

Francesca Mussi

Nadine Gordimer by Laura Giovannelli

Laura Giovannelli. 2013. *Nadine Gordimer*. Firenze: Le Lettere, pp. 388. € 22,50, ISBN 978-88-6087-684-3.

In her sixth monograph, *Nadine Gordimer*, Laura Giovannelli decides to focus on the work of the 'South African Lady of Letters', Nobel Prize for Literature (1991), Nadine Gordimer, who embodies one of the most representative voices of contemporary literature in English. Extending the study on Gordimer carried out by Tania Zulli in 2005 (1), Giovannelli provides a compelling reading of the South African writer's novels, from her early works to her last novel *No Time Like the Present*, by relying both on fundamental critics such as, for instance, Stephen Clingman and Dominic Head, and on Gordimer's non-fictional texts. In the introduction to her monograph, she outlines the main feature of Gordimer's writing: the tension between her ethical commitment to South Africa's history and political situation, and her devotion to art for art's sake. By citing one interview in which Gordimer claims that "my writing does not deal with my personal convictions; it deals with the society I live and write in. [...] My novels are antiapartheid, not because of my personal abhorrence of apartheid, but because the society that is the very stuff of my work *reveals itself*" (32), Giovannelli emphasises, on the one hand, Gordimer's profound connection with her land of birth, and, on the other hand, her loyalty to a type of "scrittura onesta" ("honest writing", 33), to a language deprived of any ideologies or political propaganda.

After briefly discussing the history of colonialism in South Africa in the 20th century – with particular attention to the establishment of the apartheid regime – as well as Gordimer's biography and bibliography in the section entitled "La lunga strada della 'ragazzina Bianca di Springs'. Un quadro biografico e contestuale di Nadine Gordimer", Giovannelli moves to the analyses of the writer's early novels:

The Lying Days (1953), *A World of Strangers* (1958), *Occasion for Loving* (1963), *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), *A Guest of Honour* (1970), and *The Conservationist* (1974). I find very insightful Giovannelli's choice to analyse the novels not in a chronological order, but according to a thematic and conceptual point of view. Indeed, she first concentrates on *The Lying Days*, *Occasion for Loving*, and *The Late Bourgeois World* highlighting the tormented journey undertaken by the white bourgeois woman, who moves from a liberal-progressive dream to embrace a more radical perspective in relation to her involvement in the struggle against the segregation system. She also underlines how the dismantling of the liberal ideology is conveyed by a stylistic choice of privileging a discontinuous and fragmented type of discourse.

Conversely, the other three novels – *A World of Strangers*, *A Guest of Honour*, and *The Conservationist* – depict different typologies of the main male character, ranging from an attitude of empathy and solidarity with the problems affecting black South Africans to a posture of indifference and delusions of grandeur. Although these early texts lack the maturity and completeness showed by Gordimer's later novels, *The Conservationist* deserves particular attention, Giovannelli suggests, for its stylistic complexity and the deployment of the modernist technique of stream of consciousness, which is intended to denounce the pathologies of the imperialist mindset embodied by the male protagonist.

The following section, entitled "Verso nuove fisionomie identitarie", is dedicated to the discussion of four major novels: *Burger's Daughter* (1979), *July's People* (1981), *A Sport of Nature* (1987), and *My Son's Story* (1990). Giovannelli points out that all these texts play out the protagonist's journey in search of identity, who tries to adjust to South Africa's turbulent political and historical situation of the period between the 1970s and 1980s. She also underscores the importance of the narrative voice and the role of sexuality in the construction, deconstruction or negotiation of (new) identities. In *Burger's Daughter*, for example, the protagonist's three-phase *Bildung* corresponds to both the tripartite

division of the text and the three addressees of the protagonist's confessional moments. Sexual freedom turns into a revolutionary instrument in *A Sport of Nature*, where the demolition of the colour bar is dramatised by sexual intercourse between the white woman and the black man. In *My Son's Story* instead, whose protagonist is *coloured* according to apartheid racial classification, sexual transgression assumes other nuances reflecting the limits of the "sinergia tra eros e politica" ("synergy between eros and politics", 214) in the wake of the repeal of the Immorality Act.

As suggested by the title, "La transizione e il post-apartheid", the last section of the monograph deals with the historical period of the political transition towards democracy and inaugurates the novel of the post-apartheid era. Here, Giovannelli explores Gordimer's last five novels: *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The House Gun* (1998), *The Pickup* (2001), *Get a Life* (2005), and *No Time Like the Present* (2013). These late novels, Giovannelli argues, witness Gordimer's growing inclination to adopt a polyphonic system of narrative voices and the indirect free speech, along with the intersection of the characters' mental peregrinations. She also emphasises the writer's undying interest in the problems which continue to affect South Africa despite the official demise of the apartheid regime in 1994. *None to Accompany Me* and *The House Gun* are anchored in the overwhelming challenges the country had to face in reinventing itself as a liberal democracy. On the other hand, the last three novels are presented as the author's invitation to awaken, to "get a life" – as the homonymous text advises, Giovannelli observes – to direct our attention to global-scale issues: the prejudices and the hatred against illegal immigration, the threat of environmental disaster, the spread of AIDS, along with the poverty and violence still reigning in post-apartheid society.

I believe that Giovannelli's *Nadine Gordimer* constitutes a painstaking and lucid in-depth analysis of Gordimer's novels which will definitely contribute to a greater familiarisation of the Italian readership with the South African writer's work,

her ethical commitment, and the coeval historical political context of South Africa itself.

NOTES

1. Tania Zulli. 2005. *Nadine Gordimer: strategie narrative di una transizione politica*. Napoli: Liguori.

Francesca Mussi is a PhD scholar in English Literature at the University of Sussex (UK) and is currently working on post-colonial literatures with particular emphasis on South African literature.

F.Mussi@sussex.ac.uk