VIOLENT TRANSITIONIN NADINE GORDIMERTHE HOUSE GUN

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Traditional and modern societies have always been confronted with different forms of violence that reflect on both public and private life. Testimonies of violence are provided by oral or written literature, visual descriptions or mass-media coverage. This paper approaches the vast theme of violence in relation to Nadine Gordimer's novel, The House Gun from two perspectives: on the one hand, it analyses the violent process of transition of the post-Apartheid South African society and on the other, it focuses on the process of reconciliation with the violent past. Both perspectives will focus on the relationship between the vulnerable and the violent Other and on the way they shape the Gordimer's perception of the South African society.

Keywords: violence, reconciliation, vulnerable, transition.

As an interpreter of life in South Africa and its conscience, Nadine Gordimer's protest was directed towards the attacks of both white and black military groups on civil population, towards the violence that has put South African cities on top of the list of towns having the highest crime rate in the world. The novels *None to Accompany Me* (1991), *The House Gun* (1998) and some of her post-Apartheid short storiesconcentrate on violence and its consequences in the new South Africa, on the transformation of people in the transition towards reconciliation and tolerance. This new South Africa is not a romantic place: there are deaths by violence, corruption, political rivalries. Coming to terms with social change and questions of culpability, connivance, and compromise are the main preoccupations of South African writers at the beginning of a new stage of national literature. Transition, by nature, implies entering a crisis, and every crisis requires self-examination. Gordimer presents a family in crisis, as a microcosm, to expose South Africa in state of transition and quandary: she is expressing the questions that trouble her people concerning their position within society and as a society, their beliefs and their acceptance of the past. Another core theme in post-Apartheid South African literature is the deconstruction of the term 'post-Apartheid' and a consideration of the subsequent social conditions of this period. Some scholars compare it to the postcolonial period of other "liberated" nations, in which people have control of the election process, but there are still unequal economic conditions and oppressive class structures, which lead to riots and random acts of violence.

In an interview, the South African writer of Croatian origin, Ivan Vladislavic, has underlined the dilemma of writers in his country, which extends, in fact, to all citizens concerned with South Africa's past and present:

> Now it's as if writers are being pushed between those two positions, because if you lose sight of Apartheid, then people say you've forgotten the past, that you're part of the trend towards 'amnesia'; on the other hand, if you go too deeply into Apartheid, they say you're holding onto the past, and it's negative. (Warnes 2000:280)

Violence is a legacy of the Apartheid period and unequivocally adopting one of the two extreme attitudes expressed by Vladislavic represents the predicament of South Africa. Gordimer has found a method to combine the two points of view.

As Ileana ŞoraDimitriu (2000:103) observes, Gordimer's novels used to be a pretext for discussions intended to explain economic or land policy, corruption in offices, federalism,

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the education crisis, lesbianism and AIDS. The return to civilian times is not an easy task. "Gordimer carries her burden as national spokesperson: she cannot avoid, as fact, the baggage of South Africa's traumatic transition. In her attempt to deflect the obdurate event, it is almost as if she has to rediscover an earlier novelistic craft concerning the resilience of the private life amid social surroundings".

Replacing Apartheid themes and subject matters in the new South Africa is a demanding task. However, *None to Accompany Me* and *The House Gun* explore violence primarily as a heritage of Apartheid South Africa, and secondarily in connection with individual and social responsibility to end it; *The Pickup* engages with the oriental adventures of a young white female South African. *Get a Life* explores themortal body and life choicesAlthough it is not the first work published after the abolition of Apartheid laws, *The House Gun* is clearly Gordimer'sfirst novel set in post-Apartheid South Africa.

J.M. Coetzee (2007:256) observes that Gordimer's essays "show her struggling inconclusively in the toils of the question of what it means to write *for* a people 'to write for their sake and on their behalf' as well as to be read by them". Moreover, sometimes language seems insufficient to fulfill her need to convey a certain image of her country and this is the reason why "[s]he is sometimes content to gesture toward what she means rather than pinning it down in words".

A process of reconciliation with the past parallels the process of transition as guilt and punishment are two notions that South African society must replace with a 'forgive and forget policy' in order to complete the transitory period. The process of "probing, of release and of uncovering the traumas of past events has had an impact on South African literature" (Kossew 2004:151). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has brought reconciliation to the public's attention: "TRC broke down the fundamental divides between public and private spaces and narratives, and between the scales of the familial, the local, the national, and the international: that is, stories that were previously considered private and personal were told in a public forum, registered in collective consciousness, and mediated for a global audience" (Graham 2009:3). TRC is only the beginning of an ongoing process of transformation toward an understanding of its past through a continual re-writing of its history. Shane Graham (2009:5) speaks about a new South African literature that arose after the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Gordimer is part of it. Narrative forms use "representational strategies" such as "displacement and condensation, mapping, archiving, and curating; the symbolic conflation of bodies and landscapes; excavations and holes; and palimpsests". Gordimer has already used some of these forms in her novels and what she borrows from these hearings is the legalese of the courtroom. In 1975, she remarked that "we live in our situation as of now, as the legal phrase goes; one falls back on legal phrases as other forms of expression become too risky". Despite the language that allows no interpretations, she does not offer a fixed invariable narrative of historical truth. Instead, she suggests that an interpretation of her narrative implies decoding meaning through absence, as she only offers one short testimony of the main character who committed murder.

The House Gun presents a possible outcome when a gun is "lying around in the living-room, like a house cat" (Gordimer 1998:271), the consequences of violence and the strong ties that it builds among people at a time when 'something terrible happened'. The opening line of the novel announces the South Africans' concern with the terrible things that take place in their country during its transformation: guilt, punishment, confession and violence, to name just a few of the issues faced by the 'rainbow nation'. Gordimer depicts the vain

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attempts of a society to shield itself from the violence within, which was forced into everyone's life.

Harald and Claudia Lingard, the passively liberal white couple placed at the center of the story, do not consider that much has changed in the political transition to the post-Apartheid rule, from F.W. de Klerk to Nelson Mandela. Harald, a business executive, and Claudia, a medical doctor, live ordinary lives until one evening when they hear that "something terrible has happened". They are living in relative security, in a small and comfortable house in the Suburbs of Johannesburg, watching evening news of disasters elsewhere, when they are faced with a piece of news about violence, that will affect their lives. The Lindgards have moved to "this townhouse complex with […] security-monitored entrance" (Gordimer 1998:3) with the specific purpose to escape the outside world and its violence, and the moment when they hear the 'buzz of the intercom' they enter into a state of alert. Any visitor ringing at that time of night cannot be a bearer of good news. The white middle-class family believes they have been shielded from such violent intrusions, until Duncan's friend brings the message of violence into their carefully cushioned existence.

Their only son, Duncan, has been arrested for killing one of his housemates. He confesses to the crime, although his testimonies are not out of guilt. Yet, Harald and Claudia cannot understand what happened to Duncan's faith and to their personal teaching to him about the sanctity of human life, nor can they understand the state of violence that had always affected others. The parents know that their son has encoded in his hybrid the different streams of immigration to South Africa - Scottish and Norwegian - "genetically coded name Duncan Peter Lindgard" (65) and they are appealing to genetic factors in order to explain his choices.

The House Gun is a record of the psychological transformations that Harald and Claudia undergo, as they search for the truth and an understanding 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 novel is divided into two parts: the first part presents the reactions that Duncan's parents have when they are confronted with the news of their son being a murderer, whereas the second part provides access to Duncan's multiple identities, depending on his relationships with the others. The different perspectives on Duncan's personality, including the short incursion in his conscience, de-construct the typical portrait of a murderer, and compose the complex image of a troubled South African society.

As in the majority of Gordimer's novels, the personal becomes political. Duncan's crime is definitely a crime of passion, and it determines Harald and Claudia to return to reality and face the legacy left by Apartheid: South Africa's bloody history has determined its inhabitants to keep guns for protection in almost every household. Duncan's parents also must face their own prejudices, as they have to accept Hamilton Motsamai, the black lawyer hired by the defendant. His attempt to demonstrate that Duncan acted against his own nature, as he was "betrayed out of his mind" by his gay friend and his girlfriend is successful, and it marks the rise of the black elite.

Nadine Gordimer presents new links between the self and society. Harald and Claudia understand how complicated relationships are and how flexible the boundaries between them may be. *The House Gun* is the portrait of a new nation in the process of reconciliation, represented in the relationships between a father and mother, a husband and wife, a parent and child, a nation and its citizens. The novel starts as a personal tragedy of a couple of parents

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who suffer that their son murders a man, and continues with a transformation of their personal values and beliefs. At the same time, the murder that Duncan commits functions as a prism used to explore many faces of intimacy: intimacy between husband and wife, parent and child, lovers (hetero and homosexual) and friends, attorney and client. A parallel theme is that of the integration of blacks, through their representative Hamilton Motsamai.

Despite the fact that Gordimer's novel focuses on violence committed by a white person, this is not a case that could be brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is a crime committed in the household of a young, privileged, middleclass man, a crime of passion in a post-Apartheid moral climate. As Gordimer declared in a 1998 interview with Donald Paul "the climate of violence seems to seep through, like some kind of stain, so that it forms the connection of [the Lindgards'] lives". Thus, as Sue Kossew (2004:156) notices, "this paradoxical assertion of violence as a way of linking the individual to the communal so that personal trauma becomes collective experience is a central aspect of the text". The questions of justice, truth, and coming to terms with the past are answered in the microcosm of this middle-class white family, which is the image of an entire multicultural and multiracial society put on trial and forced to remember and reconcile with what is revealed during the Commission's hearings or during a murder trial.

The plot develops when Claudia refers to a note that she and Harald wrote to their son after one of his classmates had committed suicide: "There is nothing that you cannot tell us" (1998:159). However, it soon becomes clear that Harald and Claudia know very little about Duncan's life, about his friends and his love for another man.

There are sections in the novel that offer glimpses into Duncan's perceptions of life, and what intimacy, love, and justice mean to him. Nevertheless, for the most part he remains an opaque character and a trigger for discussions about violence in South Africa. Duncan, like Gordimer, is an avid reader who recognizes that writers are "dangerous people" (1998:282), because they know how to murder without picking up a weapon. Gordimer (2000:89) remarks that "the question of violence" enters deeply into writers' awareness and they must admit that they have an "inescapable need to read the signs society gives out cryptically and to try to make sense of what these really mean".

For both Harald and Claudia, something new has emerged "out of something terrible" (279) and they find a different way of living in the new South Africa, no longer safely secured in their own ignorance. They agree to take some responsibility for a new-born, even though the father is not necessarily Duncan.

The final words of the novel belong to Duncan, as his seven years in prison give him time to read Homer's *The Odyssey* and reflect on the idea of violence as a repetition. His conclusion is that "I've had to find a way to bring life and death together" (294).

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