

Representing Women in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Feminist Consciousness, Emancipatory Knowing and Social Development in Nadine Gordimer's Fiction

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Abstract: This article analyses three of Nadine Gordimer's post-apartheid novels from a postcolonial feminist and narratological viewpoint. More specifically, literary representations of women are examined to evaluate the social and cultural transformations in post-apartheid South Africa. The study argues that compared with her previous novels, Gordimer portrays strong female characters, especially the black ones, endowed with an acute feminist consciousness. In the South African society represented in *None to Accompany Me*, *The Pickup* and *No Time like the Present*, female characters surpass their traditional status as only life transmitting belts and domestic women to embrace that of agents of social development. Their efficient use of emancipatory knowing is indicative of Gordimer's perception of South Africa as a site of gender inclusiveness.

Key terms: Emancipatory knowing, Empowerment, feminist consciousness, gender, representation, woman.

Résumé : Utilisant une approche postcoloniale féministe et narratologique, cet article analyse trois romans de Nadine Gordimer publiés après l'apartheid. De façon plus spécifique, il examine les personnages féminins dans le but de mieux comprendre les transformations sociales et culturelles intervenues en Afrique du Sud après l'apartheid. L'étude soutient que, par rapport à ses romans écrits pendant l'apartheid, Gordimer dépeint dans les romans sélectionnés des personnages féminins forts, en particulier les personnages féminins noirs, dotés d'une conscience féministe aiguë. Dans la société sud-africaine représentée dans *None to Accompany Me*, *The Pickup* et *No Time like the Present*, les personnages féminins surpassent leur statut traditionnel de courroie de transmission de la vie et de femmes domestiques pour embrasser celui d'agents de développement social. Leur utilisation efficace du savoir émancipatoire montre que Gordimer perçoit l'Afrique du Sud comme un site d'intégration du genre.

Key terms: Conscience féminine, Empowerment, femme, genre, représentation, savoir émancipatoire.

Introduction

After the end of Apartheid in 1994, South African major writer Nadine Gordimer has written five novels including *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The Pickup* (2001) and *No Time like the Present* (2012). Without neglecting *The House Gun* (1998) and *Get a Life* (2005), these three novels can be taken as the quintessence of Gordimer's post-apartheid literary

production. These books reveal the changes observed in black and white people's living conditions and their attitudes after the supposed loss of white hegemony in South Africa. Conjointly to the changes noticeable at every level of South African society, women's situation has been through multiple steps. This has not escaped knowledgeable observers of South African post-apartheid society. Nadine Gordimer, Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010, is certainly among them. Indeed, her post-apartheid fiction is the testimony of multiform changes in the social, cultural and political landscapes of the new South Africa.

The aim of this article is to analyze the representations of dynamic female characters in the struggle for social change and justice in post-apartheid South African society. Indeed, the study of female characters shows the changing place of women in Nadine Gordimer's fiction. Therefore, it is relevant to delineate the lifestyle as well as the social roles available to them such as portrayed in three of her post-apartheid novels. This study intends to show how Gordimer gives or denies voice to female characters in post-apartheid South Africa and how she highlights women's positions in terms of gender roles and self-expression in both public and private life in the New Nation. Do the representations of these characters contrast with the status as "second class citizen" (Emecheta) or "second sex" (De Beauvoir) as well as the voicelessness and the invisibility assigned to them in Gordimer's apartheid fiction?

As far as the theoretical framework is concerned, this article is mainly based on a combination between a postcolonial feminist perspective, a theory which is primarily concerned with the representation of women in former colonized countries, and narratology which is to be understood as a discipline dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation. Taking into account the evolution of Gordimer's representations of women in her fiction, this article focuses on the new images of female characters in their private and professional lives as the outcome of their feminist consciousness and their new understanding of gender power roles in a society not plainly extirpated from hegemonic and conflictual relationships.

1. Feminist Consciousness and Political Empowerment in a Changing Society

Generally speaking, feminism can be regarded as an ideological position which aims at structural and cultural transformation for equality of opportunity for women and the eradication of all social forces which lead to discrimination and oppression. As African women have always been the objects of male subjectivity, they have been defined in relation

to male needs in society. This implies that they are not allowed freedom of choice. However, in recent times, women seem to have successfully overcome the inferiority complex created in them by their traditional social position. In fact, they venture forth into the man's world to create independent status for themselves. Their approach to life, as well as their sensibility and sensitivity, invariably differs from that of men. That is why women's point of view is often considered as the outcome of their feminine consciousness.

In her historical introduction to a wide range of women's movements from the late-18th century to the present titled *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action*, Sheila Rowbotham asserts that "feminism is sometimes confined to women's struggles against oppressive gender relationship. In fact, however, women's actions, both now and in the past, often have been against interconnecting relations of inequality and have involved many aspects of resistance around daily life and culture and not simply about gender" (1992: 6). She thus defines feminism as a movement which is not only concerned with women's rights insofar as it includes resistance against oppressive culture in terms of class, race and sexual orientation.

However, present feminist criticism shows that there is an increasing recognition that whereas Western feminists have struggled against sexism and against social and political inequalities, women in the 'Third World' have had to confront additional and even more intractable problems. They often have to combat sexism in the form of deep-rooted local beliefs and practices inducing class, religion, and ethnic biases. For instance, in South Africa, black women had to fight against both Apartheid and male oppression. For this reason, this research is basically based on postcolonial feminism and not on global feminism which is perceived as Eurocentric by postcolonial criticism. On this subject, Ritu Tyagi notes:

While postcolonial theorist struggles against the maiden discourse that aims at representing him as inferior, the task of a postcolonial feminist is far more complicated. She suffers from "double colonization" as she simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. In this oppression, her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice but her oppressor. (Tyagi, 2009: 45)

This vision of postcolonial women's resistance is exemplified in Gordimer's fiction. As indicated by Michelle Goins-Reed, "regardless of Gordimer's personal feelings and public remarks regarding feminism and her own refusal to be identified as a feminist writer, her writing offers a significant contribution to the field of feminist studies" (2019: 52).

Indeed, in her post-apartheid novels, the South African writer presents her female characters' point of view in such a way that, at once, their feminine consciousness gets revealed. In *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The Pickup* (2001) and *No Time like the Present*

(2012), Gordimer unveils the conscious awareness of her female characters as well as their development as competent political activists. For example, in *The Pickup*, Julie Summers, one of her characters, rebels against the materialist values of her parents. To show the new attitude she has adopted towards the Blacks, she lives in a formerly black part of the town, drives an old second hand car, works for a rock'n roll agency and spends her leisure time with a multiracial and liberal circle of friends. She asserts her separate individual point of view with regard to everything around her. Gordimer subtly describes major South African political issues throughout her heroine's personality within modern socio-political realities. Julie Summers is depicted as a strong character who attempts to address public issues affecting the new-socio-political order.

In Gordimer's post-1994 fiction, the recurrent issue of racism is somewhat replaced by the concern of oppression against African immigrants in post-apartheid South Africa. In fact, Julie's opinions about policies regarding the immigrants and HIV/AIDS in her country tend to politicize her actions. Her complex representation shows how Gordimer's female characters respond to the new social realities beyond racial issue. In the post-apartheid society represented by Gordimer in *The Pickup*, xenophobia is seen as an issue that challenges the new social order. As a political activist against xenophobia, Julie condemns immigration law of expulsion. In fact, as an immigrant, Abdu, her lover must leave South Africa. To avoid his expulsion, Gordimer's heroine tries to do something by relying on her father's friend Hamilton Motsamai, a successful black lawyer. Unfortunately, the prosecution does not succeed and she decides to follow Abdu to his homeland instead of staying in South Africa. Julie's personal choices demonstrate her political actions in resisting the cultural domination of the West over the East. Thus, she abandoned the privilege lifestyle that her parents can offer her both in South Africa and in the United States where her mother had settled after emigrating. Julie's political struggle against Western cultural hegemony highlights Gordimer's endeavour to promote a transcultural philosophy in a world where many forms of intolerance tend to affect the current socio-political order.

In *None to Accompany Me*, Gordimer presents a different perspective on female characters. The focus of the novel is on the empowerment of black and white women in the context of transition within the new multiracial South Africa. The changes in political power are used to provide women with a more important role in the first democratically elected South African government. Gordimer describes two female political figures with different prerogatives. The first influential female character is Vera Stark, a white lawyer who uses her

professional skills to resist the political oppression of black people. The second one is Sibongile Maqoma, the most important black female character of the novel. She has returned from political exile together with her husband, Didymus and their daughter Mpho.

Most of the critics underline the political consciousness of Gordimer's characters in this novel. For instance, in "Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me: The Context of Freedom and Empowerment in Post-Apartheid South Africa*", Toshiko Sakamoto states:

These women's political growths are paralleled with the delicate process of empowerment in South Africa, which is undergoing massive and fundamental political struggle and self-definition into the narrative of the new nation. The empowerment of the nation also becomes an empowerment of women who are integral to that struggle. Gordimer now investigates this and shows us what happens when women redefine themselves and their roles within the struggles (p. 228).

The portrayal of Vera's political engagement against racial discrimination at the Legal Foundation shows her position during and after apartheid regime. In *None to Accompany Me*, the reader is informed that Vera "had been in campaigns against detention without trial, forced removals of communities, franchises that excluded blacks" (p. 5). Being appointed member of the Technical Committee responsible for drafting the country's constitution, Gordimer alludes that white women are getting higher position and empowerment in the new society.

As noted by Nancy Topping Bazin, this higher position among black South Africans is shown through two ways: "radical political actions and sexual liaisons with black activists" (2000: 33). Through her political activism, Vera Stark heads efforts to restore land to Blacks. As evidenced in the novel, her sexuality attraction facilitates her activism as a white woman in the movement for a free South Africa. Moreover, she belongs to the category of freedom fighters who chose to resist apartheid from within by staying in the country. All over the strong behavior she expresses, Gordimer describes her as a powerful woman who transcends the dread of dying for the sake of the oppressed. The incident in which she gets injured and that results in the death of Oupa, her black assistant, exemplifies women's courage and resilience in participating in the political struggle.

The portrayal of Vera's political engagement in the struggle against racial discrimination is comparable to Gordimer's own political stance against the apartheid regime. In fact, many parallels can be drawn between the two women in terms of their political involvement. Vera and Gordimer are professionally committed to resist political oppression. Vera resorts to her Legal Foundation to express agency against socio-political oppression while Gordimer uses art as her political struggle weapon. However, Gordimer refuses to identify herself with her female character. As reported by Stephane Serge Ibinga, Gordimer

rejects in an interview the idea that Vera's political engagement be looked at as reflecting her own biography. The 2010 Winner of Nobel Prize in Literature goes further by articulating the discrepancy between herself and her female protagonist. She thus explains: "I'm not a lawyer. She (Vera) is involved professionally. My political involvement, oddly enough, has been on a much more personal level than hers. I've never done any work like hers to bring me into the kinds of contexts she has" (quoted in Ibinga, 2007: 73). As can be seen, Gordimer praises her heroine's political achievement. For her, through her professional activities, Vera is to be grasped as an icon of political resistance.

In addition to Vera, Gordimer makes the depiction of another powerful female character whose name is Sibongile Maqoma. With her husband Didymus, she experienced the new political climate and they are willing to join the party that will govern the country and, at the same time, be part of the preparation process of elections. Actually, home politics in post-apartheid South Africa has a new significance for Sibongile, since it has replaced the meaning of her old home. The narrator in *None to Accompany Me* observes: "Home for her was the politics of home" (p. 71). Sibongile and Didymus represent freedom fighters that were forced to choose the route of exile to carry out resistance beyond national borders. Since their return from England, Sibongile begins playing an active role in socio-political transformation of the newly democratized South African society. Gordimer's text gives empowerment to women, particularly to the black ones, in the new political scene. Ever since in her previous texts, only white women were able to express and own power meanwhile black women were absent and invisible. Gordimer's approach in delineating female black characters has been widely criticized. For instance, in her analysis of female characters in Gordimer's fiction, Toshiko Sakamoto notes:

In Gordimer's earlier works, a large group of Black women are left out of her vision of social reality. She has been criticised for rendering Black women silent and invisible in revitalizing and liberating exclusively white women through their attachments to black men as if to suggest that the issues of liberation may only be explored between white women and black men, and as if to endorse the assumption that matters of liberation within the non-white community are entirely masculine issues. Gordimer sees the emancipation of black women as secondary to national liberation within which black women's struggle is subsumed. (Sakamoto, 2001)

Contrary to the representation of women in Gordimer's early fiction, in her post-apartheid novels, black female characters are offered political roles and their struggle for the progress of South Africa as an emergent nation has a positive implication. As Sibongile puts aside the traditional duties of a woman, she begins to struggle not only for the black South African women but for the South African society as a whole. Her political position as deputy director of the movement in charge of the social reinsertion of returnees from exile and her

election as member of the executive board of a post-apartheid movement indicate the empowered status of the black women in the political sphere of the new South Africa. On the whole, Gordimer's representation of Sibongile's political achievement shows that black women are very enterprising in taking decision in new national political challenges. Through the depiction of this character, Gordimer gives voices to black women's political roles in the transforming society. In the same vein, black women's political participation in home politics can promote the emancipation of women in the political sphere.

Nadine Gordimer's last novel, *No Time like the Present*, also analyzes the relationship between the political and the personal worlds of female characters. Gordimer delineates the life of Jabu, a black female revolutionary activist who shares some similarities with Sibongile Maqoma in her political activist struggle against apartheid regime. Her political involvement against racial discrimination in South Africa where she experienced prison life in the women's prison in Johannesburg led her to be recruited by Freedom Fighters in Swaziland.

The depiction of Jabu's political activism shows that she is totally empowered in the political arena. By assigning to her protagonist a wide range of political roles available to black women in the new nation, Gordimer has created a character who distinguishes herself by a sense of critical awareness that undoubtedly stems from her political consciousness. After her degree in Economics and Law, Jabu's role as a volunteer secretary to a women's action group against women's and child abuse indicates her determination to raise her voice against the new socio-political order in the South African society. As indicated in the novel, the "country is said to have one of, if not, the higher incidence in the world" (p. 352). Otherwise, South Africa has the highest levels of rape and violence against women in the world. Rape and sexual abuse against women is an important social issue in the new nation. Jabu is aware of this issue because many women and girls "are forced into cars when they're taking a walk to a shopping mall in their suburb, or a gang gets over the security fence and breaks into a house, one rapes the woman while the others collect the TV and computer" (p. 357).

What is more intolerable in the society represented by Gordimer is that rape is seen as a masculine entitlement for which the South African police and justice are helpless. The narrator refers to this unacceptable situation as the perpetuation of a "culture of impunity" (p. 353). Indeed, an insignificant rate of the rapists who do go to trial is only condemned while the overwhelming majority is found not guilty of rape. To give a realistic aspect to the novel, Gordimer even interferes a real fact in her story. Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo, known to the

South African public as Khwezi, alleged that political leader Jacob Zuma had raped her in 2005 while he was the ANC deputy president. Unexpectedly, Zuma was acquitted on the rape charge in 2006, after claiming that sex had been consensual. The whole affair has been particularly seen in terms of gendered roles within the circle of Zulu culture. In fact, in Zulu culture, it is a traditional norm for a man to satisfy an aroused woman who can be identified, literally, by her dress code which in this case was a sarong-type skirt. The discourse surrounding Jacob Zuma's rape trial is built around consent intercourse between him and the woman. As he answered during the trial that "it was traditionally incumbent in Zulu culture for a Zulu man to satisfy a woman who showed she was sexually aroused. You cannot just leave a woman if she is in that state' (p. 134).

Nadine Gordimer delivers an unambiguous message about South African sexual politics in *No Time like the Present*. By reminding the collective memory of the name of this woman whose life was completely smashed, she takes a stand against rape culture in South Africa. Her novel unveils some dark aspects of Zulu culture that refrain gender promotion. It is as if women's sexual availability to men within patriarchal societies must never suffer the slightest contestation. This appropriation of women's body by any necessary means is denounced by the novelist. As reported in *The Guardian*, if for South African justice, Khwezi was not a victim, for the collective memory and more particularly South African black women, she is "a symbol for all of us who are abused in this violent, disgusting and patriarchal way. She is an example of what we must not do. We must show solidarity with those who are vilified for speaking out" (Thamm, 2016

As a female novelist, Gordimer shows through her narratives her solidarity towards the victims of sexual violence. Indeed, in *No Time like the Present*, her heroine's political action against rape and sexual abuse as a lawyer gives voice to female victims. Jabu's action to restore the dignity of these women is thus saluted by the novelist who gives her a higher consideration in the new nation as a black woman.

2. Women at Work: Female Characters as Agents of Social Development

In her post-apartheid novels, Nadine Gordimer represents South African women in their professional life. If her writing is focused on women's self-determination and self-fulfillment in the new South Africa, her female characters are mostly portrayed as agents of social development. In *The Pickup*, Gordimer represents the image of the central female character in the public sphere. She is described as an engaged woman who plays a major role

in the process of emancipation of the other women of her husband's village. Her sense of denouncing the social realities that dominate the new dispensation such as poverty, disease, and immigration is highlighted in the novel. Indeed, Julie Summers is the daughter of a successful businessman who abandons her privileged suburban lifestyle to follow her lover in a North African village. Once there, she realizes that she can be useful to this place by committing herself to serve and work with the women in the village.

Gordimer's narrator describes Julie Summers as a character who initiates social work in the village by giving education to women and also helping them to set up a cooperative of their own so as to free themselves from patriarchal constraints. She further teaches English to them and other young girls in the neighbourhood. The narrator claims:

Julie was teaching English not only to Maryam and the quiet young neighbourhood girls and awkward boys who sidled into the lean-to whispering and making place for one another cross-legged on the floor... The woman invited the foreign wife to come to tea and be good enough to talk English with other ladies wanting to learn to speak the language (pp. 140-141).

Julie succeeds to enter the women's circle by teaching and educating them. For her, this is to be seen as the major priority for women's fulfillment in society. In doing so, she succeeds in empowering these women psychologically and financially. She helps them acquire notions of self-esteem and financial autonomy. Above and beyond, Julie commits herself against discrimination against boys and girls who are not given chance to access to schools. Thus, the narrator comments upon Julie's commitment as follows: "She had been drawn in to coach English to older boys hoped to go to high school in the capital some day; she had been able to persuade-flatter-the local school principal to let girls join the classes although it was more than unlikely their families would allow them to leave home" (p. 193). Throughout Julie's actions, Gordimer shows in *The Pickup* how solidarity between African women should be promoted. By teaching English to rural women, Julie contributes to transforming women's mindset about their own emancipation.

As expected, women's empowerment in patriarchal societies is not well seen by men, especially male chauvinists. Therefore, one understands that Abdu, Julie's husband, accuses her of influencing rural women with her rich girl's Café ideas of female independence (p. 254). However, the novel shows that these women's conscious awareness is effective and they do not need to be influenced since they know that they have the right to speak for themselves. The narrator explains:

But they want to decide for themselves. They don't want anyone to tell them to wear the chador, all right, but if they do want to wear it, they won't have some Westerner telling them to throw it away. They want to study or work anywhere they decide outside the kitchen, the modern world where men still think we're the only ones to have a place. (p. 176).

Despite Abdu's bitter accusation, Julie is seen by the novelist as a strong and humble character throughout her actions which give her a strong sense of attachment to this place. Described as an urban woman in the city of Johannesburg, Julie grows up through wealthy and individualistic principles that shape her relations with her parents. The narrative describes the city as a place where struggle for women's rights is well established because Julie and the other female characters display their pride of being independent. Julie's uneasy relation with her parents is the result of that modern inhuman world that Gordimer describes in the novel. Her parents could provide her with massive material wealth but they fail to fulfill their daughter's deeper needs that are more social than individualistic.

To better highlight the status of her protagonist as an agent of social development endowed with sisterhood ideology and solidarity with women, Gordimer has crafted her as fundamentally different from the other female characters of the novel. Indeed, contrary to the other members of her family, Julie leads a humble life. In searching for her own independence and identity, she refuses to drive her father's luxury car. She rather prefers an old one and enjoys her meetings with her friends at public places where they explore the particular contemporary issues concerning their community. Julie is mainly represented as the opposite of her family in the sense that her step-mother and her father value materialism while she despises expensive lifestyle. In the world depicted by Gordimer, all these characters represent "the antagonist force, an obstacle that prevents the thematic force from unfolding in the microcosm" (Bourneuf & Ouellet, 1989: 161). For instance, Julie's step-mother epitomizes the women who affectionate material possessions and physical comfort. She is delighted to organize dinners to her husband's house and to host many business people whose main topics are their business and their fortunes (pp. 40-41). Neglecting spiritual values, Julie's stepmother defines power in terms of material possessions. As made explicit in the novel, the two women's distant relationship is due to the massive family inheritance coveted by the stepmother who is wholly described as a heartless character.

Another female antagonist character to which Julie is ideologically opposed is her mother. Whereas Julie has chosen to settle in a rural area where she proves to be helpful to other women, her mother has decided to relocate in the United States where she remarried to another rich businessman. Meanwhile, her father stays in Johannesburg with his new wife and still runs his business. In the end, Julie's portrayal in her private life shows that she never experienced parental love within the family unit. In contrast to her life as an urban woman

described as a negative one, she proves to be a happy and useful woman engaged in social change in the new South Africa represented by Gordimer in *The Pickup*.

As can be noted, in the world represented in this novel, there are only a few characters functioning as “adjuvants”, that is to say characters that help the protagonist to reach her goal (Bourneuf & Ouellet, 1989: 163). This is certainly due to the fact that in Gordimer’s vision, there are still many obstacles to genuine social change in South Africa. However, this does not mean that her vision of the future of South African nation is pessimistic. Before writing *The Pickup*, she showed how black South African women could be seen as symbolizing the hope for a social change. Their emancipatory knowing, that is to say their “ability to recognize social and political problems of injustice or inequity, to realize that things could be different, and to identify or participate in social and political change to improve people’s lives” (Chinn & Kramer, 2011: 64) is highlighted in Gordimer’s post-apartheid fiction.

In fact, in *None to Accompany Me*, Gordimer represents female characters in their professional life. The most powerful female characters are Vera Stark and her black friend Sibongile Maqoma. Both women are described as successful women in their careers and their engagement in women’s emancipation. Sibongile is depicted as a black woman who returns from exile during the transition period of South Africa. She symbolizes the new black intellectual woman who is asserting her status in the public sphere. Vera also embodies South African women who benefit from the policy of black empowerment, which is to be grasped as an attempt to redress past disparities by giving leadership position to black people.

Another female character who plays a key role in the social transformation in *None to Accompany Me* is Sally. She is an influential political figure whose personality has grown with her political involvement in the Movement while in exile in England. She is depicted as a woman with strong personality whose “obvious undocile femininity would count against her; the physical disturbance she made no attempt to minimize prefigured the disturbance in the male appropriation of power she might seem presumptuous to ignore” (p. 70).

Sally is given a high position in the public arena as she is appointed Deputy Director of the Movement’s redeployment program (p. 86). She has a better job than her husband Dydimus has and travels around the world to represent her country at conferences. She belongs to a higher social class where women start extricating themselves from social conditions prescribed for women. Furthermore, the narrator describes Sally’s work environment as being directed by an intellectual woman who effectively plays a leading role in a male-dominated world:

Sibongile spoke of her job as if it were quite humble (...) When there were complaints about her she said to her comrades in high positions what they themselves thought it better not to express.– I don't want to be told I behave like an exploiter just to someone can go on sitting around filing her nails or someone who was once detained thinks he's forever entitled to disappear two hours for lunch... This's not sheltered employment (p. 67).

Sibongile is presented as a black powerful woman in the professional field whereas her husband is less visible in the public domain and he is portrayed as exhibiting the attitudes of a weak and lazy man in comparison with her wife. The husband does not have a choice but to take care of the domestic tasks since his wife's working days are busier than his are.

Like Sibongile Maqoma, Vera Stark has also played an important role as a social worker at the Legal Foundation. In fact, the narrator depicts her as a fulfilled white woman in the public domain. To better highlight her professional and human qualities, her status is contrasted with that of her husband. Indeed, in comparison with her husband Ben, Vera is described as a successful lawyer. The narrator describes not only Ben's lack of maturity in tackling domestic issues but also his failure in his career. His irrational passion for Vera makes him sacrifice his artistic talent. The narrator states: "But married to the woman he had captivated and captured and the father of a family, he had given up the idea of becoming a sculptor. Vera, at last, had attained her easier ambition of qualifying in law" (p. 18). This clearly implies that Ben has become a real burden to his wife on whom he totally depends physically, emotionally, and financially.

In *None to Accompany Me*, Gordimer's characters take on traits from opposite genders. In this perspective, the power relationships between men and women are reversed. For instance, Ben is wholly depicted as a voiceless character, a status usually assigned to women in apartheid and postcolonial fiction. Indeed, the narrator describes him as a man who has accepted his situation and who does not challenge the hierarchy between him and his wife: "Lovingly, he felt no jealousy; hers was a practical goal, not dependent on the imponderable mystery of talent; of which, protected by sensual happiness, he came to accept he perhaps did not have enough" (p. 18).

Contrary to this voicelessness noticeable in the attitude of Ben, a careful analysis of his wife's personality shows that she develops an image of a powerful woman at the Legal Foundation. Indeed, the narrator notes: "Mrs Stark is a fixture at the Legal Foundation... Her quiet acerbity at meetings, when she disagrees with aspects of policy... her ability, sitting back with her head in its close-cut cap of white-streaked dark blond hair held immobile in attention... Nobody can corn Vera, her colleagues agree with satisfaction (p. 11). Both her knowing knowledge and her attitude reveal Vera's equal status with men since she constantly

attempts to break subversion etiquettes socially ascribed to women. On the whole, Vera Stark is described as an influential white woman at work whose personality has grown with her involvement with land retribution problems and her nomination as a member of the country Board Director to write the new Constitution. She develops a strong personality in the public domain from which she withdraws to concentrate on her private life, a field where she still has a great deal to learn.

If South African white and black women do not have the same history, Nadine Gordimer shows in her writing project that their present and future are tightly linked. They must challenge gender hierarchy and fully participate in the building of the post-apartheid society. In the nation's reconstruction project, these women represent the most promising South Africa. This is probably why Gordimer is obsessed as shaping them as social workers and as lawyers. For instance, like Vera in *None to Accompany Me*, she represents in *No Time like the Present*, a powerful female character with advanced education. Rebecca Jabulile Reed, a brilliant black lawyer, plays an important role in gender justice by defending women and child abuse. The narrator describes her as a fulfilled woman in the public domain as she specializes in Economics and Law, two fields in which she has achieved a great deal. In the new dispensation represented by Gordimer in *No Time like the Present*, this female character epitomizes the image of the enfranchised black woman. The narrator comments on her as a young woman who perfectly combines her status as a worker and her life as a modern woman:

As the muscular image of a professional sports player develops a certain conformation so Jabu's image went through certain changes. Though her hair was the African crown of braided patterns and locks that was the general assertion of traditional African aesthetics reinstated in the free woman, she has as if unnoticed by herself begun to adopt the other traditional convention of female freedom, the informal but well-cut pants and jackets of professional men ... she had managed or been given a synthesis between the working relevance of the past and the present (p. 123).

Though a typical African woman as described by the narrator, Jabu refuses to operate in a social sector assigned to black girls by convention in the past and is instead determined to make a successful career. Furthermore, compared with Vera in *None to Accompany Me*, Jabu proves to be a more complete and stable character. Undoubtedly, through her, Nadine Gordimer promotes collective intelligence and gender collaboration. In fact, the character's family environment is a peaceful one and her father is also proud of her because he had been in favor of girls' education. Although coming from a patriarchal society where gender roles are predetermined, Jabu's father sent her at a mission school instead of leaving her at home for women's daily activities. The narrator further states:

The women were accustomed to leading a woman's life alongside a man in a bed but sharing, apart, their own preoccupation with care of children, cooking, maintenance of the family commune in their activities, from growing vegetables to building shelter. Jabu has always been her father's child. She wasn't kept at home while a brother, males always first in line for education, went to school, paid the fees and a younger brother waited his turn for entry (p. 27).

What Nadine Gordimer reminds the reader of in *No Time Like the Present* is that women's roles and functions in South Africa were exclusively restricted to the domestic arena for centuries and Jabu's mother and the other women in her father's compound were assigned to these roles. In other words, the status of women within the family unit remained confined to their biological functions, such as procreation and childcare, confining them to a lower marital and social rank compared to their male counterparts. Gordimer's depiction of Jabu's social and professional achievement indicates that women, particularly black women, now have the same opportunities like men in South Africa social fabric. As shown by Jabu in the novel, they are now emancipated and have their own thought about education: "How could we have got to vote in '94 if we hadn't followed the banned Freedom Charter. How'd I have got to school ahead of my brother and then away from 'Bantu Education' to Swaziland, if my Baba had accepted that at home females come second, for a black daughter education comes later. Hopeless" (p. 69). This rhetorical question put by Jabu, clearly implies that Gordimer foresees a considering position for women in the South African society.

Conclusion

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* reveals that females are generally regarded as below men. The French feminist thinker asks in the introduction of her book "What is a woman?" (2011: 23). Looking for the answer of this question through three of Nadine Gordimer's post-apartheid novels, it can be asserted that a woman is someone who is no more less of a human being than a man. Indeed, the fight for gender equality and gender oppression feminists have been leading for decades in modern societies find echo in *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The Pickup* (2001) and *No Time like the Present* (2012). Contrary to the novels she has written during apartheid, Gordimer's post-apartheid novels show female characters in multiple contexts where they are depicted as agents of social transformation.

Despite sociocultural constraints and the burden of patriarchy, these women are actively participating in the shaping of a new society. It is as if the breakdown of apartheid has empowered them in such a way that they have successfully crossed gender, race and place boundaries. This enables the observers of South African post-apartheid literature, as suggested

by Leon De Kock, to favor from now on the notion of “sewing” over that of “frontier” since everything seems to convey that the country is now a site of “both difference and convergence” (2001: 276). In the changing society depicted in the three novels, black and white female characters show acute awareness of social problems and their knowing knowledge is put forward by Gordimer in a multicultural and multiracial context. Characters such as Sibongile, Vera and Jabu depicted as dynamic show more concern to social challenges than domestic problems in which South African women were confined before the end of apartheid. As illustrated in the three novels, the new South Africa cannot be defined without taking into account these women who are redefining their identity along with that of the new nation. In spite of Nadine Gordimer’s reluctance “to think of herself as a feminist writer” (Driver, 1983: 33), she clearly promotes gender inclusiveness in post-apartheid South Africa.

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