



The Weapon on the Table: Gun Culture and Post-Apartheid Reconciliation in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*

¹Shaik Shabana, ²Prof. K. Suma Kiran

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

Professor, Department of English, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994 did not bring the peace many had hoped for. Although the official structures of apartheid were dismantled at the governmental level, a troubling contradiction emerged in private life: the weapons once taken up for political liberation were now kept in homes under the pretext of "safety and self-defence." Gordimer's fiction does more than reflect these changes; it holds them up to scrutiny, showing how the lingering effects of apartheid-era violence have followed South Africans into their own homes. Her twelfth novel overall, and the second set in post-apartheid South Africa, *The House Gun* was awarded the Premio Mondello Prize (1998). This paper examines the devastating consequences of gun culture on post-apartheid society, arguing that Gordimer reveals it not as a random social problem but as the direct consequence of a state that replaced one form of institutional violence with another. Through the tragedy of the Lindgard family, the novel demonstrates that easy access to weapons does not bring safety - it brings catastrophe. Drawing on criticism by Clingman, Driver, Jolly, and Medalie, this paper shows how Gordimer uses the domestic space of the home and the formal space of the courtroom to expose the failure of post-apartheid society to build genuine peace. This novel stands as a testimony to a society constantly shadowed by violence, and Gordimer's ultimate argument is that reconciliation is possible only through human compassion and ethical responsibility, not through weapons or institutional authority.

Key Words: Apartheid, Discrimination, Gun-Culture, Post-Apartheid, Ammunition.

Introduction

Gordimer is one of the finest fiction writers who has spoken out against the injustices and irregularities in South Africa. She has penned 15 novels and several short story collections. Gordimer was also actively engaged in politics and human rights activism. South Africa, under the minority Afrikaners - White South African immigrants who had been predominantly ruling and exploiting the local Black South Africans - was a country held together by the Apartheid policy. This policy forbade Black South Africans from using educational institutions, health care facilities, and living areas reserved for Whites. Such conditions of exclusion and exploitation could only produce turbulence and violence. This violence is the result of the extreme oppression and inequality in the rights of Black South Africans. They were ill-treated and humiliated due to their colour and race. Black South Africans were denied the most basic human rights and dignity. The systemic injustice sparked the resistance efforts of Black South Africans, leading to the eventual end of racial segregation and the achievement of equal rights. However, even after this significant victory, societal tensions persisted, and the dream of peace and unity was still a long way off. Though the first multiracial elections were held in 1994 and Nelson Mandela was elected president after 27 years in prison, things were far from smooth across all areas of national life. People suffered during the Apartheid due to the violence, and continued to suffer in the post-apartheid period too. Violence has continued in different social forms, with the victims' demographics changing while the core culture of fear endures. This ongoing suffering, both during and after apartheid, is exactly what Gordimer portrays in her



writing. Violence has become a fundamental part of daily life in South Africa. Crimes such as carjackings and robberies became commonplace, and even if victims showed no resistance, they were frequently wounded or killed. By the mid-1990s, South Africa had one of the highest murder rates in the world, between 60 and 70 annual murders per 100,000 people. During the same period, a study reported an average of 5.5 per 100,000 across 80 nations (Barbarin and Richter 86). It is against this backdrop of persistent, normalised violence that Gordimer sets her novel - and from which she draws her most urgent warnings.

Rosemary Jane Jolly, in her seminal study *Cultured Violence: Narrative, Social Suffering, and Engendering Human Rights in Contemporary South Africa* (2010), situates such statistics within a broader argument about the normalisation of violence in the post-apartheid body politic, arguing that the state's failure to address structural inequalities created a culture in which lethal force became a default currency of social exchange (Jolly 47). This critical framework lends weight to Gordimer's depiction of a society in which the gun has become a domestic fixture rather than an exceptional instrument of harm.

Although scholars like Clingman and Driver have explored Gordimer's political aesthetics and ethical issues throughout her body of work, there has been limited critical focus on how *The House Gun* portrays domestic gun ownership as a lingering aspect of apartheid-era violence in the context of post-apartheid private life. This paper attempts to address that gap.

This paper argues that in *The House Gun*, Nadine Gordimer reveals post-apartheid gun culture not as a random social problem but as the direct consequence of a state that replaced one form of institutional violence with another - this time dressed in the language of self-defence and domestic safety. Through the Lindgard family's tragedy, Gordimer demonstrates that until South African society confronts this honestly, neither justice nor genuine reconciliation is possible.

The House Gun opens with a chilling statement: Something Terrible Happened. This declaration serves as a stark warning to readers about the tragedy that has struck the wealthy Lindgard family. Harald Lindgard is a prominent banker, while Claudia Lindgard is a distinguished doctor. The couple holds a high reputation within the city's elite circles. They have only one son, Duncan, a young architect who lives with a group of Black and White friends in a cottage on the grounds of a large suburban home. Natalie is his girlfriend. It is a shattering revelation to Harald and Claudia when Duncan confesses to killing his housemate Carl Jespersen with the household gun. Harold was particularly struck to discover that Duncan had been reading Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* - a novel whose triangular tragedy uncannily mirrors Duncan's own situation with Natalie, whom he sometimes calls Nastasya.

Claudia says: "In this violent city, she has watched those nuggets delved for and prised out on operating tables; they retain the streamline shape of velocity itself. There is no element in the human body that can withstand, even a dent, a bullet." (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 13)

Through Claudia's character, Gordimer has expressed her views and mirrored the street violence in Johannesburg. This has gradually become part of the grim reality of day-to-day life in South African society.

The critical analysis of gun culture in post-apartheid South Africa forms the central focus of this paper. That violence erupted during the period of resistance - the oppression of Black South Africans under apartheid, with its strict bans on education, healthcare, and freedom of movement, left little choice but resistance. The apartheid policy, officially enacted in 1948, had systematically crushed the morale of Black South Africans, both psychologically and physically. But what concerns Gordimer, and this paper, is what happened after freedom was won.

After nearly four decades of intense resistance by Black South Africans and growing international pressure, the white supremacist government was forced to concede and hold the first non-racial elections during



the 1990s. Ultimately, in 1994, the general elections were conducted, and equality and democracy prevailed. It is evident that the Blacks picked up guns to “fight for their right” (though this was not desirable). If closely examined, it is more of a political and power struggle. However, the post-apartheid gun culture conveys a different picture of South Africa. Young South Africans, bewildered and unsafe, turn to weapons - and this very impulse exposes the hollowness of the nation’s post-apartheid promise.

The uncontrolled vehemence is here described by the anonymous voice: “...; in a region of the country where the political ambition of a leader had led to killings that had become vendettas, fomented by him, a daily tally of deaths was routine as a weather report; elsewhere, taxi drivers shot one another in rivalry over who would choose to ride with them, quarrels in discothèques were settled by the final curse-word of guns. State violence under the old, past regime had habituated its victims to it. People had forgotten there was another way.” (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 49-50)

David Medalie, in his review ‘The Context of the Awful Event’: Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*, said that from the title of the novel, we can understand that violence remains insidiously habitual in South Africa and that the gun was available in the house of the friends where the crime took place. Besides that, the gun was a domestic item, as it was needed in any household (Medalie 638).

Dorothy Driver similarly observes, in her essay “Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women,” that Gordimer consistently employs the domestic and the juridical as interlocking registers through which larger social failures are exposed. In *The House Gun*, the courtroom becomes the space where private tragedy is transformed into a public matter - a technique that Driver identifies as central to Gordimer's post-apartheid aesthetic of accountability (Driver 181). The gun, placed casually on the living-room table, thus functions not merely as a murder weapon but as a symbol of the state's failure in its duty of care toward its citizens. Sarma, S. (2023)

One crucial reason behind this disturbing social change is the easy access to weapons for everyone. As the novel shows, it is not a hardened criminal but an ordinary young man - Duncan, an architect - who kills with a household gun lying casually on a table. Betrayed by his closest friend Carl Jespersen, who had slept with his girlfriend Natalie, Duncan acts not out of premeditation but out of sheer anguish. In that devastating moment, the gun’s presence on the table is what turns a moment of rage into murder. Gordimer’s point is precise: when a weapon is within reach, impulse becomes irreversible.

He had a bullet wound in the head. He was lying half-on, half-off the sofa, as if he had been taken by surprise when shot and had tried to rise. (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 15)

The crime has been committed, and the culprit has surrendered himself. Now the stern picture of current realities occupies the forefront of the novel. Gordimer steadily builds the novel toward its most urgent pitch with her stark yet truthful description of the consequences of Duncan’s actions and the facts surrounding the murder itself. Mr Hamilton Motsamai is brought into the scene, and the story turns into the next level of court drama. Mr Hamilton Motsamai, a Black lawyer who empathises with the plight of the Lindgards, carefully examines all the circumstances and concludes that it is not the culprit who is to be scrutinised. It is the scenario in which the crime has been committed. Mr Motsamai’s powerful and clear logic in arguments lays bare the ground realities of South African gun culture and the bewilderment in which the youngsters are leading their lives. The psychological, political, social and familial disturbances have landed the youth of this nation into a chaotic state of mind pushing them toward taking up the gun. The rhetoric of “Something Terrible Happened” resonates across every sphere of South African socio-political life. Guns are kept and used in the name of safety and precaution. Dzüvichü, K., & Yhome, V. (2024)

“...the gun kept in the house as mutual protection against burglars” (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 16)



Gordimer suggests throughout the novel that danger is not always an outside threat; it can reside within the very walls of a home, especially when a gun is kept there. But when a weapon is within anyone's reach, a mishap becomes not just possible but likely. There was hope that with the abolition of apartheid, peace would replace violence and hatred. Instead, distrust and fear have taken root once more. Gordimer succeeds in transforming a story of personal betrayal and courtroom drama into a penetrating portrait of post-apartheid South African society. Gordimer implies that human impulses, when acted upon in a setting where weapons are casually available, become instantly and fatally irreversible. At the same time, she tries to expose the failures of society and the nation in all aspects to provide its citizens with a reliable setup that will foster compassion and cooperation. The novel insists that social trust must be rebuilt, and racial anger addressed, if genuine reconciliation is ever to take hold.

If the citizens of any country bestow their trust and faith in the weapons, then there are meagre possibilities of attaining justice and peace. Ultimately, the novel suggests, social order depends as much on individual conscience as on institutional law. Gordimer's strength as a writer lies in her deep concern for her fellow countrymen and her unflinching commitment to her nation's conscience. Through her characters, she holds a mirror to the various faces of human weakness and resilience. In fact, everyone aspired to and expected a peaceful transition and genuine equality between the country's two major racial groups. Unfortunately, that has not happened. South Africa has instead witnessed a different kind of robbery - the robbery of social equilibrium and tranquillity.

Writing in 1998, Jack Miles, a Mellon Visiting Professor at the California Institute of Technology, observed that South Africa was caught between two opposing views: a nascent gun control movement arguing that more private guns makes society more dangerous, and an entrenched gun culture insisting the opposite - that the solution is to ensure every house has its house gun. This unresolved debate is precisely the social crisis that Gordimer's novel dramatises.

Gordimer draws attention to the very issues that governments and society urgently need to confront. She firmly believes that a society built on such deep disparities can never achieve true peace or prosperity. She also wishes for her people a life in which politics no longer invades and dictates their personal existence. Gordimer sees violence as a cycle that society seems unable to break:

"People kill each other and the future looks back and asks, what for? We can see, from here, what the end would have been, anyway. And then they return to kill each other for some other reason whose resolution could have been foreseen." (Gordimer, *None to Accompany Me* 305)

Still, she invites her readers to look honestly into the deeper dimensions of human nature. She is the guerrilla of imagination, according to Seamus Heaney. Her imaginative power reaches one of its finest expressions in *The House Gun*.

Stephen Clingman's influential work, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986), provides a foundational framework for understanding a key quality in Gordimer's writing. He argues that her fiction operates as a form of "internal history," in which the consciousness of private individuals registers the tremors of public catastrophe (Clingman 23). In *The House Gun*, this is rendered with particular economy: Harald and Claudia's gradual disillusionment mirrors the broader post-apartheid society's confrontation with the limits of its own moral optimism.

"It is unfortunate that a deadly weapon, a gun, was casually accepted as part of the household in that living-room and that it was lying on the table". (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 258)

The judge reprimands all parties concerned. He further adds:



“-But that is the tragedy of our present time, a tragedy repeated daily, nightly, in this city, in our country. Part of the furnishing in homes, carried in pockets along with car keys, even in the school-bags of children, constantly ready to hand in situation which lead to tragedy, the guns happen to be there-” (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 267)

The judge's words highlight just how intertwined guns are within everyday life in South Africa and how accepted they've become. His decision underscores the fact that the government can't tackle this issue alone. Achieving meaningful change demands that citizens actively engage in improving their country's situation, regardless of the political climate.

By the end of the novel, some measure of resolution arrives as the court finds that the murder is indirectly provoked by the people involved in the immoral act and the government's failure to control the easy availability of guns to the public. The need to restore social equilibrium across all sections of society is urgent. Guns are not the solution to the problems people face, in any way, and the easy reach of such weapons must be urgently regulated. The existing death sentence is declared legally untenable. The judge declares the death penalty as an official murder by the government. Hence, the court bans it. Based on all the circumstances, the court imposes a sentence of seven years' imprisonment on Duncan.

“The last judgment of the constitutional court has declared the death penalty unconstitutional”. (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 284)

It is further revealed that Natalie is pregnant, and Duncan's decision to claim responsibility for the child, even from prison, becomes Gordimer's final symbol of life asserting itself over death.

Duncan speaks the very final lines of the novel, “Carl's death and Natalie's child, I think of one, for me. It does not matter whether or not anyone else will understand: Carl, Natalie/Nastasya and me, the three of us. I've had to find a way to bring death and life together”. (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 294)

This signifies the victory of life over death. Though the post-apartheid era begins with extreme violence and terror, Gordimer bears the belief in humanity and compassion.

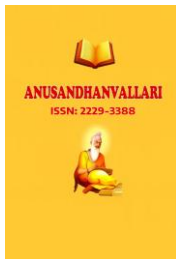
Gordimer writes: “Over. It's a new beginning.” (Gordimer, *The House Gun* 276)

Conclusion

Gordimer masters the art of balancing literary storytelling with social responsibility. She not only entertains but also holds up the "values of life" as the true measure of a civilised society. *The House Gun* powerfully maintains Gordimer's commitment as a writer deeply rooted in the realities of South Africa. This novel completes the circle of death and life, violence and peace - showing that where one ends, the other must begin.

In her exploration of the Lindgard family's tragic story, Gordimer reflects on a harsh reality in post-apartheid South Africa: escaping political oppression did not mean escaping violence. The gun that ended Carl Jespersen's life was not brought in from outside - it was already in the home, carelessly resting on the table like any ordinary household object. This is the heart of Gordimer's alarm. As Clingman observes, her fiction works from the inside out - the private catastrophe of one family becomes a register of a whole nation's failure to make peace with itself (Clingman 23). Driver's argument that Gordimer uses the domestic space to expose larger social failures is equally borne out here: the cottage, the courtroom, and the gun together form a complete portrait of a society still trapped in cycles of violence (Driver 181).

The judge's words in the novel say it plainly - the gun is in homes, in pockets, in school bags. The solution does not lie in the law alone, or in the government alone. It lies in the willingness of ordinary citizens to



choose trust over fear, and compassion over revenge. Duncan's final resolution - to bring death and life together, to claim responsibility for Natalie's child - is Gordimer's quiet answer to the loud despair of post-apartheid violence. It is a small, human act of reconciliation, but it is precisely the kind of act that rebuilds societies.

Gordimer does not leave the reader without hope. Duncan's final words - "I've had to find a way to bring death and life together" - signal that reconciliation, however painful, remains possible. *The House Gun* is ultimately not a novel about a single murder but about the moral condition of a whole society: one that cannot achieve genuine peace until it removes the weapon from the table - literally and figuratively.

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