

## Études littéraires africaines

# « Simple as the Black Letters on this White Page » : Nadine Gordimer's Grey Politics in *No Time Like the Present*

Dominic Davies



Number 38, 2014

L'Afrique du Sud et la littérature post-apartheid (1994-2014)  
South Africa and Post-Apartheid Literature (1994-2014)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1028676ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028676ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN

0769-4563 (print)  
2270-0374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Davies, D. (2014). « Simple as the Black Letters on this White Page » : Nadine Gordimer's Grey Politics in *No Time Like the Present*. *Études littéraires africaines*, (38), 83–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1028676ar>

Article abstract

Le dernier roman de Nadine Gordimer, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), a pour thème central le conflit entre la poursuite de l'engagement politique, d'une part, et la lassitude ou la désillusion qu'engendre la politique, d'autre part, conflit qui caractérise de manière notoire le champ socio-politique de l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid. En comparant le dernier roman de Nadine Gordimer à son premier, *The Lying Days* (1953), et en s'appuyant sur l'ouvrage de Fredric Jameson concernant *l'allégorie nationale*, cet article montre comment *No Time Like the Present* décrit et critique sur le mode autoréflexif les relations changeantes entre littérature et politique dans un contexte sud-africain. Le paysage politique complexe de l'après-apartheid, qui n'est plus scindé entre blanc et noir – entre pro- et anti-apartheid – est reconfiguré de manière formelle à travers une ambivalence narrative qui déconstruit également les barrières séparant la vie publique de la vie privée. Le roman exploite jusqu'au maximum les limites des contraintes allégoriques qu'impose le contexte politique afin de révéler que plus rien n'est aussi « simple que les lettres noires sur la page blanche ». Il en résulte une ambivalence formelle qui exprime l'absence d'une orientation politique post-apartheid claire – une situation difficile que je désigne comme la « zone grise » du roman.

---

## DOUTE ET DÉSILLUSION

---

### « SIMPLE AS THE BLACK LETTERS ON THIS WHITE PAGE » : NADINE GORDIMER'S GREY POLITICS IN *NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT*

#### RÉSUMÉ

Le dernier roman de Nadine Gordimer, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), a pour thème central le conflit entre la poursuite de l'engagement politique, d'une part, et la lassitude ou la désillusion qu'engendre la politique, d'autre part, conflit qui caractérise de manière notoire le champ socio-politique de l'Afrique du Sud post-apartheid. En comparant le dernier roman de Nadine Gordimer à son premier, *The Lying Days* (1953), et en s'appuyant sur l'ouvrage de Fredric Jameson concernant l'allégorie nationale, cet article montre comment *No Time Like the Present* décrit et critique sur le mode autoréflexif les relations changeantes entre littérature et politique dans un contexte sud-africain. Le paysage politique complexe de l'après-apartheid, qui n'est plus scindé entre blanc et noir – entre pro- et anti-apartheid – est reconfiguré de manière formelle à travers une ambivalence narrative qui déconstruit également les barrières séparant la vie publique de la vie privée. Le roman exploite jusqu'au maximum les limites des contraintes allégoriques qu'impose le contexte politique afin de révéler que plus rien n'est aussi « simple que les lettres noires sur la page blanche ». Il en résulte une ambivalence formelle qui exprime l'absence d'une orientation politique post-apartheid claire – une situation difficile que je désigne comme la « zone grise » du roman.

\*

In an interview with Nadine Gordimer in 2003, Hermione Lee asked the writer what is a particularly illuminating question for the concerns of the present article, one that *No Time Like the Present* negotiates through its own sociopolitically-loaded narrative : « Would it be simplistic to say that in your work there is no such thing as a private life ? That these very private emotions of parents and children and mothers have necessarily to always be played out in a political context or have a political meaning ? »<sup>1</sup>. Gordimer's response is revealing. At first she disagrees : « Not always. It depends where you live. [...] The morals of your society, whether it

---

<sup>1</sup> LEE (Hermione), « Nadine Gordimer in conversation », *Wasafiri*, vol. 18, n°39, 2003, p. 3-7 ; p. 4.

is here [Britain] or in America, or in the divided Germany, or in the divided South Africa, wherever it is, these things subconsciously impinge upon you ; this is something central to my thinking »<sup>2</sup>. Gordimer gestures to the idea that a certain sociopolitical context determines an individual's private thought. Lee's question pushes this relationship further, as she interrogates the idea that politics might, in certain circumstances, come to define private life in its entirety. Despite Gordimer's initial rejection of this proposition, just a sentence later she changes her mind, retracting her claim of « Not always » to concede that : « There is no such thing as an apolitical being in the sense that they are totally unaffected by the values, morals and manners of the society in which they live »<sup>3</sup>.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, it would also appear that there is no such thing as an apolitical Gordimer novel. She explicitly interrogates the relationship between these two practices – the literary and the political – in her 1976 essay, « English-Language Literature and Politics in South Africa », in which she writes : « Where and when, in a country such as South Africa, can the influence of politics on literature be said to begin ? »<sup>4</sup>. It is important to note the geographical specificity here, as Gordimer contrasts South Africa directly with « the Western World » :

[A]ll that is and has been written by South Africans is profoundly influenced, at the deepest and least controllable level of consciousness, by the politics of race. [...] [T]here is no country in the Western World where the daily enactment of the law reflects politics as intimately and blatantly as in South Africa<sup>5</sup>.

These observations made at the height of apartheid indicate Gordimer's awareness of the ways in which literature might engage with politics. This engagement, or « influence », is formulated not in any straightforward « propagandist » or even simplistically deterministic sense. Instead, Gordimer configures literary narrative as a sphere in which political interrogation can be self-reflexively explored. It becomes, for Gordimer, a way of negotiating *both* the effect – as an influence, or a determining factor – of a political landscape on individual consciousness, and also as a way to explore private or personal responses to, and obligations towards, political issues.

---

<sup>2</sup> LEE (H.), « Nadine Gordimer in conversation », *art. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Lee (H.), « Nadine Gordimer in conversation », *art. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> GORDIMER (Nadine), *Telling Times : Writing and Living, 1950-2008*. London : Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 2011 ; p. 234-259 ; p. 235-236.

<sup>5</sup> GORDIMER (N.), *Telling Times, op. cit.*, p. 235-236.

In his 1981 study of Gordimer's novelistic engagement with history, Stephen Clingham draws on the materialist methodologies of Raymond Williams in order to construct his argument<sup>6</sup>. As he begins to argue there, the layers of self-consciousness exhibited by Gordimer's novels and, this article will show, in this most recent novel especially – enable an exploration and interrogation of this materialist process of determination, from public or political sphere into a private, non-political one, and back again<sup>7</sup>. In order to unpack this, it is necessary to invoke the theoretical formulation sketched out by Fredric Jameson in his development of the concept of « National Allegory »<sup>8</sup>. The assertions upon which Jameson's much-debated 1986 essay is founded are helpful when it comes to unpicking the nuances of Gordimer's narrative techniques and formal registers. Acknowledging the problematic geographical designations, homogenisations and condescensions that Aijaz Ahmad and others have criticized<sup>9</sup>, I quote selectively here so as to build on those sections of his argument most useful for this article's purposes :

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory : the story

---

<sup>6</sup> CLINGMAN (Stephen), « History from the inside : the novels of Nadine Gordimer », *The Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 7, n°2, 1981, p. 165-195 ; p. 167-168.

<sup>7</sup> CLINGMAN (S.), « History from the inside... », *art. cit.*, p. 168. As Clingman writes : « For Raymond Williams [...] “determination” should by no means be conceived of mechanistically and absolutely, but rather as “the setting of limits” and “the exertion of pressures” ». See : WILLIAMS (Raymond), *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1977, 217 p. ; p. 105-107. This formulation is also taken up by Fredric Jameson elsewhere, particularly in : JAMESON (Fredric), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London : Routledge, 2002, 296 p. ; p. 134-135, and theoretically underpins the concept of national allegory that this article draws on : « the relationship of the “third term” or historical situation to the text is not construed as causal (however that might be imagined) but rather as one of a limiting situation ; the historical moment is here understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities available before, and to open up determinate new ones ».

<sup>8</sup> JAMESON (Fredric), « Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism », *Social Text*, n°15, Autumn 1986, p. 65-88.

<sup>9</sup> AHMAD (Aijaz Ahmad), « Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the “National Allegory” », *Social Text*, n°17, Autumn 1987, p. 3-25. Though Ahmad's rebuttal of Jameson is perhaps the most direct, a long critical debate has since emerged. See also, for example, Imre Szeman's insightful article : « Who's Afraid of National Allegory ? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization », *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 100, n°3, Summer 2001, p. 803-827.

of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society<sup>10</sup>.

This generalisation is underpinned by a more basic formula. Jameson writes :

One of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power : in other words, Freud versus Marx<sup>11</sup>.

These huge spheres of debate are invoked here not to argue that South Africa can be understood as some reductive, socioeconomically « Third-World » nation-state. Quite clearly, in the « now » of the historical and increasingly capitalist present, it cannot. Instead, it is necessary to begin with the basic formula underpinning Jameson's argument : that the intensity or prominence of socioeconomic and political injustices within a geographic zone from which a novel emerges or takes as its context, will in turn determine the extent to which those political forces infiltrate the private spheres of a novel's characters ; the personal lives of these characters become increasingly subject to, and allegorical of, political and economic factors that are often beyond their control but that define their lives and inner thought. In so doing, the entrenchment of boundaries between private and public spheres that detaches the lives of individual characters from their wider sociopolitical environments is reversed. This process is not simply narrated allegorically by the characters of Gordimer's novels. Her characters self-reflexively engage with, and interrogate, the levels of political obligation that they as private individuals have towards a public sphere, a self-reflexivity further reflected in the formal and generic registers of her narrative mode and in the symbolic spaces of her literary landscapes.

It should be clarified here that this is by no means the simplistic imposition of a US-centric conceptual paradigm onto a South African literary text. Rather, Jameson's sketch of the contours of private and public spheres in a developed capitalist society serves as a basic rubric with which to approach Gordimer's novels. However, once this conceptual orientation is in place the literary texts do not neces-

---

<sup>10</sup> JAMESON (F.), « Third-World Literature... », *art. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> JAMESON (F.), « Third-World Literature... », *art. cit.*, p. 69.

sarily adhere to it. Through this article's deployment of the term « grey politics », Gordimer's last novel, *No Time*, can be understood as itself generating a critique of Jameson's essay through its self-conscious interrogation of these notions of private and public spheres. Though this interrogation comes through with a more pronounced, carefully honed self-consciousness and formal clarity in her last novel, Gordimer is already exploring this formulation in her very first novel, *The Lying Days*. Both novels, this article argues, are concerned with the infiltration of the political into the personal, so that the private sphere is dissembled or unraveled into essentially another public space. The result is the transformation of the private sphere into a space of contest for political and socioeconomic issues. However, the self-reflexive strands of Gordimer's narrative exhibit an awareness of this process, transforming a simplistic material determinism – the engagement with the public sphere by the private individual – into a pro-active and conscious decision to engage with politics on the part of her characters.

Turning briefly to a passage from *The Lying Days*, then, the formal and conceptual ideas explored by Gordimer at the very beginning of her literary and political career can be understood as a useful pole in relation to which her most recent text can be situated. Helen, the novel's first person narrator and central protagonist, is in conversation with Paul, her intellectual and physical relationship with whom is the main focus of the narrative plot. On numerous occasions throughout the novel, Helen explicitly admits that her love for Paul is rooted in his political consciousness, a politics that he attempts to practice through his job in the Native Affairs Department. In this passage – and it should be recalled that the novel is set in the late 1940s – they are discussing the recent election of the National Party that would come, historically, to impose apartheid in its full legislative form. Paul speaks first :

« There's an election every five years, you know. There's just a chance they might get thrown out. »

I moved impatiently in my chair. « – Well five years, then. A year, ten months, if you like. It makes no difference. The state of mind's still fraud, a piece of self-delusion. This is our life and it is being lived out now the way we don't like it. This is not time out. »

« Ah, that's true, » he said slowly, « that's true. [...] You talk as if everyone's resigned himself to Nat rule. And you know that's not so ; you talk as if we weren't kicking like hell. »

« Oh politically, yes. I grant that politically we're protesting madly. Even in ordinary private talk we're protesting. But you know that wasn't what I was talking about. It's inside. Inside ourselves in the – what's the word I want – the nonpolitical, the individual consciousness of ourselves in possession of our personal destiny. »<sup>12</sup>

Helen is here working out, in those early years of the apartheid regime, the infiltration of the political into an intensely private space – not just « private talk », but deep into individual « consciousness ». She suggests the complete eradication of the border between public and private spheres that, as Jameson would argue, has operated as a fundamental hegemonic apparatus in preventing effective political dissent in « the Western World »<sup>13</sup>. The capacity to have a private life that is in some way cut off from, or beyond, the public sphere, and that is not engaging in and engaged by its wider political environment prevents, as Jameson would argue and as Helen here articulates, the realization of any complete or total political protest. But the private spheres of Gordimer's characters, who here exhibit a consciousness that lies beyond the realm of the political, is reinforced within the very novel that articulates these concerns. Much of its narrative time is devoted to long sections that delve into Helen's personal life and that have no obvious, or allegorical, bearing on the politics of the historical moment. This is reinforced by the narrative form of this, Gordimer's first novel: the first person narrator asserts the primacy of an individual consciousness; speech marks delineate clearly the boundaries between direct speech and inner thought; and conventional paragraphs indicate exactly which character it is that is speaking. The division between public and private is entrenched within the novel's syntactical form.

The emphasis placed here on these formal attributes might appear to be an over-reading of nothing more than conventional novelistic patterns. To borrow Gordimer's own words from the first page of *No Time*, such an observation might seem as « [s]imple as the black letters on this white page ». Here is that sentence in its original context: « She was black, he was white. That was all that mattered. All that was identity then. Simple as the black letters on this white page. It was in those two identities that they transgressed »<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> GORDIMER (N.), *The Lying Days*. New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1994, 376 p.; p. 296.

<sup>13</sup> JAMESON (F.), « Third-World Literature... », *art. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> GORDIMER (N.), *No Time Like the Present*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2012, 421 p.; p. 1. [NT]

The novel revolves around the married couple described here : Steve, white man, Jabu, black woman, both of whom played very active roles in the anti-apartheid movement that is denoted throughout the novel as « the Struggle », always with a capital « S ». The plot is scattered, heterogeneous, slow-moving, set firmly in the titular « present » but with a constant eye on the past as Steve and Jabu attempt to leave their lives of political activism and military action behind them. In a post-apartheid inversion of Helen's ambition to achieve the eradication of the division between private and public spheres, *No Time* charts its protagonists' attempt to reclaim a private space, embodied in physical domestic spaces – the home, in particular – that are symbolically separate from the deep political consciousness that they have both developed during the anti-apartheid movement : « Why shouldn't we have a small home now », they reflect, slowly becoming « overcome by the necessities of private living » (*NT*, p. 109, 122). Repeated references are made throughout the novel to the loss of personal concerns that both characters experienced as they fought in the Struggle to bring down the apartheid regime. Everything was always, metaphorically, « black and white » during this period : « Everything you were was decided just like that » (*NT*, p. 43) ; « He thinks too much ; didn't use to be like that. In the Struggle you acted, gave yourself orders in response to what came up had to be done, this day, this area of operation » (*NT*, p. 109). The narrative thus constantly reasserts the way in which Jabu's and Steve's personal lives and private spheres were always set in relation to, even determined by, that ultimate political goal, in direct contrast to their post-apartheid condition. They seek to locate and inhabit a de-politicized sphere, but are constantly dogged by an inability to relinquish their overtly political consciousness.

The novel traces their attempts to reclaim this private space through its broader plot motions – motions which are, nevertheless, fairly limited for a four-hundred page novel, with most of the narrative space largely taken up by an engagement with various political discourses. The text is saturated with commentaries on contemporary South African politics, covering a range of issues : from rising HIV rates to Zuma's rape and corruption charges and subsequent election, to the influx of Zimbabwean refugees and widespread socioeconomic inequalities. These issues are engaged not in the style of a political tract – as Gordimer herself states quite clearly, her literature is not « propagandist »<sup>15</sup>. Instead, these political topics

---

<sup>15</sup> LEE (H.), « Nadine Gordimer in conversation », *art. cit.*, p. 6.



play into the broader interrogations of the novel, rendering Steve's and Jabu's attempts to cut themselves off from their political consciousness – to create a private, domestic sphere – ultimately unsuccessful.

The novel begins, significantly, with their move to a new house in a « Suburb », a domestic space within which they hope to carve out a private sphere. But the move, like their own marriage, is determined by politics. Their cross-racial attraction and the subsequent interracial marriage during the apartheid years – and thus condemned by the state as illegal – were, the novel makes clear, an intensely political act for both partners. The flat from which they move to the suburb in the novel's opening scenes holds powerful memories for both because it was the only place where they were accepted as an interracial married couple – it was, therefore, a political space, a space of dissent within the legal framework of the apartheid state (*NT*, p. 15). The suburb to which they move, conversely, is configured as a de-politicized space, as Steve superimposes his own childhood memories of his white parent's home – before he entered the anti-apartheid struggle – on to the new domestic sphere : « Occupying a house in a suburb is a sign of the shedding of whatever remnants of the old clandestinity, the underground of struggle and defiance of racial taboos » (*NT*, p. 18).

The only other major plot-events are a burglary – a symbolic infiltration of this sphere by what the novel's characters understand as repercussions of the deeply structural and socioeconomic inequalities of South Africa – and the protagonists' decision to abandon South Africa, to move to Australia. The repeated referral to this decision to migrate throughout the novel as « the cop-out » both aligns it with a political responsibility that dominates Steve's and Jabu's consciousness (*NT*, p. 335), whilst simultaneously suggesting their ongoing attempt to relinquish this consciousness, to create a private sphere that is cut off from the political. However, even this geographical, cross-border abandonment will not allow them to create a private sphere beyond the realm of the political. Even as the novel builds up to the imminent migration, Steve is already looking into the complex colonial histories and political travesties of that other Southern, postcolonial territory, Australia, comparing them with South Africa's : « Colonisers solved any future problem of liberation by killing off the natives, one way or another », he reflects (*NT*, p. 359). Furthermore, this migration, which dominates much of the second half of the narrative, in fact never takes place. Steve and Jabu, in the novel's final sentence, make the decision to remain

in the overtly political space of South Africa, despite the pervasive sense of disillusionment and fatigue with which they have been grappling. In so doing, they symbolically enact the narrative's overarching return from the private back into the public sphere.

The disillusionment that dominates the couple's engagement with a complex post-apartheid political landscape, no longer split into black and white – apartheid and anti-apartheid, white supremacy and racial equality – is configured on a formal level in a style that Gordimer has been progressively honing throughout her literary career. *No Time* exhibits a narrative ambivalence that deconstructs these borders between the individuals' private spheres and a broader political terrain. Rather than the first person narrative voice, the speech marks, the conventional paragraph-style and sentence structure of *The Lying Days*, *No Time* is sparsely punctuated. There are no speech marks: hyphens and dashes instead dominate the narrative, accompanied only by a smattering of question marks that often do not fit the context, blurring the tone of the text. Through its syntactical style, then, the reader confronts a narrative that refuses to reveal exactly who is speaking, and exactly what is speech and what is internal thought, a blurring effect that is compounded by the novel's grammatically incomplete sentences that read more like hurried notes than a finished novel.

Such formal ambivalence reflects the lack of a clear post-Struggle political direction – a predicament that I call the novel's « grey politics » that drives Gordimer's protagonists to seek a de-politicized sphere. This « greyness », the indecision as to what political action to take, works on a symbolic level to dispel the ideals encapsulated by the colourful rhetoric of the « Rainbow Nation » at an historical moment that is described by Gordimer, in both the novel and in the interview with Lee, as « the morning after », or « the hangover »; the « Realities » that, Gordimer says, « during any political struggle you don't really have time to think about »<sup>16</sup>. Set in the South Africa of the immediate present, the novel strains at its own allegorical obligations to its political context to reveal that nothing, political or otherwise, is as « simple as the black letters on this white page » (*NT*, p. 1). This is revealed most explicitly during the novel's account of the democratic process surrounding the 2009 elections, when Jacob Zuma came to power – the novel frames the voting process as both a definitive political act within the context of the newly democratic country, whilst also reiterating the lack of democratic

---

<sup>16</sup> LEE (H.), « Nadine Gordimer in conversation », *art. cit.*, p. 5.

choice in a political landscape dominated by the ANC<sup>17</sup>. These grey politics are foregrounded in an allusion to, but also departure from, the terms laid out on the novel's opening page :

Since the split, breakaway in the party, each unbelievably – unacceptably – does not know how the other [...] is going to vote. It has become a fact of life in common, better left unsaid. Unmasked.

This can't mean there is no exchange of impressions, arguments over the tendencies, Left, Right, uneasy Centre – politics no longer simply white against black (*NT*, p. 331).

However, despite the complication of political engagement in the emerging capitalist and supposedly democratic post-apartheid South Africa, Gordimer's grey politics, as worked out through her narrative form and literary-political style, can actually be understood as self-consciously challenging and complicating Jameson's division between public and private spheres. The conceptual paradigm this article has invoked to make sense of Gordimer's literary engagement with the political sphere is self-reflexively interrogated by and within the text. The formal and generic division Jameson claims to be symptomatic of literature produced from within the socio-economic contexts of developed capitalist contexts is thus invoked before then being rejected. As a fellow « comrade » claims : « Now, anyone may own property anywhere [in South Africa] – capitalism freed of its chains » (*NT*, p. 57). In contrast to South Africa during the apartheid struggle, in which politics was a defining feature of the lives of its inhabitants, private spheres are now available to those that can afford it. However, despite the shift in these socioeconomic determinants, Gordimer's text relentlessly returns, through the meta-narrative of its plot trajectory as well as its ongoing engagement with political discourse, to the public sphere. Whilst grappling throughout with the problems of political disillusionment and fatigue, by its concluding pages Gordimer's novel resolves, through the symbolic rejection of a private sphere by its two protagonists and their return to a public one, to re-engage with the political context of post-apartheid South Africa.

■ Dominic DAVIES<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Gordimer is a vocal critic of the ANC. For example, see : « Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer accuses the ANC of apartheid-style censorship », *The Guardian*, 27 Nov. 2011 : <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/27/nadine-gordimer-south-africa-anc-secrecy-law-censorship> ; accessed on 17 June 2014.

<sup>18</sup> University of Oxford.