

SOUTH AFRICA REFORMED: SOCIAL CHANGES IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE HOUSE GUN*

Cătălin TECUCIANU¹

¹PhD Candidate, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania
Corresponding author: catalin.tecucianu@gmail.com

Abstract

Published in 1998, *The House Gun* is Gordimer's testimony of South African realities four years after the first democratic elections took place. It has been tagged in many ways; as "a courtroom thriller" (*The Times*), "a triumph (...) a passionate, multi-layered story of awakening" (*Yorkshire Post*), "an engrossing and deeply considered novel about violence and its consequences" (*Esquire*), "a work of exceptional caliber" (*Sunday Times*), or as a "pro-tolerance novel" (*Harpers and Queen*). At its core, the novel is an attempt to lay bare and account for some of the problems South Africa was facing at that particular moment in time. By taking *The House Gun* as the point of reference, this paper aims at investigating the changes occurring in the South African social fabric and the new relationships established between blacks and whites.

Keywords: *democracy, otherness, post-apartheid, racism.*

Gordimer's second post-apartheid novel, *The House Gun*, explores the tough obligations of the New South Africa while also investigating the changes in the social fabric that the arrival of democracy with its principles of liberty and freedom had brought about. Gordimer's post-apartheid novels display new features, portraying mostly new social phenomena. One of these new features has to do with the privileged place she has given to the private field over the public, even though politics has not completely disappeared from her writing. Thus, in *The House Gun*, Gordimer focuses, particularly, on a white family, represented by the Lindgards, and on the character of Hamilton Motsamai, a brilliant black lawyer who is representative of a new, emergent black class. The interaction between the white family and Motsamai constitutes the core of the novel and the changes that their relationship undergoes are representative for an entire nation.

The Lindgards are presented as a white, middle-class, liberal family, "not racist, if racist

means having revulsion against skin colour, believing or wanting to believe that anyone who is not your own colour or religion or nationality is intellectually and morally inferior"¹. Ascribing their political interests to the sphere of liberalism which set out to promote human individuality, pluralism, equality before the law, diversity and the dignity of the person, Gordimer may have identified with the Lindgards, as she, herself, was an active white liberal humanist. Of course, this is not the first time when Gordimer takes an interest in exploring characters with a bourgeois liberal-orientated background; we have encountered "liberal characters" as far back as *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* or as recent as *None to Accompany Me*. Nevertheless, the Lindgards are a special case, mainly because of their tragedy and the post-apartheid setting which forces them to reassess everything they have known about "The Other Side".

Claudia is a doctor and she has always known that there is no difference in the feel of somebody's skin, independent of its colour and Harald is a deeply religious person who also considers all people to be equal. Nevertheless, their lives are haunted by biases. During apartheid they have lived privileged apolitical lives in order to avoid conflict with the establishment: "neither had joined movements, protested, marched in open display, spoken out in defence of these convictions. They thought of themselves as simply not that kind of person; as if it were a matter of immutable determination, such as one's blood group, and not failed courage"². Yet, by admitting that they had no "guts" to defy the apartheid laws³, the reader might assume that they passively supported them.

The Lindgards' jobs, as David Medalie and Karina Szczurek point out, are "socially relevant"⁴, especially in the postapartheid context. The narrator says that Claudia, although working in the private sector, meets "the need in areas of the city and the once genteel white suburbs of the old time where in recent years there was an influx, a great rise in and variety of the population. She had regularly fulfilled this obligation."⁵ Similarly, Harald is the CEO of "a large insurance firm with a pragmatically enlightened policy towards blacks"⁶ which is involved in negotiating "an agreement on terms of low-interest loans that would put up walls and a roof for thousands of poor people"⁷. We are told that "it gave him some satisfaction to think that he was able to be constructive in improving the lives of his fellow men, even if he had failed to follow Christ's teaching in destruction of the temples of their suffering"⁸. Gordimer clearly underlines here the feelings of guilt and shame which were "the country's lingua franca"⁹ for the liberal whites of the 1990s. Even though they fulfill their jobs and can hardly be called racists or even opportunists, "it is only the murder (committed by their son, who is racially, sexually, and ideologically much more liberated than his parents, but ironically ends up imprisoned), and the confrontation with the man from "the Other Side" (Motsamai) that shakes them out of their racial niche"¹⁰.

Duncan's crime has forced his parents to reflect on issues related to crime and violence. Claudia and Harald have little knowledge of either physical or moral suffering related to violence because it has never affected them before¹¹. It is only after this unfortunate event that they realise more fully what it means to be white in South Africa, or, as Temple-Thurston put it: "placing Harald and Claudia 'on the other side' through their misfortune forces them to identify, to empathize with the very people they have sought to keep at bay in their lives"¹². Indeed, there are many examples in the novel that make this a legitimate idea. For instance, soon after Duncan's imprisonment, a poor black woman patient at the clinic tells Claudia that her husband is in jail. At hearing this, Claudia suddenly remembers her son and realizes that it is violence that she shares with the black woman:

"Claudia is not the only woman with a son in prison. Since this afternoon she has understood that. She is no longer the one who doles out of comfort or its placebos for others' disasters, herself safe, untouchable, in another class. And it's not the just laws that have brought about this form of equality; something quite other."¹³

Harald also has similar moments of recognition:

"For him, 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, The news was his news."¹⁴

Sue Kossew points out that the Lindgards "forced personal experience of crime and violence has forced them into acknowledging common humanity with those from whose lives they had always been able to maintain distance"¹⁵. Having kept themselves at the borders of what was happening in their country, Harald and Claudia are suddenly immersed in present and past events and are confronted with their own passivity which now they must overcome even though "nothing from the past could be more remote than this present"¹⁶. Gordimer's text can be seen as an initiation process into 'real life' for those white South Africans who have never experienced "the binary duality of life"¹⁷. The novelist shows that in spite of their successful professional background, the Lindgards lack psychological maturity and, as a result, are very inexperienced and can easily 'crack' in the difficult position that their son has put them.

Their main black ally throughout the trial is Hamilton Motsamai, the brilliant lawyer who holds their son's life within his hands, "one of those kept-apart strangers from the Other Side (...) The black man will act, speak for them. They have become those who cannot speak, act, for themselves"¹⁸. Unlike the majority of black South African population, Motsamai had opportunities for advancing in life and he is "the product of both cultural heritages"¹⁹, an elevated version of the Maqoma's daughter, Mpho. Nevertheless, at

hearing the name of the lawyer that would represent their son, the Lindgards are weighed down by their own prejudices:

What about the advocate. They heard it at once, in the shock of the name; the choice of a black man. She's not one of those doctors who touch black sin indiscriminately along 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 still writhe to the surface²⁰.

A few pages further we find out that the Lindgards visit a friend who is able to supply reassuring information about Motsamai: "Look, I don't sprinkle exaggerated epithets around, but I can tell you the fellow's remarkable"²¹. It is only after this discussion that Harald and Claudia are ready to cross the divide and entrust their son's future into the lawyer's hands: "Motsamai is providential...a star was needed and he appeared in our constellation..."²².

Motsamai, like so many others, returned to South Africa in 1990 after a long period of exile in England during which, thanks to scholarships, he was able to complete his studies. He clearly represents what Temple-Thurston calls "the hope and the new direction for South Africa, his hybrid blend of cultures and his goodwill promise a positive future"²³. Indeed, a representative of the Other Side, Motsamai is presented as having both the authority - "his blackness was the stamp of authority"²⁴ - and the benevolence to use it in a kindly manner, without any prejudices regarding the white/black relationships. During their first meeting with the lawyer, the Lindgards realize that:

The only person with whom they have something in common is Senior Counsel Motsamai; Hamilton. Without bothering to ask permission from them, he had established first-name terms. The fact that he himself was prepared to address Harald by first name was licence granted. *He has the authority* (...) Motsamai, the stranger from the Other Side of the divided past. They are in his pink-palmed hands²⁵.

By entrusting Motsamai with Duncan's life - "He was all there was between them and the Death Penalty"²⁶ Harald and Claudia have to confront their prejudices. For the first time in their lives the Lindgards experience complete powerlessness which their class and race had protected them from while millions had experienced it though apartheid: "Not only had he come from the Other Side, the nakedness to the final disaster: powerlessness, helplessness, before the law"²⁷. Like "two creatures caught in the headlights of catastrophe"²⁸, their entire world falls apart:

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 teaching of the Father and Son, nor the pious respectability of liberalism, nor money, that had kept them in safety - that other form of segregation - could change their status. In its way, that status was definitive as the forced removals of the old regime; no chance of remaining where they had been, surviving in themselves as they were. Even money; that could buy for them only the best lawyer available²⁹.

However, at the same time as their world is crumbling apart, the Lindgards' relationship with the lawyer also opens up new possibilities of understanding and identification for them, which, most likely, would have remained unexplored, had the context of their lives not changed.

It is through Motsamai that Harald and Claudia "cross to the Other Side in another way, not because they are forced to, but because they learn to see beyond race"³⁰. In this respect, the most important episode in *The House Gun* is that of the party at Motsamai's house which the Lindgards attend:

Harald and Claudia had never been to a black man's home before. This kind of gesture on both sides - the black man asking, the white man accepting - was that of the Left-wing circles to which they had not belonged during the old regime, and of the circles of hastily-formed new liberals of whose conversion they were skeptical³¹.

These unprecedented situations are part and parcel of the new South Africa. From now on it is the blacks who are doing the whites a favour by inviting them to their homes. Although, as revealed by the quotation, this type gesture is not a novelty being well-established amongst the left wing, the gatherings usually had political connotations which, in this case, were absent. This is an act of kindness and openness on Motsamai's part; he feels rather sorry for his white clients, "distraught and lonely as they are, in spite of their superior social status"³².

Important to note here that there seem to be two faces to Motsamai's character: one is that of Hamilton, and the other is Motsamai. Duncan clearly differentiates between the two of these when he says that: "Motsamai was there - in the persona of Hamilton again"³³ and "Motsamai's - Hamilton's task was successfully concluded now"³⁴. In his relation to the Lindgards the lawyer always adopts the 'Hamilton' persona which exhibits a friendly, warm-hearted and understanding character, whereas in his relation with the other characters he usually displays a cold, professional, even intimidating stance.

Although reluctant to accept the invitation at first, the Lindgards, decide that it would be in their best interest to give course to it. Through an interesting reversal, it is the white family who unexpectedly look like awkward and inexperienced guests at the party. They are overwhelmed with the crowd of people they encounter at the house, unsure "whether these were all guests or more or less living in the house"³⁵. The cultural differences come as a shock to them:

The different levels of education and sophistication at ease in the gathering were something that didn't exist in the social life Harald had known; there, if you had a brother-in-law who was a meat packer at a wholesale butchery (the first man has announced his *métier*) you would not invite him on the same occasion when you expected compatibility with a client from the corporate business world, and an academic introduced as Professor Seakhoa who would drily produce an axiom in ironic connection of naïve humour³⁶.

Nevertheless, as Szczurek points out, Gordimer very subtly "allows the Lindgards to gradually fit in with the crowd, to relax and to enjoy themselves in the black couple's house"³⁷. The couple starts to blend in as Claudia drifts away from Harald to interact with the "strangers"³⁸. Her mood changes entirely as we are told that "Claudia was laughing, talking about Duncan"³⁹ and she is even found dancing with one of "these strangers" by her husband. Although the past has the potential of destroying that precious moment when these people connect beyond their skin colour in a simple act of dancing, it is "obliterated by the present"⁴⁰, at least temporarily⁴¹. The party, the dancing, and the freedom to talk about Duncan - Duncan is not a taboo, tonight, here⁴² - opens up a new awareness in the Lindgards live, it puts them at ease, and despite the fact that Claudia claims to have been drunk the previous evening, what remains as the final comment on the experience is gratitude: "God bless Hamilton. It wasn't a manner of speaking; coming from Harald"⁴³.

For Harald and Claudia, this active interaction with another world is beneficial⁴⁴ as it brings about a realisation that there is something in common with the Other Side and this enables access to a journey of discovery which 'heralds' a new era in South African history. By imagining themselves as 'the other', "they take the first step out of their entrapment in their purely white consciousness"⁴⁵ thus paving the road for a new way of living in the Rainbow Nation. Even more importantly, by confronting so many biases and misconceptions about themselves and their environment, the Lindgards have offered the reader an analysis of the social changes South African people were going through and a glimpse of what issues still remain to be addressed. If the new South Africa succeeds in bringing people like the Lindgards and Motsamai together, making them aware of each other's differences and similarities, then there might still be hope for a better country in which violence will no longer bring about so many deaths and traumas.

For both Harald and Claudia "out of something terrible something new"⁴⁶ has emerged and they find a new way of living in the new South Africa, no longer cocooned in their own ignorance.

While in its exploration of crime and punishment Gordimer's *The House Gun* connects the issues of violence, guilt and responsibility to the 'liberal-minded' whites who were not racist but had stood passive while the crime of apartheid was perpetrated, not wishing to risk losing their privileged place within that society, the possibility of recovery is also suggested. The acceptance of their son's crime, and the lessons they learn from Motsamai about the black and white worlds in the context of the new South Africa enforce the idea that there is still hope for a society trying to simultaneously come.

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8. HG, 17.
9. *Ibid.*, 28.
10. Sue Kossew, "Something Terrible Happened: Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun* and the Politics of Violence and Recovery in Post-Apartheid South Africa". *Mots Pluriels* 13, (2000) npg.
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14. HG, 17.
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19. HG, 89.
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21. HG, 33.
22. *Ibid.*, 37.
23. *Ibid.*, 38.
24. Barbara Temple-Thurston, *Nadine Gordimer Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1999), 148.
25. *Ibid.*, 123.
26. *Ibid.*, 86.
27. *Ibid.*, 127.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 128.
30. *Ibid.*, 127-128
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32. HG, 165.
33. Denise Brahimi, *Nadine Gordimer: Weaving Together Fiction, Women and Politics*, trans. Vanessa Everson and Cara Shapiro (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2012), 88.
34. HG, 274.
35. *Ibid.*, 276.
36. *Ibid.*, 167.
37. *Ibid.*, 169.
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39. HG, 170.
40. *Ibid.*, 169.
41. *Ibid.*, 175.
42. Magdalena Carina Szczurek, *Truer than Fiction: Nadine Gordimer Writing Post-Apartheid South Africa*

Endnotes

1. HG, 86.
2. *Ibid.*, 86.
3. *Ibid.*, 165.
4. Magdalena Carina Szczurek, *Truer than Fiction: Nadine Gordimer Writing Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Saarbrücken: Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften, 2008), 218.
5. HG, 12.
6. *Ibid.*, 40.
7. *Ibid.*, 54.
8. *Ibid.*, 88.
9. *Ibid.*, 85.
10. Magdalena Carina Szczurek, *Truer than Fiction:*

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42. HG, 167.
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46. HG, 279.