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Dystopian World: A Reading of Nadine Gordimer's *No Time Like the Present*

Adamu Pangmeshi

Abstract: This paper explores and examines Nadine Gordimer's recent novel *No Time like the Present* from a dystopian perspective**.** It interrogates the utopian and dystopian visions that this renowned novelist has presented**,** with an understanding that they may not simply be standpoints, but can be significant signs of the evolution of various human societies in quest for change to the disillusionment embedded in change itself. The paper underlines that dystopianism, which is often times viewed as a deliberate imaginative effort to disfigure society, is rather examined in this paper as an expression of grim realities which society refuses to acknowledge. The essay, however, concludes that Nadine Gordimer's novel captures the inherent handicap of change, that of not being reliable and further notes that; what is expected of change in a rosy imagination turns out many at times into a nightmare. This is the predicament of the post-apartheid South Africans and postcolonial nations as a whole especially when, having nurtured a common dream for a non-racial and classless society, they find themselves abandoned and exploited by the very people who led the struggle for freedom. In discussing the dystopian/stark reality that Nadine Gordimer presents, this paper reinforces the role of literature in education and transformation.

Keywords: Dystopia, Utopia, Disillusionment, Abandonment, Inequality, Transformation, Exploitation

Introduction

It is not unusual that people employ the metaphor of a half-filled glass of water to describe the two perspectives from which happenings in their world can be interpreted. The first perspective actually holds that the glass is half-filled, giving way to imagine the possibility and prospect of the glass being totally filled someday. This orientation is considered optimistic because of its strong affirmation of improvement in the future. Conversely, the second perspective views the glass of water to be half-empty and envisages a decrease of the level of water to a point of emptiness. This position is considered pessimistic because it predicts constant deterioration to the point of an impasse, an infeasible future. These two divergent perspectives respectively represent utopian and dystopian visions.

Having presented these two poles, it is important to interrogate them, bearing in mind that they may not simply be standpoints but can be significant signs of the evolution of various human societies from a thirst for change to the disillusion embedded in change itself. This constitutes our point of departure in this paper. Dystopianism, which has usually been viewed as a deliberate imaginative effort to disfigure society, is rather examined in this paper as an expression of grim realities which society refuses to acknowledge. At least two reasons account for this refusal: For the ruling class, resistance to dystopian vision means refusing to accept their failure to construct societal peace, equity and freedom; for the working-class, rejecting dystopianism implies the refusal to surrender and the denial that their hopes have turned into chimeras. But is the tagged "pessimistic" dystopian vision not realistic? Does it not make a salutary attempt to liberate people from the grip of mirage? This paper seeks to answer these questions by examining Nadine Gordimer's last novel, *No Time Like the Present*.

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Set in post-apartheid South Africa, Gordimer's *No Time Like the Present* introduces us to the dilemmas, realizations and disillusions which the present imparts on former anti-apartheid fighters. Although the novel spans over fifteen years – from 1994 when apartheid ends to 2009 when Zuma is elected president – most of the happenings in the novel take place during Thabo Mbeki's mandate. The novel describes a progressive narrowing of the people's horizon to a point where escape alone seems to be the reasonable alternative.

The Concept of Dystopianism

The word "dystopia" emanates from an eminently political context. The origins of the word date as far back as 1868 when John Stuart Mill used "dystopia" for the first time in his speech before the House of Commons. In his address, Mill decried the socio-political state of Ireland. Inspired by this origin, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines dystopia as "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible"[1]. Hence, dystopia is conceived as the opposite of utopia (which was first coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516) and it describes a nightmarish world wherein the future is utterly bleak. As the origin of this word shows, dystopia is usually engendered in societies that seem to have reached a *cul-de-sac* in their evolution. Gregory Claeys in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* postulates that "from time immemorial people have thought about the possibility of the construction of a better world, but they have also been aware of the likelihood of a future which might be worse than the present" (16). This implies that utopianism always precedes dystopianism and even makes the latter to be firmly entrenched in a sense of deprivation. As such, the desire to see brighter dawns and positive changes does not preclude the possibility of failure.

Regarding the depiction of dystopian societies, Jelena Pataki in her review of Alihodzic's and Jerkovic's *The Boundaries of Dystopian Literature. The Genre in Context* opines that "a dystopian society must be peculiar enough to allow for the *alienation effect*, but at the same time must remain familiar in the eyes of its audience in order to evoke fear and encourage the understanding of social evils present in their own, real-life society" (428) (emphasis original). This means that the gloomy presentation of society in a dystopian text should always reflect the daily experiences of people living in that society because dystopianism aims at awakening society from its torpor. The depiction should be poignant enough to make the reader interrogate their own society and exclude/separate themselves from its evils. This alienation effect should also affect the dream potentials of characters in the story as they come to realize that their dreams and hopes have become a farce: they alienate themselves from their own hopes.

It is noteworthy, however, that the Western conception of dystopia is different from that of Africa. The Western world generally views the bloom of dystopianism as one informed by the series of tragic events that marred the twentieth century: World Wars, depression, genocides, epidemics and debts. This Western perception refers to an imagined world where conditions are far worse than the real-life situation (Moylan 43). Novels like George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are interpreted as central texts of the dystopian tradition. On the other hand, the African experience of dystopia usually hinges on the corrupt neocolonial establishments that perpetuate societal inequalities after the hopeful independences. Cristina Chifane and Liviu-Augustin Chifane in "Reflections on Cultural Specificity and Dystopian Standardization in Chinua Achebe's Novels" argue that dystopianism in African literature originates with the post-independence period and is canonized by texts like *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. In their article, they posit that Achebe's last novels "acquire new dimensions, giving birth to what can be called dystopian standardization characteristic not only of a certain space or time but of any society fighting corruption and abusive political systems inevitably leading to oppressive regimes, chaos and collapse" (69). Achebe's narratives on post-independence morass therefore serve as precursors to the evolution of dystopian literature in Africa as they

[1] See: *Online Oxford English Dictionary*. < https://www.oed.com/>.

represent the demise of the independence ideal. Also, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*, and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow* contribute to the African reservoir of what is now termed "dystopian literature". Unlike the Western outlook, African views on dystopia do not depict imaginary, terrible worlds where individuals are zombified; African texts rather draw inspiration from messy societal set-ups and present this mess in crude repulsive texts. This paper focuses on Nadine Gordimer's dystopian depiction of post-apartheid South Africa from political and socio-economic standpoints with an emphasis laid on how the individual's freedom ideals are frustrated.

Political Disenchantment: Past, Present and Future in the Dock!

As we earlier mentioned, dystopianism is inherently political from its origins. It is thus logical that we explore the political manifestations of dystopia first. Paraphrasing Basu et al, Geir Finnsson in "The Unexpected Popularity of Dystopian Literature" suggests that "dystopian writing has the unique quality of engaging its readers with pressing political matters, such as liberty and self-determination" (4). It is this political thrust that constitutes the backbone of Nadine Gordimer's last novel, *No Time Like the Present*. Her novel gives life to the disenchantment of many South Africans after the anti-apartheid Struggle.

The novel opens with the move from a past (symbolized by Glengrove Place) to a more promising present and future. This past is pregnant with the memories of the anti-apartheid struggle, clandestine existence and racism. The main characters of the novel, Jabulile (Jabu) and Steve, are of different races: Jabu is a black Zulu woman while Steve is white from English and Jewish descent - his ancestors having left England to settle in South Africa. This interracial couple epitomizes the hopes for racial harmony in a country that is in convalescence after decades of racial segregation and injustice. The move toward a new, hopefully stable life is symbolized by the tearing noise of a motorbike. As Jabu and Steve stand on their balcony, contemplating what their new life will be after apartheid, the narrator says: "[A] motorbike ripped the street like a sheet of paper roughly torn" (*No Time* 5). The idea of ripping evokes either separation or disruption, and in this instance, it is the separation of the painful apartheid past from wishes formulated in the present for an egalitarian society. It is evident that Jabu and Steve are nostalgic about Glengrove because "it is the place that took them in when nowhere, no one allowed them to be together as a man and a woman" (15). But they are now visualizing freedom as they prepare to move from Glengrove to a former white suburb where they can start a new life and provide a real home for their first child, Sindiswa. The narrator says: "[N]ow everything is after" (8). There is therefore a determined effort made by Jabu and Steve to go forward without turning a moment to look behind. However, Nadine Gordimer dexterously makes this past they are eschewing to haunt their present and extinct their glimmers of hope for the future.

Gordimer's novel puts the past in-between the present and the future such that it is always possible to follow the crumbling up of past utopias in the political quagmires of the present. This is how the dystopian vision is intensified throughout the text without giving respite or relief to the reader who expects things to get better sometime. Concretely, the narrator starts by presenting the two protagonists' past in the *Umkhonto* (military wing of the ANC that fought against apartheid). Jabu, being a native of IsiZulu, is enrolled in the anti-apartheid guerrilla when she goes to Swaziland for studies. She sacrifices her studies and engages wholeheartedly in the fight to end racial discrimination. She is later on imprisoned for three months in Johannesburg under the apartheid regime, even enduring torture to protect the lives of her comrades (*No Time* 30-1; 79). Intriguing as it is, Steve, although a white, joins the Struggle early and becomes Jabu's mentor in Swaziland. He fights a regime that protects white interests and personalizes the selflessness shown by some whites who supported anti-apartheid struggles. We are told that instead of pursuing his education or finding a comfortable job within the apartheid system as his parents wished, Steve decides to use his knowledge of chemistry "to make explosives for targets such as power installations" (*No Time* 4). He becomes a bomb

confectioner blowing up an oppressive system controlled by the members of his own race. Hence, both Jabu and Steve actively participated in the anti-apartheid guerrilla. The narrator, commenting on their past lives, says that faith in the Struggle made any other preoccupation secondary; “freedom [demanded] everything” (*No Time* 190).

By presenting the contributions and sacrifices made by Jabu and Steve to subvert apartheid, the narrator makes the reader to be expectant of a sort of reward for these freedom fighters now that apartheid has ended and democracy is being established. And this is what the narrator *seems* to do as the story unfolds. Nonetheless, a closer look indicates that the prize of freedom, good governance and equity which ought to reward the years of anti-apartheid struggle is replaced by enigmatic disenchantments. In order to place the reader at the heart of dystopian sentiments, Gordimer creates a kind of debate club in the new suburb in which ex-fighters (the Dolphins) involve in intercourses regarding the state of affairs in the new South Africa. The narrator informs us that “Sunday’s permanent invitation for Jake, Isa, the Mkizes, Jabu, Steve and everyone’s kids to come to the pool become socially political amid the cult repartee [...] of the commune” (*No Time* 124). These discussions reveal the expectations of ex-fighters whose leaders in the “bush” have now been propelled to the helms of the democratic state. Nelson Mandela, having addressed the pressing problems left by the apartheid regime, has left a country that needs to build for itself a foundation. This is what is expected of President Thabo Mbeki. During their discussions, Steve argues:

> Government has to pick up the spade and tackle where we bulldozed apartheid. How long are whites going to dominate the economy? [...] Who’s going to change the hierarchy of mine bosses – from the top. The goose that makes the country rich – blacks, they’re the ones who continue to deliver the golden eggs, the whites, grace of Anglo-American and Co. make the profit on the stock exchange. [...] Mbeki has to integrate us as a concept if we are ever going to be reckoned with in the order of the world. (*No Time* 23-4)

Steve points at the enormous task of nation building that awaits post-apartheid government. As the symbol of the spade highlights, there is much work to do, especially in the economy, for black South Africans to enjoy a stable egalitarian edifice. For decades, these blacks have been excluded by Boers and by the English from the circuit of material prosperity: they have been limited to working for foreign people to consume. With a black president as Head of State, a quick change is expected. In the process of restructuring a society that had steel-like racist foundations, the new president has to conceptualize the being of South Africa in the world and raise a national culture.

All these plans are shattered by slogan-full and egocentric politics that bring no solution to the nation’s problems. In fact, things are worsened. Since Jabu, Steve and the other comrades know most of the country’s leaders (for having fought and suffered with them in *Umkhonto*), their disgust and irritation are authentically rendered. For instance, when Zuma, vice-President under Mbeki’s regime, is alleged to be involved in an Arms Deal and bribes, Peter Mkize remembers: “Zuma was our Chief of Intelligence in the bush” (*No Time* 131). Mkize is disappointed by this fellow comrade who had been a model in the Struggle but has veered into corruption and nepotism. Like Mkize, Jake exposes his frustration when he asks: “How’s it possible to believe that these same comrade leaders have forgotten what they were, what they fought through – in exchange for freedom as bribes, freedom as money” (132). He cannot explain the fact that the ideal of freedom has been screwed for money. To be perplexed, as Jake is, is a symptom of the dystopian syndrome. The inability to understand how and why reality has turned so gloomy leads to what can be termed imaginative failure. Imaginative failure means that the faculty of dreaming has been compromised by the absence of possibilities. It either involves an abrupt or progressive disconnection of the mind from societal closures that render dreams possible. Here dreaming is not viewed from the Freudian perspective; it is rather understood as an activity which the human mind can carry to imagine possibilities which society does not permit. In a dystopian context, however, this imagination fails because the mind has transgressed societal barriers only to realize that an abyss lies behind these barriers. Jake’s imaginative failure is therefore an attempt to protect himself from possibilities he is afraid to behold.

Furthermore, the narrator reveals the annoyance of the Dolphins with the appointment of incompetent comrades at key ministerial positions at the detriment of qualified ones. They question "why so-and-so, whose pathetic lack of capabilities comrades all knew too well, had been given the leg-up in a ministry while so-and-such, comrade of brains and integrity, seemed to be sidelined onto some minor committee chair" (*No Time* 125). This deliberate encouragement of mediocrity in ministerial appointments prepares grounds for inertia to paralyze the country. But an objective reading also gives reason to doubt the ability of these qualified ones to keep their integrity if they are given the powers. Jacob Zuma, one of the qualified ones, is actually immersed in accusations of rape and corruption and only gets scot-free because the justice system is manned by the "democratic" government (*No Time* 255-6). Hence, those who had fought for and believed in the anti-apartheid struggle are disillusioned when their leaders, competent or not, betray their trusts.

In fact, these new leaders have engaged in another struggle, the scramble for power and money. This is evident in the schisms that take place within the ANC itself. Mosiuoa Lekota, a prominent anti- apartheid fighter, takes advantage of accusations against Zuma to create his own political party called COPE ("Congress of the People"). Although he is defeated in the elections, Jabu who had voted for COPE learns afterwards the implication of its leaders in bribery. COPE leaders who manage a public fuel company receive undue bonuses of 1.8 million and 3.5 million rands (*No Time* 350). Jabu is obliged to admit that there is no difference between corrupt ANC politics and the supposedly new COPE. This situation reinforces dystopianism in the novel since expected sources of change eventually turn to be replicas of the establishment one is running away from. Steve describes these so-called comrades as "reborn clones of apartheid bosses" (223). They have turned their backs from a shared ideal and there is no hint that a reversal is possible. Steve asks Jabu: "D'you really believe in the classless society we were making for? Our old freedom dream stuff? We've been woken up. Had to be" (228). Steve's words indicate that he has already relinquished every hope for betterment. He refers to their anti-apartheid dream as mere stuff and he recognizes having been awakened by the shocking realities of the present. It was imperative that their utopic vision be caught by facts – one of the facts being that the "*Ubuntu* – we're all one, I am you, you are me" ideology has been completely forgotten and forsaken (111).

The absurd equally plays a fundamental role in enhancing the dystopian character of *No Time Like the Present*. Absurdity springs from some disorientation in the attitudes of characters and ironies in events described in the narrative. In this novel, absurdity is politically oriented and focuses on Zuma. We are told that "Zuma headed the 'Moral Regeneration Movement', a government initiative on prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS" (*No Time* 133). This means that he is supposed to be a model of moral rectitude, especially in matters of sexuality. Ironically though, he is accused of raping the seropositive daughter of a comrade, and Jabu's legal experience induces the reader to believe that Zuma is guilty in this affair. The fact that Zuma displays ignorance of HIV prevention measures in court is alarming for someone who ought to lead the fight against the AIDS pandemic. This situation underscores the topsy-turvy management of the country, and more so, if we realize that Zuma's rape is symbolic of the regime's exploitation of and deviation from liberation ideals. To give a greater ironic twist to the whole story, Gordimer's narrator keeps the reader in suspense of a definitive judgment that never comes: Zuma slips through the nets of justice and the rape affair is tagged as a defamatory plot against his presidential ambitions (*No Time* 134; 142).

The peak of absurdity is reached when Zuma is elected president "with seventy-two charges of fraud and corruption against him" (*No Time* 322). One of his first promises is that he will fight corruption and nepotism under his administration meanwhile he is involved in corruption scandals himself (348). There seem to be opaque blinds that prevent masses all over the country from noticing the perfidy underlying his candidature. Zuma's ANC also promises "to rescue South Africa from global recession. Cut unemployment to less than 15 percent by 2014" (282). Naive disillusioned people in quest for a hope to hang on believe in these promises which carry from their very origin the promise of their failure. The population therefore makes wrong choices for the wrong leaders. The narrator summarizes the nation's evident confusion in these words: "The country is in its adolescence" (*No Time* 260). This metaphor is poignant for at least two reasons: firstly, it denotes a premature

state wherein false consciousness is dominant; secondly, it connotes the presence of troublesome political "hormones" secreted by the ruling establishment and which disrupt rational functionalities. Post-apartheid South Africa is thus in a transitional phase, just that we do not know where it will lead the country to. The future is sombre and the narrator emphasizes this point with her own reflections: "What is the difference between not doing anything, and having arrived, while desperately opposing yourself, at recognition that what had been believed, fought for hasn't begun to be followed – granted, couldn't be realised – in fifteen years – and right now, every day degenerates. Oh that fucking litany, Better Life, how often to face the dead with it" (351). The narrator in these words captures the dystopian trend of political activism in South Africa by arguing that it makes no difference to have fought against apartheid or not. This is because the expectations of those who fought (and who seemed to achieve their goal) have been quickly battered by reality. Former freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives for societal equity and justice are now obliged to "oppose" themselves, that is, they are forced to live/witness the corruption of their ideals by fellow comrades. Fifteen years after the struggle, they are compelled to admit that they have failed: Fighting in the bush, being imprisoned and tortured, making bombs, dying, all of these efforts were futile. Not only has the present condition failed to fulfil the promises of the past, it has also made the situation worse than it was before - the deterioration is accentuated day after day. It is similar to watching powerlessly a newborn baby drown bit by bit. It is the dream of many generations that Mbeki and Zuma have selfishly betrayed. That faith in a better life to come claimed many lives but, alas, there has been no significant improvement.

This section has analyzed the political disenchantment caused by egocentric administration of post-apartheid South Africa by former *Umkhonto* leaders. The incompetence of these leaders, the impunity that accompanies their illegal activities and power-mongering constitute the recipe of ex-fighters' dystopian outlook throughout the novel. As the Dolphins point out, "the shit of the past" (the apartheid mentality) has not yet been cleaned (*No Time* 254). This is part of where my argument in this paper lies. In doing this, the paper reinforces the importance of literature in education. Identifying and presenting the dystopic world is in a way creating awareness and clamouring for change and social transformation in the world of the novel and the society at large.

Individuals and the Omnipresence of Societal Inequalities

Jelena Pataki in her book review highlights that dystopian novels are concerned with the "negotiation of individual's position within the oppressive society" (428). She equally mentions that "the dystopian world is inevitably linked to a totalitarian state apparatus, depriving its inhabitants of freedom" (426). As such, there is a conflict opposing the individual to his/her society as he/she strives to obtain freedom which the regime firmly withholds. In the context of South Africa, this totalitarianism is not a direct brutal assault of the government to restrict liberties; it is rather its breeding of societal inequalities that help consolidate its power. In such context, the dystopian protagonist is usually abreast with the socio-political and economic state of his/her country; critical of the ills of this society; concerned with breaking free from societal shackles; and finally problematizes the notion of freedom. There is therefore a complex intertwining of freedom, fear and happiness in dystopian fiction. Happiness is viewed as an ideal that only freedom gives way to, but the worry is that freedom remains unattained mainly because of 1) the fear of failing anew and 2) the resilience of socially-destructive practices to individuals' improvement moves. In this section, Jabu and Steve are considered as dystopian protagonists in *No Time Like the Present*. Their engagement with societal inequities is given keen attention because it serves indirectly as a battleground where they oppose the regime's complicit aloofness.

After living an anti-apartheid clandestine life in Glengrove Place, Jabu and Steve caress the hope of starting afresh in a new age. The oppressive system is apparently dismantled. The narrator, who narrates most of the story from the third person limited point of view, says: "[I]t seemed an Age was over. Surely nothing less

than a New Age when the law is not promulgated on pigment, anyone may live and work and move anywhere in a country commonly theirs" (*No Time* 4). There is a semblance of freedom and equality after the Struggle: Blacks can now live in former exclusively-white populated suburbs; many black students are admitted into various higher education programs; and mixed marriages are no longer prohibited. Nevertheless, this impression of freedom proves deceptive when Jabu and Steve venture into their respective professions. The societal commitment infused in them by *Umkhonto* directs them towards vocations that put them in close contact with the people.

Jabu is, for some time, hypnotized by the ideals of the Struggle. About her choice to leave teaching and join the legal professions, we are told: "[The Struggle is] not left in the bush camp or the desert or the prison, it is the purpose of being alive; still a comrade…So she's going to become a lawyer" (*No Time* 56). Jabu's choice is clearly not motivated by financial rewards; her profession is a dedication to the predicaments of the oppressed as well as a move to make things better with the measure of power she has (*No Time* 115). This is evident when she fights to protect the rights of black workers who are dismissed without compensation after working in mining companies for years (*No Time* 277). According to Jabu, life is meaningful only when it is geared toward justice and freedom. But the cases she works on at the Justice Centre soon reflect into her eyes the shocking reality: Racism is still present and causes havoc. For instance, while Steve is in London for a conference, Jabu relates to him an incident (through phone call): "[A] farmer's shot a man he saw on his mealie field, he says he thought it was a baboon – She doesn't have to say white farmer (who else)" (*No Time* 173). A white farmer has deliberately killed a Black farmer, pretexting that he was protecting his farm from a "baboon". The reference to a baboon is obviously racist because it is a primate to which white supremacists have always associated black people - when it is not a "baboon", it is a "monkey". Thus, racism disguises to resurface in ways that are difficult to forestall and stop.

Commenting on Jabu's and Steve's expectation to witness the end of racism, Marek Pawlicki in "Perspectives on Past and Present Realities: Nadine Gordimer's Voice on Social and Political Problems in South Africa" argues that although they are shocked and surprised to live the perpetuation of racism, this attitude is "in a sense, the expression of the protagonists' latent naivety as to the anticipated progress of the post-apartheid South Africa" (182). In other words, their utopian world is challenged and extinguished by dystopian realities. At another moment, Jabu complains about a case in which white students in hostels abuse black cleaners, and no sanction is given; the hostel is simply closed (*No Time* 217). Racism therefore perpetrates its attacks on blacks with the consenting impunity and silence of a black democratic government. Jabu is forced to realize that even her dedication to justice/freedom is insufficient for redressing widespread corrupt mentalities.

Steve has his own lot of disappointment. His conversion from industrial chemistry to academics is geared at impacting young people more effectively. Early in his teaching profession, he notices that the politicized intake of black students in the University maintains, or even worsens, the intellectual gap between white and black South Africans. He organizes what he calls "Band-aid" lectures for black students because their intellectual abilities are far beneath university requirements, contrary to their white counterparts (*No Time* 66). Steve welcomes these students in his house regularly to teach them. He quickly realizes that this initiative is quite inadequate to solve this problem. He asks himself "whether a token of coaching in hopes of bringing [black students] up to university standards can achieve recovery from ten years of hopelessly poor schooling" (66). Indeed, for this educational disparity to be resolved, and in a bid to maintain social equilibrium, a profound reformation of the educational system has to be undertaken at the national level, not a minute individual enterprise. With this idea in mind, Steve becomes an activist in his university urging his colleagues to address the issue seriously with the Minister of Education. Steve and Lesego Moloi (another colleague) are quickly viewed as "Lefties" who want to disturb the status-quo of "the old guard" (65).

Upon many attempts, a delegation is constituted and finally decides to meet the minister who purposefully avoids them. The delegation is received by a top official who gives them this evasive answer: "The

department is applying itself intently to changes that will bring about development necessary for the times" (*No Time* 101). This answer is a polite way of telling these teachers to go back to their classes and shut up. The cosmetic changes that are eventually made (like the change from "Pupil" to "Learners"; from "Results" to "Outcomes") show that the academic Establishment has not taken the problem of black students into consideration (92). This fundamental negligence provokes massive unemployment in the country as black students obtain university degrees with no competence/know-how; whites are privileged by the job market because their training has been thorough. Hence, all of Steve's efforts have been watered down. His dismay is captured when the narrator says: "[I]n the faculty room he was in a coterie of the present among the structures of the past, fuming inwardly against [...] the rites of scholarly self-esteem" (122). These words foreground Steve's detachment from inertia nestled in the education sector. He is living a present which ought to be devoid of past inequalities but he is witnessing the survival, worst still, the nursing of inequalities in a delicate, pivotal sector.

The segregating policies of apartheid are indirectly reinforced when the new government neglects the training of blacks. In a discussion on this issue, Jake asks Marc: "Can you tell me the 'advancement' in granting degrees to students who're going to enter professions unequipped to do the work they're supposed to do [...]. That's perpetuating the racist 'inferiority of blacks' brains', that's apartheid dolled up as Black Economic Empowerment" (*No Time* 260). Jake is actually pointing at a trap embedded in demagogic claims that the admission of blacks in higher education institutions constitutes in itself an emancipatory, equality-driven policy. There is need for fundamental reforms that will enable blacks compete equally with whites.

Therefore, both Jabu and Steve use their jobs as springboards to a more egalitarian society wherein justice and freedom are preserved. The order they try to put after the demise of the apartheid Establishment ultimately fails because the so-called democratic regime of Mbeki is nonchalant, inert and aloof from the pressing problems of the legal and educational systems. This insouciance allows the canker of apartheid and racism to keep scorching South Africa's black-majority population. The freedom ideal for which Jabu and Steve sacrificed; the inequalities which they so vigorously combated during the apartheid; their personal initiatives towards betterment are all crumpled by a reckless government.

A Steaming Social Context

As mentioned earlier, Nadine Gordimer's *No Time Like the Present* offers no break to its reader; it constantly assaults him/her with deteriorations of the social corpus, especially as the story gives the impression of being narrated by powerless commentators of degradation. Jabu, one of these commentators, raises the first alarm when she evokes the possible contamination of South Africa by Robert Mugabe's poor governance. She asserts: "Mugabe's good start in Zimbabwe has careered off into dictatorship. We can't pretend other neighbours aren't in trouble or heading for trouble and we won't be involved" (*No Time* 24). Jabu's premonition is confirmed in the later parts of the text when poor Zimbabweans migrate in great numbers to South Africa and create unprecedented social tensions. The country finds itself in deep trouble. It is this influx of Zimbabwean refugees, coupled with South Africa's widening social fissures, which stir the urge of emigration in many middle-class South Africans. On the other hand, the implications and exigencies of migration make Jabu and Steve (who are of the middle-class) to reconsider their wish to migrate. The novel therefore ends with an impassable situation wherein the protagonists are entrapped in socio-economic chaos at home.

Zimbabweans are running away from misery and death to seek refuge in South Africa. As Steve says, they are fleeing from a country "where you can die slowly, because your brothers take everything from you [...] for themselves" (*No Time* 195). These Zimbabweans first settle in Alex Township but are quickly driven by the police because it is a rich, mostly white populated area (*No Time* 198). They now turn to poor black suburbs where their black race makes it difficult to distinguish them from Black South Africans. And, of course, there is no police to send them out. The "invasion" of these Zimbabweans has the merit of revealing the structure of neo-

apartheid South Africa where class stratification has increased racial inequities. The whites are rich and well educated while blacks suffer dearth in the ghettos. While white towns have been freed of Zimbabwean intruders, black quarters experience a boom of violence with regular, sometimes murderous, confrontations between black South Africans and refugees. The narrator depicts this tension and violence in these words:

> No authority but what they can lay their hands on: knives, axes, their resident gangs' stolen guns; fire. Some Somalis fled from their country's particular conflict bring with them their trading instincts and have set up stores which are torched with the new traditional weapons of South Africa resorted to during the Struggle, burning tyres. And the invaders are fighting back. (203)

These ferocious attacks are quickly represented in discussions as South Africans' outright display of xenophobia. But do South Africans really hate other Africans? Are they really jealous about the profits made my refugees and strangers in their land?

As long as black South Africans' conditions are precarious, it is hasty to conclude that they hate strangers. Their so-called xenophobic instinct is less the dislike for foreigners than the urgency of protecting morsels that maintain them alive. As the narrator adroitly opines, "in last resort against their own condition [black South Africans] are desperately defending the means, scraps of substance, their own survival" (206). Hence, their violent actions are the signs of a marginal existence in their own country. Steve emphasizes this point when he says that blacks South Africans live "an existence as refugees from [South African] economy, unemployed, unhoused, surviving by ingenuities of begging" and should not be guilty of defending "the only space, the only means of survival against competitors for this *almost nothing*" (*No Time* 212) (emphasis original). Here, Steve indicates that blacks have been economically excluded. They are left with almost nothing and cannot dare share it with strangers, even if these ones are also facing difficult times. It is sheer poverty that causes these tensions, so instead of labelling the South African subaltern, who defends his crumbs, as xenophobic the accusing finger should rather point at African rulers who enrich themselves to the detriment of their disillusioned peoples.

Furthermore, the fragmentation of the societal fabric is projected by a racist scandal at The Free State University. The narrator ironically says:

> White students [...] held out the ultimate hand of non-racialism and no class prejudice by inviting the university cleaners of their hostel, black, to a party [...]. The mostly elderly four women and one man whose role in these students' higher education was to clean up after them, danced in drunken freedom, and then on their knees forced to help themselves generously from a pot of stew. One of the students had pissed into it. (234)

This symbolic blatant insult made by young, rich white students against elderly, black people exposes the economic disparity between both races as well as the racist mentality assimilated by most white South Africans. Genuine economic empowerment of blacks, which would reduce racism, is fudged by the government thereby allowing the notion of whites' supremacy to be consolidated. Since the novel is set in a globalized era, this racist act is filmed and shared through the internet by its perpetrators. The university institution takes no drastic sanction against these students, and the black workers are simply ignored. This racist scandal perturbs Jabu profoundly to the point that she starts considering migration as a means to run away from this racist society (*No Time* 238-9).

After this racist scandal, the narrator takes us back to issues of unemployment and poverty. Jabu has an encounter with a broom-seller who has finished school and is still unemployed two years later (278). Despite the education and degrees he has received, this black South African is limited to selling brooms, an activity that can only earn him a meager pittance. Yet, in line with dystopian representations, we are made to think that this broom-seller's condition is better than that of other blacks. For instance, in her car, Jabu sees a bony beggar clinging to the glasses of her car, imploring to be given some money. The narrator says this beggar is "barely alive", meaning that death can be read on his body (*No Time* 303). What is worth noting is the meaning Jabu

gives to his begging gesture; she thinks that "what whites did and blacks must change, pointed down the open mouth" (304). In other words, the black beggar acts like a symbol of the failure of post-apartheid leadership, constantly reminding drivers and passersby that the regime has completely missed the mark.

The series of problems in this country is extended to the educational sector and to public services. Nothing functions normally. In the educational field, students riot because the school fee is too elevated; fresh year maths students in a university follow lessons seated on the floor; school authorities embezzle millions destined for scholarships; nationwide performance of engineering students is poor (*No Time* 350). In the public service it is a succession of strikes that assault important aspects of social and economic life. The narrator says: "On the first day of August telecommunications workers began a strike of 40,000 union members. The workers at the zoo in the capital city Pretoria were on strike [...]. A metropolitan railway strike continues" (377). Also, electricity workers threaten to strike because the National Treasury refuses to give money they need (380). To crown this disorder, there is a rise in insecurity throughout the country. Wethu (Jabu's house girl), for instance, has to learn to keep away from dangerous sites in the town (382). Despite her prudence, Wethu is brutalized when robbers penetrate Jabu's house to steal (387). A hint is given that one of the thieves is an unemployed boy who used to hang around in the streets. Violent confrontations between the natives and Zimbabwean refugees continue with some unfortunate ones dying in the course (401). South Africa seems to have reached a dead-end where people resign and surrender to their lot. It is in this hopeless and steaming social context that the novel ends.

The last sentence of the novel, "I'm not going", is uttered by Jabu and Steve (*No Time* 421). This statement connotes a faint utopia (that things may someday get better) and the vicious cycle is expected to continue. Refusing to go/emigrate implies that one is ready to cope with the present bad situation, harbouring at the back of one's mind that things can change one day. In line with what Jelena Pataki writes in her book review that there is an "inevitably circular nature of utopian and dystopian ideals" observed in the fact that "they repeatedly instigate each other's occurrence" (426). Thus, the last sentence of the text hints at a frail possibility of improvement that prepares the ground for another dystopia. Dominic Davies in "Simple as the Black Letters on this White Page" emphasizes this point when he argues that Jabu's and Steve's decision to stay in South Africa "despite the pervasive sense of disillusionment and fatigue with which they have been grappling" is a symbolic enactment of their return to the public, political sphere (91). They have decided to endure the poor state of affairs, to dream again and take action against socio-political problems, making the reader wonder whether this will not lead to another – and perhaps greater – disenchantment.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the dystopian features that transpire from a reading of Nadine Gordimer's *No Time Like the Present*. The first section has discussed the betrayal of freedom ideals and the sense of loss that characterizes ex-fighters who do not know what to do and whom to rely on. The second section has analyzed the attempts made by the novel's protagonists to effect change in their respective sectors, and how government's inertia blocks these efforts. The third section of this article has retraced the series of chaotic events that destroy South Africa's social fabric and intensify hopelessness at the end of the narrative.

Therefore, this paper arrives at the conclusion that Nadine Gordimer's novel captures the inherent handicap of change, that of not being reliable: What is expected of change in a rosy imagination turns out many at times into a nightmare. This is the predicament of post-apartheid South Africans when, having nurtured a common dream for a non-racial and classless society, find themselves abandoned and exploited by the very people who led the struggle for freedom. The narrator summarizes the (dis)illusion brought by change when she says: "Change, change, the past had to be overturned but what crawls out of the rubble can surface in some form anywhere" (*No Time* 252). Actually, racism camouflages as class stratification and the apartheid regime simply

puts on black masks. As the narrator further highlights, the country has to deal no longer with the "rising sun post-apartheid but the present freedom's storms" (290). At the end of the story every aspect of societal life has to be reformed - if alone reformation does not disguise into old structures as it usually does.

Though South Africa is still far from freedom, Nadine Gordimer finds her own freedom as a writer through her subjective but realistic depiction of her home country. In her own words , a writer's freedom "is his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society" (*No Time* 174). The intensity of social problems recorded in the novel and her personal implication through the narrator's opinions indicate that Gordimer attains her artistic freedom through severe critique of South Africa's morass, an interweaving of literature and politics and above all, portraying the relevance of literature in education and the transformation of the society.

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