gendered divisions of space and the ways in which national history was constructed.

Full paper

The novel opens with the news that Duncan Lindgard had been imprisoned on the charge of murdering a man called Jespersen. Claudia Lindgard, Duncan's mother, is a doctor and Harald, her husband, is an insurance executive. They belong to white upper-middle-class. Her relationship with her husband, Harald, has been weak until the issue of Duncan's guilt emerges and the ramification of the act strikes the couple hard. They wonder at their understandings of human beings and start questioning the love between man and women, between parents and son and the ease of friendship.

When Duncan selects Hamilton Motsamai, a black lawyer, to handle the case fresh worries haunt them as they fear that memories of apartheid existence of blacks may affect the case as Hamilton Motsamai has just returned from exile. He assures them that even though the death penalty is still on the Statute Book, there is a possibility that the court will rule it out as unconstitutional as the climate of violence that existed in the country bears some serious responsibility for the act that the accused had committed. Harald wonders whether the inhumanity of the old regime's assault upon the body and mind has somehow survived beyond its time. He recollects incidents that led to but burnings and assassinations for political rivali'y on

one hand and social crimes that were committed in the name of race and colour or for considerations. He wonders what justice is meted to as well as the keys of the vehicle and the taxi drivers who killed rivals for the patronage of fares and giving license to a young man to pick up a gun and shoot in the head of a lover. Duncan's crime is pieced together by Motsamai for good defence. It is found that he had been living in a cottage with his girlfriend Nathalie. Other friends including Carl Jespersen, who was a homosexual, lived in a house nearby. At the trial, it emerges that Duncan had discovered Nathalie and Carl making love on an evening in Carl's house. Shortly after this, Jespersen's murdered body is found lying on the sofa. Duncan refuses to say anything to his parents about the affair when they come to visit him in prison.

When Nathalie is questioned, she insists on the fact that Duncan tried to dominate her in the relationship and admits to the fact that Duncan saved her from drowning herself and gave her a new lease life. She also mocks Duncan for the fact that he had a fling with Jespersen at one stage. She confesses that she had been living with him for some time but has been unfaithful. Nathalie is now pregnant and does not know exactly who the father of the child. The story traces the complex relationships between parents and son and how they moved apart from one another once the son matures. In Duncan's testimony, he admits to shooting Jespersen with *The House Gun*, which was beside the sofa. He is sentenced to seven years imprisonment. Nathalie, later on, has a baby and Duncan asks his parents to look after it and provide it with something.

Gordimer turns away from the realist mode and opts for modernist techniques to explore the relationship between the self and society. In the prolonged absence of the novel's central actor, the author is able to concentrate on a void and move toward a collapse of the private/public, personal/political binary. This strategy also allows Gordimer to penetrate the inner psyche of Harald and Claudia, revealing subtle racial prejudices and the white liberal's illusion that he or

she can exist outside the historical process. The relationship between the Lindgards and Motsamai is emblematic of shifting power relations between Blacks and Whites in post-apartheid South Africa. However, Gordimer documents in detail the private reflections of the Lindgards in regard to their defense council and in so doing, reveals lingering racial prejudices that would remain unspoken in realist texts, which tend to rely more heavily on spoken dialogue. Upon discovering that a black lawyer has been appointed to defend their son, the Lindgards think:

They had heard it at once, in the shock of the name, the choice of a black man. She is not one of those doctors who touch black skin indiscriminately along with white, in their work but retain liberal prejudices against the intellectual capacities of blacks. Yet she is questioning, and he is in the muck in which they are stewing now, where murder is done, old prejudices writhe to the surface. (33)

Apart from Harald and Claudia's more explicit but self-conscious racial biases, such as their initial reaction to Motsamai's appointment, their specific impressions of Motsamai and his family are similarly dubious and equally revealing. Claudia focuses on his accent and appearance during their first meeting, saying that "the whites of his eyes" were "strikingly clear-cut in his small mahogany face as the glass eyes set in ancient statues" (40) and that his chin "asserted a traditional African style" (39) than a caricature of questionable accuracy. She regards him as "full of himself. Somehow arrogant" (43) after he lays out a strategy of defence. Before having met Motsamai's family, Harald claims, "He has the idea that women, somewhere in the background, are more accessible than men... it comes from the way things are in his own house. . . It is their style" (95), thus relegating him to the common era.

The Lindgards clearly retain radicalized conceptions of Motsamai's identity. Gordimer's distance from the narrative voice of these portions of the novel remains unclear. In focalizing the narrative through multiple characters Harald, Claudia, and occasionally Motsamai whose lives revolve around an absent protagonist, Duncan, Gordimer "investigates the broad modernist preoccupations as an inability to assume consensual knowledge and also pointedly refers to the failure of the 'consensual entente' that had not led to 'totalizing' terms of the relationship between self and society" (Medalie, 635).

Gordimer's modernist exploration of the inner psyche of Harald and Claudia reveals the fluctuating distance between their interpretations and responses to the events that affect their family. Harald tends to search for answers in literature and religious faith while Claudia, steeped in secular humanism, questions the possibility of "consensual knowledge." In one scene, Harald and Claudia's divergent worldviews clash as they discuss the absent Duncan's criminal motivations. Claudia tells Harald, "Go on. Adultery, blasphemy, you believe in sin. I do not think I do. I just believe in damage; do not damage. That is what he was taught, that's what he knows knew. So now is to take life the only sin recognized by people like me? Unbelievers. Not like you" (HG, 103).

The Lindgards' struggle to come to terms with their son's actions and to sustain a meaningful dialogue with one another suggests the concerns that some critics of the TRC expressed regarding the tremendous effort to piece together individual traumas into a single, institutionalized narrative. Furthermore, Duncan's prolonged absence in the text forces the reader to continually defer and revise judgment and speaks to the much moral indeterminacy that surrounded the treatment of the victims and perpetrators of apartheid during South Africa's transition. By making Duncan and Motsamai remain in shade Gordimer denies access to the

consciousness of either for most of the duration of the novel. He remains an enigmatic figure throughout the novel and it is impossible to account definitively for his motivations or the circumstances in which he shoots Carl Jespersen. He resists the search for a conventional protagonist and the moral slipperiness of his character subverts binary oppositions (good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, etc.) The destabilizations of traditional narrative about the concepts of "self" put the onus on the reader to create meaning.

Duncan's private reflections are not made available until the novel's closing pages and the rendering of his parents' subjectivity does not lessen his inscrutability. What the rendering of Claudia's and Harald's inner life and struggle to come to terms with their son's violent crime does reveal is that attempts to separate their private lives from the political process are futile and that their spatially-protected privacy is a false illusion of refuge. The novel features the "private life" of a couple invaded by the "public domain" as the ramifications of apartheid-era' injustice and violence penetrate every private space in post-apartheid South Africa: "There is a labyrinth of violence not counter to the city, but a form of communication within the city itself," and "Duncan is contained in that labyrinth" (141).

The Lindgards were unaware of it as they remained behind security gates. Duncan's act claimed their labyrinthine spatial conception through which Gordimer exposes the impossibility of clear-cut divisions of "private" and "public" space and the inescapability of South Africa's political history the Lindgards try to resist. Once they were made to come to public domain their struggle to divide their personal lives from political context and public violence are shattered. The Lindgards initially resist Gordimer's labyrinthine conception of space and violence by saying it can happen only to "Other people! Other people! These awful things happen to other people" (78), as do their fellow white South Africans, who agree to it by saying: "no-one is

casting opprobrium at Mr.Lindgard for his son's criminal act; what they are expressing is a mixture of pity and a whine against the injustice that such things should be allowed to happen to a nice high-up gentleman like him" (85).

However, Harald later muses that the truth of all this was that he and his wife belonged, now, to the other side of privilege. Neither whiteness, nor observance of the teachings of the father and son, nor the religious respectability of liberalism, nor money had kept them in safety. In a way, that status ended with the forced removal of the old regime, and Duncan's brought an awareness that there is no chance of remaining where they had been 'surviving in themselves as they were' (127).

The "forced removals of the old regime," is the metaphor that significantly links the racial and financial privileges in post-apartheid South Africa to apartheid-era segregation. This recognition draws attention to how white South Africans, even those who considered themselves liberal (as the Lindgards do), benefited from the apartheid system and allowed for a spatial separation between the "genteel white suburbs" (12) and allowed the "cruelty enacted in the name of the State they had lived in" to continue (126), "that led to beatings and interrogations, maiming and assassinations" (142), of which the Lindgards claim that "none of it had anything to do with them" (126). But the events force the Lindgards to acknowledge the common humanity from whom they have sought to distance themselves by rigidly maintaining the boundary between their public and private lives: For [Harald], the photograph of a child clinging to the body of its dead mother and the report of a night of mortar fire sending nameless people randomly to the shelter of broken walls and collapsing cellars was suddenly part of his own life no longer outside but within the parameters of disaster... . (280)

However, while it is true that the Lindgards grieve privately, there are more than a few moments in the text in which Harald and Claudia emerge from their absorption in their own sorrow to recognize that they now have something in common with people whose situation had previously seemed wholly dissimilar to theirs. For example, Claudia experiences her work in the downtown clinic in an entirely different light. Suddenly she realizes that she "is not the only woman with a son in prison" and "she is no longer the one who doles out comfort or its Placebos for others' disasters, herself safe, untouchable, in another class" (17).

Harald's realization that they can no longer live 'in themselves as they were' (127) marks the collapse of the private/public binary, the phrase "in mensemselfs" emphasizes the internal or personal quality of a life that cannot exist outside political systems. Gordimer's subversion of the personal/political binary, her destabilization of conventional notions of self and her use of multiple focus produces a narrative that questions the possibility of a definitive, singular truth can the white liberal continue to rely on race and class-based privilege in a post-transition state instead of recognizing the limits of his authorial power? By representing trauma and violence through penetrative insight into the inner consciousness of multiple characters, Gordimer suggests the existence of unspoken and invisible histories that cannot exist outside institutional and collective accounts of the past. The National Party (NP) sought to safeguard its authority by deepening ethnic divisions and fostering multiple ethnic nationalisms by passing legislation that relegated black South Africans to quasi-independent Bantustans or homelands.

For several decades, blacks endured many of the brutalities that comprised ethnic cleansing: collective expulsion, forced migration, bulldozing and seizure of homes and infamous pass laws, among other hardships. However, conditions have changed, and Gordimer delineates the emerging phenomenon through Motsamai's ability to transgress apartheid-era divisions of space.

He is symbolic of the new South Africa's transitional period in which he has access to social, political, and financial capital that was previously reserved exclusively for the whites. He lives in a "suburb that had been built in the Thirties and Forties by white businessmen", and his sizable house was meant to "express the distinction of old money" and the "prestige and substance of the plantation-house pillars of the Deep South" (166). While some critics interpret Motsamai's residence in a formerly white suburb as a delicious bit of irony and see Motsamai himself as the heroic figure of the Rainbow Nation, the narrator of *The House Gun* notes that Motsamai's neighbourhood was saved by the unpredicted solution of desegregation and counted Motsamai among the "new generation with newer money that arrived, although these were no immigrants from another country. They were those who had always belonged to the hovels and township yards they were confined to. Now they were provided the "Electrically-controlled gates" to create a barrier between the (black) "cities squatter Camps" and affluent suburban neighbourhoods. Motsamai seems to have adopted the nouveau riche lifestyle of his Boer predecessors with ease, abandoning his activist background and embracing the real powers of the beneficiaries of the apartheid regime.

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