

Gordimer's "A World of Strangers" as Memory

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“A PLACE WITHOUT A MEMORY”¹ comments Nadine Gordimer’s narrator, Toby Hood, in *A World of Strangers*. Johannesburg is the city, and it is a thrown-away, unself-conscious aside, not meant to be taken very gravely. First published by Gollancz in 1958, *A World of Strangers* kept its own internal memory very much intact. Written in the firm social style of the British novel overseas, it probed to the very corners of the urban complex, connecting point of view and ironic observation in a web of fictional design greater in scope than the worlds available to its characters. The main metaphor was a South African city as a conglomerate of separate “countries,” with secret “passports” (passes), “border posts” and the no-man’s land between — the appropriate terrain of a voyeuristic visitor like Toby. The roots of his history are there intact, too; Toby had his grandfather buried in the Boer War at “Jagersfontein” outside town; Jagersfontein becomes a black freehold settlement, is to be cleared — Toby meets the very woman who is attempting to postpone evictions. Keep making the connections, and the vision of the fictional world is complete.

But it is now some thirty years since *A World of Strangers* first appeared. The British colour bar society the novel portrays was to settle into the amnesia of the Afrikaner apartheid system. Many of the events just about to precipitate this great oblivion are quite accurately foreseen: Sharpeville, the demolition of Sophiatown, the outlawing of black resistance in the form of the ANC and PAC, the Treason Trial, and the flight of artists and intellectuals, black and white, into exile. For those who remained behind more cosmopolitan schooling was to be replaced by Bantu Education,

the widened no-man's land to be patrolled with guns. Banning brings down the curtain of the thriving literature of resistance, and the '50s which *A World of Strangers* so celebrates floats off into limbo, is lost. Rereading the novel today is indeed like reclaiming a past unknown, one which it is now very much the vogue to reconstruct.

The landscape was different, then. Of his early days in Johannesburg Gordimer has Toby remark:

We left the city . . . and crossed the new Queen Elizabeth bridge. I twisted my head to look back and I must say that from there, it all looked rather fine; the rectangular buildings, bone and sand and stone colour, pale as objects picked up on a beach, made a frieze of clean, hard shapes against a sky that was all space. (48)

The queen's two-laned coronation bridge, then the main access route from the north, is now six lanes wide, and today for an aerial view Johannesburgers have encircling flyovers. Like that of any modern city, the skyline has been transformed by redevelopment. At a recent screening of *Come Back, Africa*, the American Lionel Rogosin's secretly-made hand-held camera documentary of Johannesburg and its people of 1958 — shown here on public circuit for the first time this year — Johannesburgers guffawed in utter disbelief: could that flat dorp once have possibly inspired such awe?

The subtropical and Edwardian Carlton Hotel, complete with pinkly-lit Palm Court orchestra, from which Toby started out now rises sixty floors high. Glassy skyscrapers, cut like the diamonds they represent, blink coldly gold in the sun, and even the old lantern-shaped cooling towers are imploded.

Newtown is no longer new, and the colourful Market is now the Africana Museum — and the famous theatre complex where the children of the '50s go in other colours to see musicals like *Sophiatown* about their past. In these musicals not even the music of the original ghetto is accurately recollected; it's all disco and soft liberation anthems now. Gordimer's milieu in *A World of Strangers* is (one dreads to remark) full of chronic song in the streets:² pennywhistles, kwela and jive. Indoors is the jazz of saxophones and Todd Matshikiza — his look-alike in the novel, Sam Mofokenzazi, writes an African jazz opera, the prototype of

King Kong. Even Miriam Makeba appears for a few guest numbers (as Betty Ntolo with the Township Ten [92-93]). Now the songs are unaccompanied at funerals; either that, or rehased in gutless high-tech showbiz. *Drum* magazine, that during the '50s unleashed the fervour of a much romanticized Johannesburg school — to which Gordimer's own verve is not unrelated — is owned these days by the government.

On the other hand, Coca-Cola — which so amazingly fills Gordimer's pages as a novelty — is still here, though disinvested due to sanctions and bootlegged in from Swaziland (!). Her fin-tailed Studebakers and Cinemascope of such vogue persist in the leisured boulevards and desegregated venues in uninterrupted modernizations, but out of the central business district in the white bunkers to the north. Meanwhile, not only has a rival dormitory city, one of the largest in Africa — Soweto — been spawned to the southwest, but it has irresistibly flowed back into downtown.

Hillbrow in *A World of Strangers* was still notorious for its townships in the sky (that is, servants' quarters on the roofs of apartments). Toby's landlady chewed him out for having blacks inside the building: " 'Yoo can't bring kaffirs in my building,' she screamed" (216) . . . those were the days! Now the older parts are occupied from the ground floor up by those servants' middle-class children. After thirty years of residential segregation, South Africa has achieved an undemolishable "grey area," housing near to a million contentedly integrated citizens, living happily in sin.

Today nostalgia for the '50s has become a growth industry in the arts in South Africa. The experience of Sophiatown, which was destroyed, is relived in three or four books a year;³ Alexandra Township (described in the novel from page 130), after a generation of being threatened with removal, has been partly renewed; accordingly it has accumulated none of the other place's apocalyptic glamour. The illegal drinking dens or shebeens that commanded Toby's delighted awe, where prohibition-type hoods rubbed elbows with intellectuals and drunks — the spirit of Can Themba and Lewis Nkosi haunts *A World of Strangers* — are now legalized; there is even a union of shebeen-owners, a few of the members being millionaires.

One feels nostalgic for Gordimer's version of the '50s, I suppose, because in the post-Forster, "Passage to Africa" type tradition of British fiction in which she wrote there could be some certainties. It is not just a matter of the "Belgian Congo," "Northern and Southern Rhodesia" and even Harry Llewellyn's famous horse, Foxhunter, still being talking-points; "Mau Mau" and the name Nkrumah were already evident. Gordimer could believe in a kind of Afro-European evolutionary progress; of Sithole she had Toby write:

He was a new kind of man, not a white man, but not quite a black man, either — a kind of flash — flash-in-the-pan — produced by the surface of the two societies in friction. (134)

For the liberal novel there was evolution, continuity, to be driven by the type of acuity and disengaged observation from the sidelines such as Gordimer offered. There was the confidence to ruminate on the human condition, relax into a faultlessly satirical commentary.

We don't need to be reminded now how even *that* has changed. The twists and contortions of Gordimer's later vision show her loss of cool, her embattled, confrontational position, and how the issues in South Africa have polarized since then.

And, returning to *A World of Strangers* after such cultural deprivation, the contemporary reader finds it is nothing like what it was intended to be. It has turned into a documentary, an archive of the writer's lost possibilities. The Stratford bar in Commissioner Street (39), in a building owned by the same Oppenheimer group to which an author like the late Alan Paton⁴ made such a personal appeal for charity in racial matters, is gone (in favour of a cut-rate supermarket) . . . but so is the Imperialism it implied. In fact, about all of the '50s that is left as a landmark is the literature. *A World of Strangers* can now be seen as the "conglomerate night-cry" (her expression [131]) of memory; accurate, truthful, to be recaptured in full.

But this process of reclamation cannot proceed as innocently as the reception of the return of the '50s in general has proceeded.⁵ Toby the Britisher, like Gordimer's later Bray in *A Guest of Honour*, derives his non-committal attitudes to life in reaction to

his leftist, cause-championing intellectual family. For the novelist his non-partisanship is useful, gets him places. But Toby is also a conscienceless drifter; he can make no decisions other than in the end to quit, and he is guilty of moral dereliction (which, one fears, in those days passed all too easily as authentic existential angst).

Some of the judgments he makes we see with hindsight are unforgiveable. The myth of the Nietzschean south, which Gordimer quite schematically transposes from Forster's Italy to her southern Africa, must finally be seen as unfortunate, even libellous. Italians are entitled to feel as offended as are South Africa's blacks that some old northern European dialectic of otherness renders them "opposites," "outsiders" — in short, excluded. True, Gordimer frequently has him talk of "the feeling that the age-old crystals of the North were melting away in my blood" (129), and to some extent that is what *A World of Strangers* is really about, but they don't melt, give up, find a new chemistry. Nor does the novel; in the end it merely appropriates Johannesburg, never

There are also some heresies practised in the novel, unintentionally joins it and its wonderfully dispersed, derelict people. For example, the only character Toby encounters whose full autobiography is given is Anna Louw, an early portrait of an Afrikaner dissident. Through Toby, Gordimer rightly admires her — but is it her Afrikanerhood or her dissent which is so fascinating? If the former — well, Afrikaners have presented themselves as the only *true* South Africans for thirty years now, so that any overattention paid them in the literature, when it is at the cost of other true South Africans, receives little sympathy these days. If the latter — then Gordimer was thinking wishfully; revolt from within the ranks was not to come in the literature for another generation.

Many recent critics of Gordimer, herself included, would probably also react to her "township scenes" as too generalized, too panoramic. One has only to read works like Mongane Serote's *To Every Birth its Blood* (1981) to realize how hopelessly naïve they are:

And they lived, all the time, in all the layers of society at once: pimps, gangsters, errand boys, washwomen, school-teachers,

boxers, musicians and undertakers, labourers and patent medicine men — these were neighbours, and shared a tap, a yard, even a lavatory. (130)

Apparent classlessness for class-crippled Toby is a democratic wonder, maybe, but Gordimer seems to endorse this romantic gush, rather than analyse it. Through the pane of glass that is privilege, plain common sense—impartiality—becomes distorted, the picture outside too idealized. Today Gordimer is the last author to be accused of over-simplification, but a reductive tendency was certainly there in her early work. The turnabout that most liberal thinkers of old have had to perform on this issue has obvious causes — apartheid thrives on gross, schematic simplifications and deceptions — human rights, for example, become social engineering — and the system will certainly not fall through furthering that process.

Yet the new radical critics, guilt-stricken, can often not appear to be generous-spirited towards the old liberal style. At present its grievous ideological and tactical faults are anathema, its concealed paternalism and condescension out. Yet, confronted across the divide of forgetfulness with *A World of Strangers* once again, I believe it has taken on a newly promising value for us. It is one of the few works to tell us how things in Johannesburg really *were*.

NOTES

- ¹ All quotations from *A World of Strangers*, Penguin edition. "The street was one of those newly old streets that I saw all over Johannesburg — a place without a memory" (64).
- ² "Outside my flat, piccanins shuffled and jerked their backsides to tin whistles and a banging on old tins" (189) is a characteristic remark.
- ³ Notably in Don Mattera's *Gone with the Twilight* (London: Zed, 1987), published in South Africa by Ravan with the more apt title, *Memory is the Weapon*. See also *Sophiatown Speaks*, Pippa Stein and Ruth Jacobson eds. (Johannesburg: Junction Avenue, 1986), which contains a retrospective interview with Gordimer on the '50s (25-30). Athol Fugard's novel, *Tsotsi*, first published only in 1980, is the outstanding example.
- ⁴ Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) is addressed to Sir Ernest Oppenheimer — surely the most misaimed appeal in modern letters.
- ⁵ Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986) is the necessary corrective.