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**CROSSING BORDERS: IDENTITY AND PLACE  
IN NADINE GORDIMER'S NOVELS**

- Summary of the thesis -

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**Iași, 2014**

For many decades Nadine Gordimer has been at the centre of South Africa's literary and socio-political developments. As a writer whose career covers over more than sixty years, from the beginning of apartheid until its demise and well into the post-apartheid period, Nadine Gordimer's fiction and non-fiction represent a history of the problems the South African nation has faced throughout these years. At its core, Gordimer always puts the theme of identity, so important to an internally compartmentalized society like South Africa, and weaves it with that of place, offered by the historical background.

However, it is in the novels that Gordimer truly manages to bring to the fore the life of South Africans and create memorable landscapes in which the characters play out their existences. For Gordimer the novel occupies an especially important place among her writings and although she started her career as a short-story writer, she soon discovered that the novel gave more opportunities for exploration, more space for the action to develop and, equally important, more depth to the characters.

Taking these aspects into account, in a succession of five chapters, this study of Nadine Gordimer's novels presents the themes of 'identity' and 'place' through a focus on the impact of physical and mental barriers (typical of South African society) in the characters' lives. To be more precise, we have interpreted eight of her novels (written between 1953 and 1998) in chronological order and by grouping them into four stages that are drawn from both Gordimer's own developing identity as a writer and the history of South Africa. The concept of 'place', as it is understood in the context of the present thesis, has two dimensions: a spatial one - represented by actual places - and a temporal one - represented by the flow of time. These two are in a constant friction and provide the backdrop against which human identity is shaped and reshaped over and over again.

Across the years, researchers have looked at Nadine Gordimer's fiction from virtually every angle and as testimony to this stand numerous studies, articles and essays on her writing. However, to our knowledge so far, a full-length study that brings together concepts such as 'identity' and 'place' in an analysis of the novels has not been published as yet. We hope to fill that niche with the present thesis. This is also where our personal contribution resides: by employing such notions and exploring their relationship in the configuration of a borderland consciousness, the present thesis will hopefully offer a new paradigm of interpretation and, by doing so, make its innovative contribution on Gordimer's works.

The study of a writer's career is never truly complete as each age brings along fresh perspectives and new critical instruments with which to analyze his or her work. In this respect, the use of concepts such as 'borderland', 'space' and 'identity' can provide useful insight into the novels of Nadine Gordimer. As apartheid created restricted social identities in South Africa, the concept of 'border' gave Gordimer a space of inspiration in which she could escape from the rigidity of social hierarchies. Thus, Gordimer works both within and beyond the colonial experience to question the myth of the unbridgeable gap between the black and white races.

The current project also aims at partially enlarging the Romanian perspective on the topic of South Africa - with a particular emphasis on Nadine Gordimer's literary achievements – while at the same time trying to serve as a tool in understanding the complex mechanisms of identity within a constricting environment such as apartheid.

The first thing we did before starting an analysis of the novels *per se* was to establish a theoretical framework proper for an exploration of the concepts of 'identity' and 'place' as seen from the South African post-/colonial experience. Hence in the first part of **Chapter 1 – The Post-/Colonial Perspective and Its Impact on Nadine Gordimer** we begin our discussion with a concise account of the modern (mostly political) history of South Africa with a particular focus on the period called *apartheid*. Gordimer is a writer who generates her fiction from historical realities and, as such, one has to be aware of the context from which she drew her writing.

In the second part of the first chapter we shifted our focus from the historical perspective to the colonial and postcolonial one. Of all the concepts that have been put under scrutiny in this subchapter, Bhabha's conceptual metaphors such as 'borderland', 'identity' and 'hybridity' have had the highest relevance for our analysis of Gordimer's novels. These concepts are important as they specifically reinforce the severe physical shock and alienation that apartheid has generated among white and black communities alike. Through *borderland* Gordimer investigates how the multitude of South African boundaries affected the individual lives of people. Moreover, the use of this concept has shown that Gordimer creates new physical and mental spaces in which her characters can grow new identities. This comes to counteract the barren South African society that didn't allow any room for its citizens to cross over physical and psychological borders.

Also important, a discussion about the concept of 'internal colonialism' revealed interesting aspects about Gordimer's fiction. As a country that became united as far back as

1910, South Africa did not banish the colonial practices until the 1990s; to put it differently, although in theory South Africa has been a postcolonial country for more than eighty years, it was not until 1994 that it became postcolonial in practice. It becomes clear that Gordimer is situated at the intersection of the colonial and the postcolonial. Thus, everything that she has produced until the 1990s bears the mark of colonialism. Indeed, in her apartheid/colonial novels she always puts in the center the blacks' plight in a white society that is characterized by fear of the unknown and a blind, ever growing oppression against it. Realities such as educational restrictions, home displacements, segregated public areas or disenfranchisement are all mingled to create true to life stories that offer a glimpse of how difficult life had been for the natives. Only with the publication of *None to Accompany Me* in 1994, Gordimer became a postcolonial writer and, indeed, the themes that she examines in that particular novel (the arrival of the exiled, the drafting of a new Constitution, etc) as well as those that follow, are characteristic of a postcolonial society.

Finally, in the third part, we brought together the historical and post-/colonial elements to see how they inter-relate in Gordimer's case. Also, a discussion of what we called 'Gordimer's whiteness' gave us the chance to see the paradoxical position of the white writer living in South Africa, a writer who chooses to denounce the atrocities committed by those of his/her kin on the black majority. Being a 'marginal' element in the society, her observations had the accuracy and clarity that was unattainable by those directly involved in the political struggle.

With the second chapter, **Emerging Identities in *The Lying Days* & *A World of Strangers***, we began our analysis of the novels. Gordimer's early phase of writing provides useful insight into the way in which she experiments with the form and subject matter of her fiction. Moreover, through the exploration of the dialogues within the multicolored society of South Africa, she attempts to reach an understanding of her own identity – as a white woman and a revolutionary writer. The plot in her early fiction is built through the characters' attempt to cross over the social barriers of their South African society into those 'borderland' or 'frontier' places represented by multi-racial gatherings where people can be seen as equals. It is in such places that they develop a deep awareness of the Other's harsh life and, as a result, commit themselves to the struggle against apartheid.

However, both her early novels also investigate the characters' lack of social commitment to the issues of race and identity in their South African lives; they are affected by it,

which enables them to develop an empathetic character, but they refuse any involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle and thus enforce their position as spectators. Therefore, alienated and separated from the other ethnic groups in their country, both Helen and Toby choose exile: they leave South Africa for Europe.

Gordimer's novels stem out from the *bildungsroman*, although often written while still in the process of discovery, of exploration. As the novels probe the dilemmas of liberal conscience in racially segregated South Africa, and the impossibility of total fulfillment, they paradoxically become more significant and yet more restrictive and despairing. Therefore, in the third chapter **Beyond Liberalism: Identity Crisis in *Occasion for Loving* and *The Late Bourgeois World*** our discussion shifts towards an analysis of the novelist's fictional response to the social and political events that affected South Africa in the 1960s in terms of how identity is constructed and of the way in which space/place is now seen and represented.

By the beginning of the 1960s, Gordimer had exhausted humanism as a discourse and was experimenting with new themes so that the publication of *Occasion for Loving* in 1963 brings to completion an important dialectical movement in Nadine Gordimer's first three novels. Whereas both *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers* expose the characters' lack of social commitment to the issues of race and identity in their South African life, *Occasion for Loving* concentrates on the inescapable process of alienation and social distancing that apartheid institutes in the lives of South Africans. Using both personal and collective trauma as the starting point, Gordimer turns *Occasion for Loving* into a political metaphor and investigates the liberals' commitment to their creed and the relation between love and power. Thus, the ethics of the white colonial minority established in South Africa is brought into question, and their identity dissected. No wonder then that the protagonist, Jessie Stilwell, goes for the most part of the novel through a process of introspection, renegotiating the terms of her existence by reevaluating the past. What she is facing, along with thousands of other liberals is an identity crisis and, as a result, is in search of a new identity

There was a new mood at the end of the decade. The peaceful methods that had been the orthodoxy of the 1950s had been met with repression and violence. This new *modus vivendi* is explored in *The Late Bourgeois World* which also marks a further stage for Gordimer in her disillusion with the ideology of liberal humanism. *The Late Bourgeois World* emerges from this specific disillusionment; it is a novel that registers "the fragmentation of liberal ideology" (Head,

1995: 78) while also attempting to find new ways of understanding the political world and the demands it makes on the individual. It is concerned with discovering “new and legitimate terms in which historical engagement can be undertaken” (Clingman, 1992: 90), since the liberal humanist impulse of Gordimer’s first three novels has now been fully quelled.

In the analysis of *The Late Bourgeois World* we also brought to the fore a discussion about censorship and its effects on writers that live under totalitarian regimes. Censorship adds a new barrier to the existent racial and social ones in the rigid space of apartheid South Africa. From this standpoint the novel deals with the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of crossing the ever-growing number of borders that apartheid regularly establishes; its banning, the first in Gordimer’s career, is the very proof of this. It seemed that nothing could escape the apartheid ivory tower; under such oppressive circumstances a revolution seemed like the only possible way out.

The trajectory of Nadine Gordimer’s literary career shows her political evolution from liberal humanism to despair, and thus to intransigent anti-apartheid opposition. Consequently, in the fourth chapter **Landscapes of Revolution: *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People*** we conducted an investigation of the effects revolutions have on people’s identity and how they re-/shape the human mind and character. We have seen that Gordimer’s novels written in her second phase of creation (i.e. after the Sharpeville incident) focus on the shift from a peaceful struggle against apartheid towards a radical solution – revolution - that would put an end to the social, economic and political injustices perpetrated by the whites in South Africa. The most important change that occurs in her writing is that the characters are now constructed as “abstractions” (Mazhar: 2007: 109) living their lives against the background of a larger and more committed political framework.

The protagonists in both novels are the product of revolutionary situations which produce abnormal psychological pressures for them in their South African lives. In Bhabha’s terms, the ‘borderland’ encounters with apartheid make them reconsider “questions of identity, social agency and national affiliation” (1994: 1) for their future course of life in South Africa. Through imagination, Gordimer accounts for many complex aspects of human lives. Her two novels draw a thin line of articulation between standing apart (Rosa Burger) and being fully involved (the Smales), while also shedding light on the specific consequences of the historical life circumstances in South Africa. Gordimer is never straightforward; she does not try to influence

the reader into pursuing her line of thought. Instead, she makes her ideological statements subtle and unobtrusive so that the readers are given the full freedom to select the message and to enjoy the pure artistic pleasure.

Finally, in the fifth chapter **The New South Africa: Metamorphosis of Identity and Space** we move away from the apartheid novels towards the post-apartheid novels, *None to Accompany Me* and *The House Gun*. The journey that started in 1953 with *The Lying Days* arrives at a crossroads after forty years. If Gordimer's early novels describe a society characterised by obstacles, the post-apartheid novels depict a society characterized by uncertainty. Gordimer's literary production of this period can be seen as "a kaleidoscopic study of the New South African Constitution" (Szczurek, 2008: 51). Every piece of the emerging society is picked up and played out over and over again in her fiction to see what approach could provide the best results for the newly reborn country.

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. The avalanche of social changes occurring in the public realm has a deep impact on human existence. Family or individual habits also undergo a transformational process due to the significant political mutations taking place in the public sphere. Identities and places are renegotiated under the pressure of the socio-political changes. The nation and the characters embark on a journey in a search for identity against the backdrop of the new political context.

The next novel, *The House Gun* (1998), puts in the limelight a serious problem: violence with its influences and consequences on individual lives. Our objective in this sub-chapter was to explore the shifts in the social South African fabric after 1995 and to analyze the way in which an act of violence can affect the lives of many through the hands of one. In terms of identity construction, Gordimer employs an interesting method in this novel; accordingly, the protagonist's identity is never truly revealed, but is constructed by the other characters who, by taking turns, add their own pieces to the puzzle that constitutes the absent protagonist's identity. The central character becomes, thus, an object of analysis and interpretation; his actions are accounted for from every possible angle so that a large variety of critical approaches (psychoanalysis, social and historical analysis, deconstruction, gender and queer theory,

postcolonial theory) are employed to provide an identity for him. Duncan's actions and personality are literally and literary dissected.

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Nadine Gordimer combined in her life and literary career the creativity of her genius and the social commitment of her conscience. Her strongest political and personal statement on the obligations and ambiguities of 'living in the interregnum', synthesizes, codifies and transforms into her 'world of fiction' which ultimately becomes a meditation on responsibility and history. Finally, on July 13<sup>th</sup> 2014, at the age of 90, Gordimer rests her mighty pen leaving behind a rich and powerful literary legacy for the generations of readers and writers to come. Her time and place might have been twentieth century South Africa, but her work is timeless and universal.

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