

## RECONSTRUCTING NATIONAL IDENTITY: NADINE GORDIMER'S *NONE TO ACCOMPANY ME*

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*Abstract: For more than six decades Nadine Gordimer has been at the center of South Africa's literary and socio-political developments providing an X-ray of the society in which she lived through her fiction. The historical evolution is at the core of her writing and, in this respect, we may speak of a climax in her "fictionalized history" - the outcome of the fight against apartheid and the formation of a new South African state at the beginning of the 1990s. Gordimer's eleventh novel, None to Accompany Me (1994), focuses on the country's political transition from apartheid to democracy and in doing so it offers a testimony of the great efforts to rebuild a broken nation. It is the scope of this paper to present and analyze the South Africans' endeavor to redefine their national identity and values in None to Accompany Me.*

*Keywords: national identity, apartheid, South Africa, crisis, democracy*

*A strong current of the present carries them headily:  
this is the year when the old life comes to an end.  
(Nadine Gordimer, None to Accompany Me)*

Much of Gordimer's readership and many of her critics have wondered whether the novelist would continue writing after the fall of apartheid, whether the long-awaited revolution had dispossessed her of the inspiration and theme she had so thoroughly explored on all of its facets or, on the contrary, this exact change would empower her writing by providing new themes to investigate. Will the reputation of the "typical anti-apartheid novelist" (Peter McDonalds) be diminished? Is her "subject" over? (Dominic Head, 1995: 1). Now that the improbable had happened, Gordimer had to match the demands of this long-awaited, yet unexpected time. Her reply came in the form of five novels focusing on this new South African society, proving that she was nowhere near to finishing her survey. Indeed, "life in the interregnum" (Gordimer, 2010: 374) had a lot to offer and the challenges of transition towards a democratic society were yet to come.

Gordimer's eleventh novel and the first post-apartheid one is *None to Accompany Me* (1994) which serves as a link between the previous and the present era and deals with the country's political transition from apartheid to democracy. It began as an idea in 1989 and was finished in December 1993, its writing spanning exactly the time it set out to describe (Roberts, 2005: 510). Although published in 1994 and thus, technically, a post-apartheid novel, many critics have seen it as "a novel of transition" (Head, 1995: 1), "the last novel of the interregnum" (Roberts, 2005: 523) or simply "not quite a post-apartheid novel" (Temple-Thurston, 1999: 127). In spite of its chronologically intermediate position, *None to Accompany Me* remains, as Magdalena Szczurek remarks, "the cradle for Gordimer's post-apartheid interests" (2008: 132) and "a fictional introduction to her post-apartheid writing" (ibid).

Although *None to Accompany Me* chronicles all the important socio-political events of the early 1990s, it does not do it explicitly by referring to actual historical events or leaders, but rather implicitly by fictionalizing the events that happened and the people that were living

in those times. Moreover, by choosing to focus on a particularly limited number of characters and providing psychological insight for each of them, Gordimer is able to go beyond a mere chronicle of transition from dependence to independence and prove, as the Chicago Tribune excerpt from the back cover of the 1995 Penguin edition says, that she is “a lucid witness to her country’s transformation and a formidable interpreter of the inner self”. In the midst of a country’s struggle for change, human relations are tested so that the novel also deals with “the question of freedom in relation to how the self survives in the process of tremendous political and social change” (Sakamoto, 227).

*None to Accompany Me* encapsulates a selection of novel conditions featuring a transitional course of events taking place in the recently democratized South Africa. As Stpehane Ibinga points out, the novel explores “the myriad changes taking place on the macro and micro levels of social life” (2007, 198). In what concerns the macro level (i.e. the public sphere), the novel depicts the transformations following the fall of the apartheid regime such as the homecoming waves of past exiles and political prisoners or the establishment of new habits – that range from the relocation of blacks in formerly ‘whites only’ suburbs to a public recognition of new relationships across the colour and gender bar - as well as land redistribution.

The avalanche of social changes occurring in the public realm has a deep impact on human existence, and this can be seen in the micro level. To put it differently, family or individual habits also undergo a transformational process due to the significant political mutations taking place in the public sphere. The novel reflects the transformation process of Gordimer’s society as the reader is exposed to the changes happening in the public arena and then introduced to the intimate lives of characters.

The private and the political are intertwined to demonstrate how mutually dependent they are in a country of transition seeking to “create a new, hybrid nation and culture” (Temple-Thurston, 1999: 136). According to Dimitriu the political sphere and other areas of life in *None to Accompany Me* are characterized by liminality; nothing is permanent, various states of mind compete with one another and are moulded into new forms (quoted in Szczurek, 2008: 140). But this is nothing new to Gordimer and was even anticipated more than ten years before, by the Antonio Gramsci motto of *July’s People*: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms”.

Although the depiction of the political context is considerable, the most prominent aspect of the novel is its orientation towards the private sphere of two powerful women characters, the middle-aged white lawyer, Vera Stark, and her black politically-involved friend Sibongile Maqoma, who represents the emerging elite of black women with crucial positions in the new administration. The representation of the public life gradually shifts towards the private one and, as the plot unfolds, the reader realizes that the private stories of Vera and Sibongile take precedence over their public ones. Thus, the value of the novel lies in its dual viewpoint: 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 country “caught in its evolution and undergoing transformation that is as much feared as eagerly anticipated” (Brahimi, 2012: 48).

*None to Accompany Me* is a densely layered narrative, composed of situations or events from the past (Vera's affair with Ben before her divorce, her affair with Otto Abarbanel, the relationship with the Maqomas before they went into exile etc) and present (early 1990s) that define the protagonists' future. Through the use of flashbacks, which give the story a remarkably rich and complex composition, the reader can follow Vera Stark's life, from her adolescent lovers and first marriage interrupted by the war, up to the gradual but inevitable decay of her second marriage. The narrative non-linearity, as Szczurek and Ibinga rightfully observed, is countered by one of the most commonly used metaphors in fiction to suggest a passage from one state of order to another, which spans the whole novel: the metaphor of a journey (2008: 138).

This idea is reinforced throughout the entire length of the novel, starting from its title - *None to Accompany Me*, which expresses the loneliness of the voyager on his journey – and going insofar as 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 repertoire of airport usage. The political transition is echoed in the individual transition of the main protagonist, “who journeys through her past to arrive – like the country – at an independence, alone, and free to continue the political work that has become her life's commitment” (Temple-Thurtson, 129). The journeying nation and the characters tackle the emerging political context in a quest for belonging and a search for identity, the two inseparably interlinked.

One of the most important issues in South African history has to do with the whites' territorial segregation of the African land through successive acts. This familiar theme of space is explored in *None to Accompany Me* through the characters of Vera and Zeph. In 1950 the South African government passed The Group Areas Act which imposed residential apartheid in the country. As a result, the urban areas were divided into zones, the better ones being allotted to the whites. Two years later The Native Laws Amendment Act limited the blacks' right to live on a permanent basis in urban areas and in 1954 The Land Act imposed a buffer strip of five hundred yards between any black neighborhood and the white town it served, creating a captive labour force.

As Denise Brahimi points out, the novel clearly emphasizes the conflict that arises between Afrikaner farmers and rural black farm workers (2012: 49). Tertius Odendaal, an Afrikaner farmer whose grandfather was a Boer general, continues the fight in a different way by holding on to his three farms. He is ready to use any means necessary to defend these from the invasion of black squatters, and even attempts to call on the government to assist him legally. This is how Vera becomes involved, because in the early 1990s, she works for a Legal Foundation, which “came into existence in response to the plight of black communities who had become baggage, to be taken up and put down according to a logic of separation of black people from the proximity of white people” (*None to Accompany Me*, 12).

It is in this context that Zeph Rapulana first makes his appearance as an extremely capable, independent, responsible and socially-conscious individual, but one who is not blinded by idealism. Initially, Vera sees him only as someone who could help her in negotiating with Tertius Odendaal, but Zeph's character develops rapidly as he comes to represent a new class of blacks - like Sibongile - who know surprisingly well what they want. Violence may not always be avoidable, but this new class of blacks is doing a much better job

in keeping it under control. The novel also suggests that Zeph's is "an identity which is desperately needed for the transition to majority rule to work" (Szcurek, 2008: 173).

Irrespective of Vera's initial thoughts, Zeph "acts more like the squatters' leader than a negotiator" (Brahimi, 2012: 52), and the outcome of his actions proves to be helpful for the blacks, who eventually 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 the annex of this cottage that Vera will ultimately understand her place in the new South Africa and acquire a new identity.

Vera and Zeph's relationship "is placed entirely within the context of powerful renewal" (Brahimi, 2012: 62). Together, they experience the political exaltation of the 1990s, which creates an intimate bond between them, "no emotion ... could draw two individuals more closely" (*None to Accompany Me*, 72) and one can understand how the "strong current of the present carries them headily" (ibid), and replaces other forms of attraction that in the past drew Vera towards men. 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 the baggage of her life as something which she took on and wanted and wouldn't have been without, but she doesn't want it dragging around with her forever" (quoted in Bazin, 2000: 35), so by selling the house she gets rid of both forms of baggage: historical and private. In other words, Vera has arrived at the conclusion that the personal life is 'transitory' whereas the political life is 'transcendent' and, as a result, she has chosen to commit herself to the latter. Finally, as a white person, she feels comfortably 'at home' in the new country with a suitable and acknowledged role to play in the creation of equality for all in South Africa.

*None to Accompany Me* also portrays the journey of Sibongile and Didymus Maqoma, a couple who spent several years in exile while continuing their work as activists overseas and are now returning to be part of the nation-building of the New South Africa. Like all other characters in the novel, they are confronted with a pivotal historical moment in their lives, which will force them to redefine who they are and to renegotiate their place in the new political order (Szcurek, 2008: 139).

Through the Maqomas *None to Accompany Me* illustrates the second important issue in South African history: the effects of displacement upon the black people in South Africa. As the novel begins, the black couple is returning from exile – "returning heroes" (36), "transients" (44) – awaited at the airport by chanting and dancing crowds" (*None to Accompany Me*, 43). We are told that this is a time of "transit to repossession, life regained" (ibid, 44), a long-awaited homecoming. Nevertheless, the past, with its rivalries, dependencies and friendships still looms over; it does not disappear in the new context: "The past was there (...) the weight their lives had was the weight of the past, out of storage and delivered to those who had stayed behind" (ibid, 36-37). Not only the past, but also the present poses a great challenge to both Sibongile and Didymus who, like Vera, also have to rethink their whole lives and to renegotiate their identities in the new political order (Szcurek, 2008: 161).

From the moment they set foot again in South Africa, their personal and political commitments are put to the test. On coming back from exile they have to move into a hotel where other returnees live. Sibongile, the emerging black political figure, accustomed to the

privacy she had in exile, cannot put up with the temporary displacement from one room to another until a residence is found for her family. 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)

Even though for Didymus the modest temporary accommodation is acceptable under the circumstances, Sibongile interprets his attitude as “the farce of self-sacrifice when it was not necessary” (*None to Accompany Me*, 46). She cannot understand why Didymus ignores “the illimitable opportunities for self-gratification placed by history at his feet” (Isidore Diala, quoted in Szczurek, 2008: 162). While the husband is portrayed as somebody who is ready to “suffer in noble silence” (*None to Accompany Me*, 47) and to do “whatever was needed, as everyone must” (ibid, 72), his wife indulges in “beautiful objects” (ibid, 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 (Szczurek, 2008: 162).

The rift that opens between Sally and Didy is further enlarged by a political event, namely Sibongile's election on the new executive, to the detriment of her husband who is delegated to writing the history of the struggle years. What Gordimer seems to be implying is that in the New South Africa the woman is better equipped and, as such, more fit to meet the demands of the transition, whereas men are not and, thus, remain symbolically in the past.

The novelist reverses traditional views about women in society. Of course, it is not purely by chance that in a couple like the Maqomas it is the woman who gets the upper hand in the new dispensation. In a larger context, Sibongile belongs to that general movement which, at the turn of the century, released an enormous amount of female intelligence and energy that had long been denied to the world. Gaining the legitimacy which they have been so wrongly deprived for many years helps women can now assert themselves freely and without reserve. 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, 2012: 58).

These changes affect Didymus who has a very hard time accepting that his wife is “one of their chosen” (*None to Accompany Me*, 99). Being assigned to writing the history book project, Didymus feels left out and the reversal of gender roles in his marriage poses a great challenge to his self-esteem. He is caught between his revolutionary ideology and its opposing forces. Those forces, as Brahimi points out, are not just “what is simplistically called his traditional vision of the hierarchy within the marital couple” (2012: 58), but are 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? As “one of the old guard” (*None to Accompany Me*, 79), Didymus is now depressed because he feels he no longer has a place in the present. The

political direction that his country takes disappoints his revolutionary ideals and this makes him bitter and passive. Nevertheless, he ultimately accepts the changes and, in doing so, he is able to preserve the unity of his family. At a symbolical level, Didy's 'sacrifice' and acceptance represent the sacrifices every South African will have to make to keep the unity of the country and to provide the chance for a better life in it.

The Maqomas' late-born daughter, Mpho, is another interesting character that stands for a new type of people that makes its appearance in the re-/construction of the South African national identity. 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 – in a time when this has not yet been achieved by governments, conferences, negotiation, mass action and international monitoring or intervention – of the struggle for power in a country which was hers, yet where, because of that power struggle, she had not been born" (ibid, 49).

Born in exile she speaks perfect London English but not the Zulu and Xhosa of her parents, although she understands them. Gordimer sums up the effects of displacement in describing Mpho's personality:

The oyster-shell-pink palms of her slender hands completed the striking colour contrast of matt black skin [...] Her hair, darwn back straightened [...] Congolese style [...] put of her mouth came a perky London English. She copuld 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 quicker to adapt to the new South Africa reality than her own mother, who feels a deep sense of alienation after her return. Like in the case of Zeph Rapulana, Gordimer seems to imply that "mutations" (*None to Accompany Me*, 51) such as Mpho are needed in the new dispensation and it is not them who will need to adapt, but the others, who have an old-fashioned mentality.

At the same time as society and State politics have been evolving, so too have the family and the couple. In this respect, we have seen how Vera's and Ben's marriage has crumbled to pieces under the weight of the new context, or, how Sally and Didy's has undergone a serious test of commitment only to emerge more powerful and united than ever. Nevertheless, there is one more type of family that is unexpectedly created and which might very well become a common appearance in the democratic South Africa. This is a lesbian family made up of two white women: Vera's daughter, Annie, and a biologist, Lou, who adopt a black child. Deemed unconventional and inadmissible under the previous political dispensation, the homosexual marriage is now brought to the fore to be put under scrutiny.

Against the post-liberation backdrop, new social phenomena, built upon the democratic principle of total respect for individual freedoms, are emerging 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. Annie represents the category of people who openly disclose and talk about their homosexual orientation. 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 homosexuality have become legitimized or ordinary practices 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” (2007: 205). Her references to the most intimate questions seem to show that the novelist wants to acknowledge that domestic issues like sexuality should not be neglected in public debates if the individual is to be freed from social or cultural constrictions (Ibinga, 2007: 205).

In all these ways, *None to Accompany Me* highlights the sense of responsibility that people in times of transition begin to seek; it shows us that in times after liberation comes, it is essential to embark on a journey of self-analysis concerning one’s past actions as this is the only way through which one can effectively reconstruct identities and societies. Despite the fact that entire groups are acquiring a legitimacy previously denied to them, society will not necessarily evolve in the direction of the individuals’ greater freedom without sacrifices from each and every part that makes up the social fabric.

Through the diversity and complexity of its characters, Gordimer’s first post-apartheid novel illustrates the possibilities and dangers of the power struggle that was taking place in the early 1990s. What appears to transpire through a close and detailed analysis of behaviours, interactions and attitudes is that “in order to succeed, the new dispensation had to confront and renegotiate its past, rid itself of false loyalties, face the corruptibility of power and, most importantly, take on ‘the burden of self’ with all the responsibility which is involved in the process” (Szczurek, 2008: 183). It might be a long, difficult and treacherous road to take, but only by walking it together, as one nation, will the process of national identity reconstruction be completed.

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