History

THE FAILURE OF LIBERALISM IN NADINE GORDIMER'S OCCASION FOR LOVING

Cătălin TECUCIANU[1]

ABSTRACT

BY THE BEGINNING OF THE 1960S THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE WAS UNDERGOING MAJOR CHANGES WHICH AIMED AT ENFORCING FURTHER RESTRICTIONS ON THE BLACK, COLOURED AND INDIAN POPULATION. THERE WERE A NUMBER OF CRUCIAL DEVELOPMENTS BETWEEN THE MID-1950S AND EARLY 1960S – OUT OF WHICH TWO STAND OUT AS BEING THE MOST IMPORTANT - THAT HAVE A DIRECT BEARING ON THE RESPONSES OF GORDIMER'S NOVELS FROM THE 1960S. THUS, THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO ANALYZE THE NOVELIST'S FICTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EVENTS AFFECTING SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1960S AND THE WAY IN WHICH SPACE/PLACE IS NOW SEEN AND REPRESENTED IN OCCASION FOR LOVING (1963).

KEYWORDS*:* LIBERALISM, IDENTITY, APARTHEID, SOUTH AFRICA, SPACE.

INTRODUCTION

The dominant ideology of multi-racialism proposed and used by the broad opposition to apartheid in the 1950s was in the new decade far less assured than it had been earlier. With the secession of the Africanist segment of the ANC and the founding of the Pan-Africanist Congress in April 1959, the assumptions of multi-racialism were now put to question. The PAC were fierce adversaries of this ideology which they believed served as a means to multiply racialism; as far as they were concerned oppression in South Africa was in fact a national oppression of the black indigenous majority by a white settler minority. As a result, resistance should also be national, by Africans for themselves, against the white.

Occasion for Loving responds in an interesting fashion to the realities of this challenge by acknowledging a basic legitimacy to the PAC claims. "What's the good of our friendship or her love [to him]?"[2], says the novel's white protagonist after a love affair between a black friend and a white Englishwoman has proved disastrous for the former. Gideon's fate at the end of the novel makes it clear that, not only are whites incapable of providing any real support for blacks, but they can also make the situation worse. In this respect, *Occasion for Loving* represents "a moment of profound transition as a dominant

[1] PhD Candidate, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași. catalin.tecucianu@gmail.com.

[2] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 313.

oppositional philosophy broke under the strains of its own assumptions"[3], and as it prepared to take up the next. This novel marks the decisive end, for Gordimer, of the success (if there ever was any) of multi-racialism and denounces the liberal's 'fence-sitting position'. At last, the answer to her 1959 essay, "Where do Whites Fit In? was bitterly confirmed: "nowhere".

The second and more important event that occurred during the writing of the novel was the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 which made quite clear the futility of peaceful resistance to the apartheid regime and marked the transition to a climate in which opposition could only be expressed through acts of violence. On March 21st, 1960 at one of the townships near Johannesburg called Sharpeville, 67 PAC demonstrators were killed and 186 were wounded after the police started shooting at the peaceful mob gathered in front of the police station. This event, more than any other, marked the transition from one world to another. The transition from peaceful resistance to violent confrontation had been made and the old assumptions of a moral struggle and inter-racial solidarity, no longer appeared to have much validity.

Gordimer had moved in circles of intellectual opposition in the 1950s, particularly the circle surrounding the Johannesburg magazine *Drum*; she had been involved in the activities of the 1950s which created a hopeful climate of multi-racial cooperation. In the new climate, however, the notion of multi-racial opposition appeared naïve: racially motivated state violence drew a stark line which necessitates the pursuit of black freedom by blacks for blacks. Cultural oppression was an intrinsic part of this attack; all the writers associated with *Drum* found themselves in one way or another being driven to exile. To Gordimer, this was "an incredible time when … almost everyone I knew was in jail or fleeing.[4]" which brought about a deep solitude.

ARGUMENTATION

Gordimer's third novel came to life in a world entirely unrecognizable from that of the earlier work, and the series of dramatic political and social changes at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s means that the assumptions of the previous decade could no longer remain unquestioned. Almost four years after the publication of *A World of Strangers*, in May 1962 Gordimer's publishers received her latest manuscript for a new novel which would be entitled *Occasion for Loving;* she would later call it "a piece of work with which I began to be a real novelist"[5].

Gordimer's third novel voices her discontent with liberal strategies of opposing apartheid, and for achieving black liberation. As Gordimer herself declares in one interview:

> It's about liberals and (…) the attempt of people to apply a personal standard of values, to oppose it to the social set-up within which they live: in this case, liberals who have no color feeling and who don't really mind the color-bar, who decide that within their private lives they will live the way they want to live, the decent way. I've tried to show how this works out in conflict with the situation here, and whether, indeed, it can be successful (...) As it works out in the novel, it's a failure.[6]

[3] Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 89.
[4] Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, 75.
[5] Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), 256.
[6] Nancy Topping Bazin & Marilyn Dallman Seymour (eds), *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Mississippi: Mississippi University Press, 1990), 26.

The novel also conveys, as Dominic Head argues, "a burgeoning sense of the positive potential of black African roots in South Africa, and this amounts to a preliminary sketch of how a black political mobilization – based on a share history – might be brought about."[7].

The story revolves around a white South-African family, the Stilwells, and their relationship with an English couple that comes to live with them, Boaz and Ann Davis. The Stilwells are convinced liberals who do not agree with South African apartheid and live their life as though the color barrier did not exist. In some ways they convince themselves they exist outside the system – their home is open to anyone, they travel freely to the townships and work within the political parties that are actively fighting against the apartheid system – and this is their way of believing they have kept their own integrity intact. Through the Stilwells, Ann Davis meets Gideon Shibalo, a black painter and a friend of the family. The two start a cross-racial affair which will call into question the Stilwell's commitment to the black cause and expose the absurdity of apartheid laws which have the power to bring to a halt friendships and even love.

As we have seen so far, there was a new mood flowing in the social and political air of South Africa at the end of the 1950s. In starch contrast to the optimism and defiance that characterized the mid-1950s, there was now an increasing awareness that the spirit of Nkosi's "fabulous decade" was departing clearing the ground for something new. Ironically, Lewis Nkosi is also the one who characterized the end of the era, particularly by referring to the future of mixed love affairs, which represented the true embodiments of multi-racialism and its success. In the new light of the age, these affairs now became only "nightmares of worry and effort to have some privacy":

> English or European girls who had no clear conception of the legal restraints and the risk such affairs entailed, arrived in the country, made impossible demands, assuming, for the most commendable reasons, that if you liked one another that was all that counted.[8]

Referring directly to the liberal socializing that had been a trademark of the 1950s, Verwoerd, the 'architect' of apartheid, had declared that he would use an 'iron hand' to do away with this subversion of state policy. Generally speaking, the inter-racial world of Johannesburg found itself watched very closely, undermined and at times even hunted, as pieces of legislation continued to separate the races in various social fields. Thus, the Native Laws Amendment Act and the Group Areas Amendment Act, both passed in 1957, were specifically designed to target multi-racial contact in white areas in the fields of religion, education, health, recreation and entertainment.

The already few liberals who were able to keep their seats in Parliament under the fatally illiberal terms did so without ever successfully challenging the core of apartheid, which was the denial of universal adult voting rights. They accepted it as a working reality. These parliamentary liberals, vapidly talking of "opportunity" while actively denying blacks the vote, were only polishing the chains of the oppressed, argued the liberation movements. Gordimer describes them:

> Nothing more than a sort of 'parliamentary' sincerity, if you know what I mean – no real, deeply felt indignation, but only the raise-finger gestures that stand for it, no flow of any sort of strength from these people promising to fight, and fight again, and still fight (…) What added the final touch was that, as usual, even when someone on the platform was thundering about freedom

[7] Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62.
[8] Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 76.

> for 'non-whites', and we were all applauding our little hands off, and the Nat hooligans were yelling abuse, there wasn't a black man in the place to see his life being arranged for him, to receive championship or abuse … The inevitable unreality about everything we whites do in this country. There's something ghostly about it.[9]

As a result, liberalism became "a dirty word in Africa"[10] and its almost inexistent power to change the life of the people they claimed to represent was exposed. This is the event that gave Gordimer a new theme – "the decline of liberalism, black and white, that has proved itself hopelessly inadequate to an historical situation"[11]. It is this historic juncture that gave rise to the preoccupations in *Occasion for Loving*, the mood of which is mostly elegiac.
Using this both personal and collective trauma as the starting point, Gordimer turns it into a political metaphor and investigates the liberals' commitment to their creed and the relation between love and power. She sketches the white protagonist, Jessie Stilwell, around her own childhood experience; thus the novel offers a stunning similarity between Gordimer's years of adolescence and Jessie's. Tom and Jessie Stilwell are a happily-married liberal couple who keep an open house and are entirely dedicated to maintain the integrity of personal relations against the distortions of law and society. Their condition is that of most white liberals: they are kind hearted and willing to help anyone if the situation arises.

For the most part of the novel, Jessie goes through a process of introspection, renegotiating the terms of her existence by reevaluating the past; to put it differently, she is facing an identity crisis and, as a result, is in search of a new identity:

> Like many people, Jessie had known a number of different, clearly defined, immediate presents, and as each of these phases of her life had closed by being replaced with another, it had lost reality for her; she no longer had it with her. The ribbon of her identity was always that which was being played out between her fingers; there was no coil of it continuing from the past. I was; I am: these were not two different tenses, but two different people.[12]

Like Gordimer, young Jessie was home-schooled, on the alleged reason of an inexistent heart illness, deprived of any physical activity and sheltered in a state of dependence by her unhappily married mother, against the latter's European husband, Bruno Fuecht. Jessie left her mother's house only to marry a young soldier who died during the war, not before leaving her pregnant. As a result, "she lived on her own – with the baby, of course – for the first time in her life, and worked and travelled for a few years before she met, and finally married, Tom Stilwell."[13].

Driven by her strange and difficult relation to her son from a previous marriage, Morgan, Jessie attempts to reconstruct her past, a process which runs parallel with her husband Tom's attempts to write a history of Africa, from the "black point of view"[14] or from the "historical point of view"[15] as he considers it, which will present the African people as a

[9] Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), 163
[10] Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Nancy Topping Bazin & Marilyn Dallman Seymour (eds), *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Mississippi: Mississippi University Press, 1990), 93.
[11] Nadine Gordimer, quoted in Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer*, 358.
[12] Nadine Gordimer, Occasion for Loving (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 20.
[13] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 22.
[14] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 10.
[15] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 10.

historical subject in their own right, rather than as a subset of a Eurocentric history.

> He had been at work for two years, collecting notes for a history he hoped to write – a history of the African subcontinent that would present the Africans as people invaded by the white West, rather than as another kind of fauna dealt with by the white man in his exploration of the world. [16]

Tom's intention relies on the belief that a disinterested perspective, which will formulate an objective rendering of history to record black experience in Africa, can be achieved. But the fact is that a white person, who has been a tool of oppression, writing the history, makes the notion of objectivity uncertain. What is significant about Tom is that through him Gordimer reveals that her conception of South African history has changed. Although in her previous novels she had included, to varying degrees, a black component, history there was dominantly portrayed as being white. In *Occasion for Loving*, however, Gordimer acknowledges for the first time that "the ultimate current of history in South African past, present and future is black, and not white: that the latter is a subset of the former"[17]. This change in national identity and space – South Africa is a country of blacks, not of whites anymore – brings along new types of identity that are ready to surface.

The most important features of the novel's interest in liberalism and humanism are presented through the love affair that also forms the core of the novel: an intimate relationship between the black artist, Gideon Shibalo, and a white English woman, Ann Davis, who has arrived with her husband, David Boaz, to stay with the Stillwels in Johannesburg. This love affair ultimately fails from the inside and the reason why it fails is even more important than the fact that it does so. No external sanctions are needed to destroy Ann and Gideon's relationship; on the contrary, these sanctions have become internalized. As an outsider who arrives to South Africa with no understanding of its human complications, Ann absorbs the obsessions and fears into the matrix of her own personality. Having fled into the countryside once with Gideon, the two lovers make plans to leave the country. But Ann cannot cope with the implications of loving a black man. In a moment of panic she suddenly leaves with her husband instead, while Gideon is left to become wreckage.

The break in communication between the white and the black characters is a theme that is taken rather frequently in Gordimer's early fiction. From the beginning in *Occasion for Loving*, Jessie is aware of the power of apartheid to break and pull people apart from each other. Hence, when Boaz talks to her about his ambition to work freely in Africa, Jessie questions him to clarify whether he wishes to work with the Africans "without hurting them" or "without being hurt by them" or "without responsibility"[18]. Jessie knows that the fascination of the white community with the African world is short-lived: "Ah, Tom, don't ask me to postulate it. We don't see black and white so we all think we behave as decently to one colour face as another. But how can that ever be, so long that there's the possibility that you can escape back into your filthy damn whiteness? How do you know you'll always play fair?"[19]

The life for the black and his white liberal friend in South Africa has reached a crisis. In 1959 there was a great debate going on in white liberal circles over the Extension of Universities Bill, which was being promulgated to exclude blacks from white universities and send them off to various tribal colleges. As an academic and a convinced liberal, Tom is very

[16] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 9-10.
[17] Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 78.
[18] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 12.
[19] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 312.

interested in this matter but the thoughts and impressions he collects from the blacks around him make him realize that there is a deep mistrust in the goodwill of the whites' actions. On his way to a meeting to discuss the Universities Bill, a black man tells him he can "fight over this business" if he wants "but don't think that anything you do really matters. Some of you make laws, and some of you try to change them. And you don't ask us". This is some distance from the general image of blacks presented in Gordimer's previous novels which shows that a significant change of tone has been registered; liberalism is on the wane.

Without the power to change anything on the public scene, the white liberal exercises his politics in personal relations, which leads to absurd effects and ridiculous situations. Thus, the liberal Jew and cheated husband, David Boaz, responds with staggering tolerance, even friendliness, towards the man who is having an affair with his wife, for the simple reason that the latter is black. Even in his jealousy, Ann's husband is unable to intervene in the affair between his wife and Gideon because "inbred patterns of guilt and consequent overcompensation have the effect of reducing him to paralysis"[20]. Ironically, however, Boaz ends up taking advantage of Gideon's skin by refusing to treat him "like any other man" because "Gideon isn't a man, won't be, can't be, until he's free."[21]. And the worst part is that "Gideon knows it"[22], as Jessie points out. Just as Jessie's shaking hands with Jason at the end of her holiday leaves the poor black servant confused, Ann and Boaz's goodwill treatment of Gideon takes him nowhere but to a secluded life away from the white world. Thus the novel explores the political power of intimate relations and shows how the state political powers define the limits of personal desire by such acts as a law against miscegenation:

> A line in a statute book has more authority than the claims of one man's love or another's. All claims of natural feeling are over-ridden alike by a line in a statute book that takes no account of humanness, that recognizes neither love nor respect nor jealousy nor rivalry nor compassion nor hate - nor any human attitude where there are black and white together. What Boaz felt towards Ann; what Gideon felt towards Ann, what Ann felt about Boaz, what she felt for Gideon - all this that was real and rooted in life was void before the clumsy words that reduced the delicacy and towering complexity of living to a race theory . . . [23]

The love relation between Ann and Gideon is doomed from the start not because of some external reason, but because the repressions of apartheid have become psychologically inscribed. In this regard, as Clingman observes, "it is the prestructuring effects of apartheid that count"[24]. Apartheid has the power to penetrate to the most intimate of human relationships and even Tom and Jessie who were witnesses to this love affair and in their liberal humanistic attitude had promoted it, are forced to acknowledge its inherent failure:

> They believed in the integrity of personal relations against the distortion of law and society. What stronger and more proudly personal bond was there than love? Yet between lovers they had seen blackness count, the personal return inevitably to the social, the private to the political. There was no recess of being, no emotion so private that white privilege did not single you out there; it was a silver spoon clamped between your jaws and you might choke

[20] Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 83.
[21] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 312.
[22] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 271.
[23] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 246.
[24] Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 82.

> on it for all the chance there was dislodging it. So long as the law remained unchanged, nothing could bring integrity to personal relationships.[25]

As far as they are concerned, this is also a failure of their liberal beliefs:

> The Stilwell's code of behaviour towards people was definitive, like their marriage; they could not change it. But they saw that it was a failure, in danger of humbug. Tom began to think there would be more sense in blowing up a power station; but it would be Jessie who would help someone to do it, perhaps, in time.[26]

The humanist autonomy that had been a success in 'a world of strangers' is found to be obsolete and lacking in an 'occasion for loving'. This discovery is a shattering one: in so far as liberal humanism is rooted in a belief in the incorruptibility and infinite social premise of authentic human relationships, in a contrary realization such as this, the premises of its existence are swept away.

It is painful for Jessie to see Gideon drunk with the impression after his "experience of the disastrous love affair" with Ann that every white woman is "a bitch". In his state of drunkenness Gideon only perceives the Jessie's skin colour and not her identity. One white is substitutable for another, and the point is that relations between Gideon and Jessie have become totally impersonal. Jessie looses Gideon's company as a family friend, thus revealing the failure of personal relations against the distortion of laws and society in which people live in South Africa:

> When Jessie saw Gideon again, he clearly had no memory of what he had said to her. They continued to meet in a friendly fashion, sometimes in the Lucky Star, occasionally at the houses of friends, but the sense of his place in the Stilwells' life and theirs in his that she felt that night never came again. So long as Gideon did not remember, Jessie could not forget.[27]

This attitude leads to the creation of a wall, a barrier that separates Jessie and Gideon in their relationships with each other. For Jessie, now, to be anti-social is a failure, but to be socially engaged is impossible. This enforces, once again, the idea that there can be no triumphs of consciousness in South Africa, no victory of personal relationships.

It is for the first time that one of Gordimer's novels ends in paralyzing irony. It is also for the first time that one of her novels expresses the acute alienation of an incapacitated white consciousness. Much of this can be put on the extraordinary force with which historical events struck at the end of the 1950s. Dismantled from the body of opposition that had disappeared both socially and politically, this paralysis and irony is the most powerful inner illumination of the destruction of the common assumptions of the previous decade. And ideologically, the most significant things about the novel is by consequence a question of absence. For if the failure of the love affair marks the end of liberal humanism, Gordimer has been unable to put anything else in its place.

All in all, *Occasion for Loving* represents a moment of profound transition as a dominant oppositional philosophy broke under the strains of its own assumptions. In this way, the novel brings to a close the inner history of liberal humanism in the 1950s and early 1960s. Godimer has finally exhausted humanism as a discourse: all the hopes of it were centered in Jessie Stillwel, and what she records is their futility in the face of apartheid.

[25] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 321.
[26] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 321.
[27] Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 332.

REFERENCES

1. **Clingman, Stephen**; *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992;
2. **Bazin, Nancy Topping**; **Marilyn Dallman Seymour** (eds); Conversations with Nadine Gordimer, Mississippi: Mississippi University Press, 1990;
3. **Gordimer, Nadine**; *Occasion for Loving*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013;
4. **Head, Dominic**; *Nadine Gordimer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994;
5. **Roberts, Ronald Suresh**. *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer*, Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005;