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A Journey Complete: Nadine Gordimer's *The Lying Days* and *No Time like the Present*

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There have always been questions regarding the work and its relation to the author. How does a person write? What is the process of writing? How does a work relate to the author? Does the author consciously draw upon life as an impetus to her work? Or is the literary divorced from its surrounding? Milton in his work *Areopagitica* says that “but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life” (4). A romantic paradigm in the reading of literature would perhaps align itself to the circumstances of the life of the writer. More self reflexive reading would try to place the author as a function in a postmodernist reading .

This paper tries to analyse two texts written by Nadine Gordimer, the first one in her literary career titled *The Lying Days* which was published in the year 1953, and the last novel that was published in the year 2012 titled *No Time like the Present* (hence forth will be addressed as *No Times*). It tries to see if the issues and queries that were raised in the first novel is carried on to the last work that she has written. It aspires to see therefore, if the works marks the completion of a journey that she has undertaken in the literary life she lived which ensues with *The Lying Days*. It places both works in the historical and political context of the country called South Africa and the life experienced there by an author called Nadine Gordimer.

There have been questions about Nadine Gordimer's connection with her life and the political clime of her country right from the time her first work of fiction called *The Lying Days* (1953) was published. In a country that was as politicized as South Africa it becomes difficult to remain inert. Politics becomes the way of life of the people. Almost all of Gordimer's works can be seen to have their roots from the political clime of the country. We find a strong response in her works to the major political events in the country.

The historical alertness that Gordimer showed in her works is reflected in the title of one of the most important critical works on Gordimer titled *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer : History from the Inside*. In the seminal work, the critic tries to point out how the novelist in her works deals with the schism that



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exists between the two polarities of black and white. The society of South Africa is a divided society that is broken on the lines of race. This forms one of the major thematic concerns of Gordimer and almost all her works are concerned with the position that a white writer should take. In the essay that echoes the title of the book, the same author says that “ Actually, the fact that Gordimer is prepared to consider other fictional writing as a certain kind of historical evidence should alert us to the possibility that her own novels might be more historically responsive than most” (Clingman,“History” 166).

In her interview with Bazin and Seymour Gordimer speaks about her childhood. A child alienated from her peers, her life revolved around her mother, and the books that she read. Many writers have left a lasting influence on her (of the European lineage) but the writer who unwrapped for her an awareness of life that is lived by the other half at South Africa was Upton Sinclair. The closeted life that she lived left an impression on her, the immediate surrounding imprinting itself in memory and reproduced in the first novel mentioned above, *The Lying Days*. It is a mining town in Witwaterstraand, the background of Gordimer’s childhood, women engaged in parties, the men as overseers at the mine, the days spent in shopping, weekends at the tennis court and the clubs, and in the back ground the silent and teeming world of the blacks that does not register itself on the memory of the novelist. The later town of Johannesburg forms the background of her youth and the space of political awakening. A much transformed Johannesburg of the post apartheid era awaits in *No Time*. In all these towns the most important feeling that Gordimer had was that she belonged. Gordimer says in an interview to Bazin and Seymour, contrary to other European countries she was at home in South Africa “ I discovered I was only a European there, just like any other white person. I took that very hard. At least in South Africa, even if I get my throat cut, I’m an African” (93).

The beginning of *The Lying Days* is important in that it points to the futuristic transgressions that will be made by the young Helen. The transgressions are much more than personal choices. They are political decisions that are taken as part of the historical compulsions of being part of country like South Africa. Little Helen is warned not to go out of the house. She is told that there is no one at home and she has to be careful and she has to beware because “there were native boys about” (Gordimer, *The Lying Days* 4). The transgression of Helen is described by the novelist as a girl who is venturing about in wonder land. “Yet now as I stood in this unfamiliar part of my own world knowing and flatly accepting it as the real world because it was ugly and did not exist in books ...I felt for the first time something of the tingling



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fascination of the gingerbread house before Hansel and Gretel, anonymous, nobody's children, in the woods"(Gordimer, *The Lying Days* 11).

The changing spatiality of Helen's world is marked by her going to the university and her introduction to her black friend. The student who later loses her housing is not allowed to stay at Helen's house by her mother. This brings home to her the differences between the public space she has created for herself outside and the ever widened chasm that is present between her and what she recognizes as home. Her relationship with Paul also is part of the exploratory nature of her link with the country. His inability to cope with his liberal self and his job with the government makes things very difficult for them. At the end of the novel Helen has decided to leave South Africa and travel over to Europe. The novel comes a full circle with the woman growing conscious of her political status as a white woman who has decided to turn away from the moral issues posed in South Africa. The growth is gradual, and is narrated at leisure by the novelist.

The novel *No Time like the Present* is on the other hand written after half a century of the *Lying Days*. The heroine in the novel is Jabu, a black woman rarely portrayed as protagonist by Gordimer in her novels. As mentioned in the focus of the article, the novel *No Time* stands close to *The Lying Days* when considering the personal choices made by the daughter. She mentions in one interview that having travelled outside to Africa it came to her that Africa was home. One of the most striking parallels we can notice on close reading of both the novels is the decision to leave South Africa. The theme of travel runs in almost all of Gordimer's novels. The characters travel to other places in relation to the political upheavals they face at South Africa.

The world that Helen Shaw sees is not the world that Jabu confronts. Helen Shaw has led a closeted life, but Jabu had to struggle to attain her education and to make herself prepared for free South Africa. Jabu lives in a South Africa that has proclaimed itself as a rainbow nation. The identity of Helen as white, pronounced by the colour of her skin is also pronounced in Jabu. In the new democratic South Africa neocolonial forces are at work, the flow of global capital is pronounced and so is the mosaic structure of race and uneven terrain of class.

Jabu stands in direct contrast with the migrant group of people she sees at the street outside the Methodist church. The people stand there, a pain in the city's throat, trying to build something of a life from the

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tatters around them . We find another home land springing up, not a forced on like Sophia Town or District Six, but one that global movements of power and capital has generated.

Yet another powerful image from the novel is an open mouth. Jabu is caught in the traffic and she suddenly sees an open mouth, wide open , without a face. A finger points into the open hollowness asking for food. Jabu sees that the hand is like hers and black. But the similarity ends there. The black finger is not the same as Jabu's. It is the poverty stricken hand of South Africa that points into the emptiness of the mouth and the fullness of the upcoming new middle class at South Africa. The point is brought home by Steve when he says, "He and she are the foreigners here. Even she. Black skin isn't enough" (Gordimer, *No Time* 194) . Jabu's reaction to the hunger stricken mouth can be related to Steve's guilt at his children having the better life.

Challenges to the New South Africa are presented in two instances; the one seen by Steve at his University and the other from the angle of Gary Elias, at what happens at his school. Steve feels guilty at sending his children to a better school whereas all around him, students come to classes with an empty stomach, they are not able to read and write even in their mother tongue. Steve says,

Was this what it was for, what we did – The Struggle. Comrades- reborn clones of apartheid bosses. Our 'renaissance'. Arms corruption, whats the nice procedure in your courts, the never-never – the Methodist dump just one of the black cesspots of people nobody wants, nobody knows what to do with – 'Rights' to highfalutin' to apply to refugees – shacks where our people supposed now to have walls and a roof, still living in shit, I could go on and on as we do, the comrades. Im in the compound of transformation at a university, schools don't have qualified teachers – or toilets – children come to learn without food in their stomachs. – (Gordimer, *No Time* 223)

At Gary Elias' school the old helping people are subjected to humiliations by being made to mimic initiation rituals. Steve reacts against it and says it is apartheid in another form.

Challenges that the country faces are depicted in the two novels with an immediacy that is warranted by the situation. While in *The Lying Days* the political back drop points to the coming of the Nationalist party to power the pictures from *No Time* are about a global South Africa. In *The Lying Days* there is mention about the mining strike. Another striking parallel is between the two books is the character of the

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female protagonists. There does not seem to be a change regarding the mannerism of the two characters. The same uncertainty that Gordimer places in her white characters is evident in Jabu too. But, dissimilarity can be noted in the evolution of the characters. We see how Helen Shaw slowly unfurls herself with the changing circumstances. Jabu on the other hand is a person who was directly involved in the politics of the time, right from her childhood, a child who was being prepared by her father for freedom.

I would like to place focus on the ending of the two novels. Helen Shaw meets her friend Joel and many things are made clear between them. But this does not prevent her from leaving the country. It would not be stepping beyond the mark to say that Helen Shaw perhaps made a decision that Gordimer may have contemplated taking, considering the circumstances. In Gordimer was the person who could not side with Nationalists in their agenda for racial segregation.

The ending of *No Time* like the ending of *July's People* is uncertain. While Maureen runs towards the helicopter is described by the novelist in uncertain terms, at the end of *No Time* a character utters the line “ -I am not going-“(421) . It is not certain who utters the sentence. Yet the sentence can belong to Jabu, who is the protagonist, who has been the focus of the novelist's gaze from the beginning. It is here in the shifting terrain of uncertainty, that the novelist makes Jabu says that she will not leave the country of her birth. The decision is affirmative. An answer the changed times in South Africa would demand. The answer that Jabu, as a woman who was looked up to by her father and the women in her household who had placed her as the woman of the future, would have approved of, the answer that a much younger Helen Shaw of *The Lying Days* was unable to utter.

Thus we that the decision taken by Helen Shaw comes to rest in Jabu, who even after being dejected by her country, decides to remain. In her must be the realization that one needs to build a space where conversation can be made possible, that democracy requires an opposition that would care enough to stay, beyond all odds.

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