

## The Liberal Tradition in South African Literature: Still a Curse? Nadine Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour* Revisited

Ode S. Ogede, North Carolina Central University

Nadine Gordimer's capacious novel *A Guest of Honour*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1970 when apartheid was in one of its most secure states, is undoubtedly one of the most sophisticated novels to come out of Africa. *A Guest of Honour* not only possesses exceptional literary qualities, but it is politically relevant as well. The effect of *A Guest of Honour* can be more accurately gauged if we look not only at the magnitude of scope, but also at the intensity and immediacy with which Gordimer attempts to capture the imaginative political temper of the time in which the novel is set. *A Guest of Honour* links concerns of politics, governance, morality of commitment, and romance, summoning up in the process an entirely new and original way of seeing the world. The idea around which this novel unfolds its controlling vision is the view that the white liberal could play a part in the struggle for a liberated South Africa. This idea was first proposed by Olive Schreiner in her novel *The Story of an African Farm*,<sup>2</sup> but by the time it is explored by Gordimer in *A Guest of Honour* new forms of anxiety had coalesced around it. Yet, Gordimer defies popular beliefs and invests a white liberal with a central role in the effort to tackle the problems facing the government of an unnamed new African state in its first year of independence, a country that has been described as a thin disguise for Zambia. In so doing, she proposes a solution that is radically opposed to the dominant ideas in her society.<sup>3</sup> Predictably, at the time, hatred flourished and focused on the limitations of her novel's white liberal protagonist, Colonel Evelyn James Bray. The critical establishment continued to view Bray's performance, or non-performance, as it were, as epitomizing the curse of liberalism.

Following the unexpected developments of 1990–1994 in South Africa, however, the resurgence of hope for the liberal political options that once were

---

<sup>1</sup> Nadine Gordimer, *A Guest of Honour* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation *GH*.

<sup>2</sup> Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (London: Hutchinson, 1883). It is worth remarking that Schreiner was one of the earliest of the white settler writers on South Africa to openly fight against the evils of apartheid from within through an appeal to the liberal conscience of the white oppressors. Schreiner exposed the appalling, self-destructive deformity apartheid was leaving upon the offspring of its own white originators and proponents. A similar position was later taken by, among others, Dan Jacobson in *The Trap and a Dance* (London: Penguin, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> See Jan Kees Van Donge, "Nadine Gordimer's *A Guest of Honour*: A Failure to Understand Zambian Society," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9 (1982–83): 74–92. It could also be claimed that the country is modeled on Malawi or Uganda.

scorned by many in the region highlights, in hindsight, the remarkable political insight of *A Guest of Honour*. And it may prove to have implications for the reception of “liberal” literature from earlier in South Africa’s history as a whole. The transition begun by former South African president F. W. de Klerk’s speech of 2 February 1990—alleged by de Klerk to be the result of a change of heart on his part brought on by, among other things, his reading of the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.—would have fulfilled the dreams of optimistic South African liberals, had there been any optimistic liberals left in South Africa by the 1980s, a time when liberalism had fallen on very hard times in the polity. However, we now see brighter days lying ahead for liberalism. At a time when radical revolutionaries at home and abroad had held high expectations for a violent overthrow of the apartheid regime, the decisive push for a positive turn of events was instead provided by a change in human conscience.<sup>4</sup>

The achievement of Gordimer’s *A Guest of Honour* is to have anticipated these later developments, and it is her character Bray who explores both the possibilities and the limitations that attend the vocation of liberalism. The ideals for which Bray stands and dies in *A Guest of Honour* can therefore be said to come with serious consequences. Once a colonial administrator, Bray is deported by the colonial regime for his sympathy for the Black cause. Then, ten years later, following the ouster of the colonialists, he is recalled by the post-independence leadership. Appointed to serve as a special advisor on education for the new government in the northern region of the country, he accepts the position because of his idealistic cast of mind, his strong faith that he will receive the support he needs to carry out his mandate successfully. However, Bray comes up against greater opposition than he could ever imagine, and ends up an ineffectual officer who later betrays his protege, the president, before losing his own life in a moment of a crisis that spirals violently out of control.

As she expressed in 1980, Nadine Gordimer harbored some suspicions about the liberal inclination: “The white man who wants to fit in the new Africa must learn a number of hard things ... giving up the impulse to advise and interfere and offer to resume responsibility may not be easy as we whites think. Even those of us who don’t want to be boss (or rather baas) have become used to being bossy. We’ve been used to assuming leadership, at least tutorship, even if it’s only been in the liberal campaigns to rescue the rights of the Africans to vote and speak for themselves. Out of our very concern to see Africans make a go of the

---

<sup>4</sup> The view that the South African racial problem could not be solved without the active involvement and support of white liberal elements both within and without South Africa can also be found in other works published between 1946 and 1973. Among them are Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (New York: Scribner’s, 1948) and Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* (London: Michael Joseph, 1950). However, the sentimental overtones dominant in Paton and Lessing are absent in Gordimer. From the late 1960s on, the tenor of mainstream Black South African writing also veered sharply away from liberalism toward a violent temper. This is noticeable especially throughout the turbulent 1970s (culminating in the Sharpville massacres of 1976), when the central concerns of Black South African writing became a retrieval of black culture and pride

new Africa, we may indeed, I know we should, be tempted to offer guidance even when we haven't been consulted. The facts that we are well-meaning and that the advice may be good and badly needed do not count ... what counts is the need of Africa to acquire confidence through experience of picking itself up, dusting itself down, and starting all over again."<sup>5</sup> A sense of the difficulty in doing what one preaches can definitely be gained from the fact that Gordimer herself cannot resist the urge to give advice. What interests me more, however, is the fact that Evelyn Bray, who indeed is consulted and who has a sincere heart to serve, gets frustrated in his attempt to contribute meaningfully to the reconstruction effort. The importance of this experience is that it is what presents the tragic situational irony that Gordimer explores using deftly deployed complex narrative strategies. Being mistaken for somebody else, Bray becomes a target of his political enemies. It is precisely in her handling of the events that lead to Bray's untimely and accidental death in an ambush that Gordimer reveals her true narrative talents, namely, the ability to paint a sensitive picture of the tragic repercussions of Third World political intrigues and manipulations.

Subsequent to the transfer of power to the Blacks after forty years of white colonial domination, the instruments for the activity of governing are entrusted into the hands of the nationalist party, the PIP, at the head of which is President Adamson Mweta. Rather than insisting that the young country be closed off to external contact, however, even in the face of an acute shortage of skilled indigenous manpower, President Mweta is receptive to the issue of dependence on foreign expertise to bring about the much desired growth of the country in the fields of agriculture, law, public health, and education. Evelyn Bray, who is part of this arrangement, starts his assignment on a very promising note, missing no opportunity to observe the bureaucratic inefficiency and unproductiveness that typify the mixed economy thrust upon the country by the departing colonial masters—the fact that “[i]n most places figures were not analyzed properly, and the frequent ‘unforeseen circumstances’ that caused a high percentage of failures, or the abandonment of modest experimental schemes were never explained” (GH 88). Clearly misplacing its priorities, the new nation chooses to misuse advice given by foreign experts on a rescue mission. It has only itself to blame for the poor judgment that results in its inability to secure the right future for its citizens.

Rather than depicting the pernicious crisis as the outcome of misdirection by foreign expertise, Gordimer gives us images of a polity whose indigenous leadership is torn apart by sharp ideological divisions. The lack of effective cooperation between President Mweta and his old ally in the independence-struggle, Edward Shinza, is the major stumbling block to the development of the country. Because the rivalry is triggered by a compulsive competitive power struggle over

---

<sup>5</sup> Nadine Gordimer, “The Prison-house of Colonialism,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15 August 1980: 918.

which neither of the two hardened contestants is willing to yield ground to the other, it poses immense danger to the survival of the polity. Whereas Mweta is an apostle of gradualism who pursues his vision of political stability by encouraging *laissez-faire*, or open-door, economic policies that place reliance on foreign aid, Shinza, now Mweta's arch-rival, perceives himself as a radical who derives his power from an alliance with labor—the local workers and the trade unions. Shinza resists foreign investment because he believes big business is a conduit through which the nation is exploited by multinational corporations. Mweta's inflexibility is revealed in the drastic measures he takes to counter opposition. He believes that the difference of opinion is a sign of self-serving insubordination and insurrection: "opposition—especially political opposition—from trade unions can only be allowed when it's clear the governing class is working to consolidate its own benefits rather than for the development of a progressive economy ... when it's only an attempt to discredit the government, the government has no choice except to break these people, ay?—even to use force, probably" (GH 373). Mweta's regime involves widely used despotic tactics; repressive state laws and overnight edicts are used to gag opponents.

Faced with the choice between the socialist and capitalistic paths of development, Mweta opts for the latter. Socialism is unappealing to him on the simple ground that he thinks "the country is not stable enough" (GH 373). Because the young country's industrial base is still in its infancy and the citizens have yet to attain a level of consciousness sufficient to support socialism, Mweta reasons that "meanwhile, subordination of the interest of the welfare of the workers to the demands of state" is for him the way to go (GH 373). Bray's tentative support gives no small boost to Shinza's ambition to exercise a country-wide influence from his remote station in Bashi. It gets him elected Secretary of Labour Union during the congressional meeting at the Luxuram, a position that the flamboyant Edward Shinza uses to cause a country-wide labor crisis.

Shinza's vision is to expose the regime's "false meaning of democracy that sees it in the sense of guarding the rights of the great corporate interests and the preferential retainment of ties with the former colonial power" (GH 375). Shinza wants to contain neocolonialism, the country's form of independence, by transferring productive power into the hands of the workers. He wants to discontinue the country's flirtation with the West, a means by which President Mweta is replicating classical colonial practices: "the old man had given away mineral rights of the territory to the whitemen for the price of a carriage and pair like the Great white Queen's and a promise of two hundred pounds a year" (GH 40).

Significantly, Bray puts so much positive store in the liberating energies of love and forgiveness that his overriding desire is to serve as a channel for unity and reconciliation. He will allow nothing to stop his efforts to help Mweta and Shinza to work through their bitter ideological disputes. By accepting the invitation to join President Mweta's government, Bray has already demonstrated his

willingness to bury the hatchet, and the ability to cure himself of the bitterness resulting from the humiliation he personally suffered when he was deported ten years earlier by the colonial regime opposed to his liberal affiliations. His change of heart is also evidenced by the altered parameters he established to guide his relationship with his former house help, Kalimo. Though Kalimo finds out to his chagrin that he cannot reclaim his post exactly as he knew it, Bray will no longer accept a return to the status quo, where the lines between boss and servant, master and slave were clearly delineated. Bray wants to take things one step further by extending an arm of love on a national scale: "If Mweta would see it. A perfect opening to take Shinza back into the fold without loss of face. Shinza would have taken the step out of 'retirement' himself, he would have the one key position outside of government; Mweta could simply put out his hand without patronage and without humbling himself in the least, and take him in. And the solution to the labour troubles, and the end of the split factions in the union, at the same time. He would have a strong government all right" (GH 323).

In searching for a viable solution to the problem of national unity, Bray's formula appears as though it is the result of an all-too theoretical and nonpragmatic liberal imagination that has naively equated ideological differences with personality clashes. This explains why his activist friend Dando admonishes him to wake "out of slumber" and move over to Shinza's corner. Nevertheless, though Bray's figure recalls Kurtz's in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Edward Bray is no idle adventurer searching for a place of escape in the tropics.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Kurtz, Bray does not suffer the paradox of the romantic ego that uses tropical Africa as a healing balm for his bored imagination. Bray can successfully combine some level of political commitment with his pursuit of romance with a mistress, Rebecca Gordon, whereas Kurtz, when placed in a similar circumstance, merely shies away from his responsibilities. Where Kurtz cuts the figure of a detached, isolated, and literally aloof and egomaniacal coaster, a bastion of authority who refuses to grant access to the common folk over whom he rules, Bray responds with warmth to both the elite and ordinary people alike, showing that he genuinely cherishes the friendship he establishes with Africans.

Bray's defiance of Mweta's orders to raise support (i.e., funds and arms) overseas does not prove absence of political commitment on his part. By rejecting the order, he merely remains true to his mission of not wanting to engage in any form of confrontation: "'I'll be back later if I can dig up a car. If I'm not here, say eleven, don't count on it'" (GH 430). To emphasize his dedication to peace and unity, Bray takes longer than necessary to get hold of a car, precisely so that he can delay the action as armed confrontation seems to him no longer an appropriate means of conflict resolution befitting of civilized behavior. Ironically, he him-

---

<sup>6</sup> Kurtz, the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, has become over time the representative image of the rapacious and quixotic white colonial officer among hapless Africans. See Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

self falls victim to the very violence he wishes to avoid. By the time he gets the car, it is too late to get away; the government's troops surge forward to subdue the uprising, crushing Shinza's radical opposition forces and killing Bray in the fracas, which shores up the status quo more securely than ever before. The local newspaper, nicknamed "Time Magazine," summarizes the unfolding happenings as follows: "This has been the year of the coup in Africa.... Goodlooking good boy of the Western nations, Adamson Mweta (40) is the latest of the continent's moderate leaders to find himself hanging on to the presidential seat-belt while riots rock his country. His prisons are full but even then he can't be sure, who, among those at large, Left or Right, is friend or foe" (GH 488). Bray's equivocations show that he is portrayed in terms that set him in opposition to some of the saintly figures that have been endlessly paraded in contemporary African fiction, such as the supermen in the novels of Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah,<sup>7</sup> individuals who are painted as exceptional persons who turn up in the nick of time to turn the ugly tide of events in favor of their communities.

Despite having some larger-than-life qualities, an inexplicable credulousness simultaneously attaches itself to Bray's down-to-earth and easygoing personality. Because he possesses warmth of character, perceptiveness, knowledge, and the ability to diagnose the critical problems facing the new country, Bray is appropriately the main vehicle through which the wisdom of the developmental option elected by the government is elaborated. Because Gordimer essentially configures Bray as an ordinary person, she does not over-idealize his response to the challenging situations with which he is faced. Indeed, Bray's desire to act on the compassion he feels for other human beings, for instance, is not granted immunity either to tragic disappointment or to the unfavorable circumstances under which he works.

*A Guest of Honour* demonstrates clearly enough that, on both the public and the private fronts, Bray is indeed an average guy whose weaknesses are much bigger than they seem at first. He has moments of debilitating self-doubt, ambivalence, and even bewilderment about his qualifications for political engagement, moments of stress that cause him to constantly muse to himself: "A white man in Africa doesn't know what to see himself as, but mentor. He looks in the mirror, and there is a fatal fascination of the old reflection.... If I don't like what Mweta does, I'd better get out and go to Wiltshire" (GH 130). Even in death, an aura of mystery continues to hang over Evelyn Bray: "No one could say for certain whether, when Bray was killed on the way to the capital, he was going to Mweta or to buy arms for Shinza. To some, as his friend Dando had predicted, he was a martyr to savages, to others one of those madmen ... who had got what he deserved ... a man who had passed over from scepticism and resignation of em-

---

<sup>7</sup> I refer specifically to characters such as Isanusi in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), and to Densu and the other healers in *The Healers* (Nairobi: East African Publishing, 1978).

pirical liberalism to become one of those who are so haunted by the stupidities and evils in human affairs that they are prepared to accept apocalyptic solutions, wade through blood if need be, to bring real change" (GH 503).

Though he is a failed lobbyist who cannot even save himself, Bray's work can truly be described as a job performed in devoted service on behalf of many who for too long endured bondage, for the resolute optimism with which he has carried it out. The duty of encouraging novel initiatives and contingencies intended to unite bitterly divided groups in order to help the young country to overcome its underdevelopment is agonizing, but Bray performs it with a stubbornness that is unwilling to make any concessions. Only a resilient spirit, such as the one Bray displays, can lift someone like him above the prevailing mood of "skepticism and resignation" that presumes a subject people to be too passive to accept an infusion of life-changing ideas and transform him into a fighter whose confidence in his mission is so secure that he is prepared to offer himself as a living sacrifice for the cause. Bray's work becomes exemplary here, offering the appropriate means through which readers can gain an appreciation of the marked difference between Gordimer's attitude and that of other noted white expatriate novelists who wrote about white men in the African mission. Such is the case with the British author Graham Greene, who openly ridiculed the idea of the civilizing mission, the notion that it is possible by adventuring abroad to extend the gifts of enlightenment to Africans.

Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948),<sup>8</sup> a classic novel about the role of white benevolence in Africa, for example, is filled with pessimism. Its protagonist, the Englishman Mr. Scobie, finds himself in a circumstance where the existing manual of conduct by which colonial officials are to define their relationship with the natives stresses exclusion and prohibits any form of fairness, or accountability, or compassion. Scobie expresses a desire to work according to the dictates of a countervailing inner ethic of compassion. But in the end, Greene has him die by suicide following the awareness of his own inability to discharge the social responsibility he has assumed: alleviation of the suffering of the denizens over whom he presides as the top colonial police officer. Tending to provoke more ridicule than sympathy for the viability of liberalism, however, Scobie's suicide gives rise to commentary. Scobie's main mistake is that he had "forgotten that no one can fully understand another, or arrange another's happiness." Greene argues that if whites are to survive in the tropics, individualistic pursuit of self-interest should be their favored manner of living. In contrast to such a disposition, Gordimer portrays Bray's compassion and self-sacrificial giving, the willingness to do something to help others improve their lives, as the shining qualities of Bray's life. Gordimer depicts Bray as the exact opposite of racist bigots such as the Fowler sisters, colonialist settlers who "hadn't wanted to sit in their drawing-room with Africans" (GH 214).

---

<sup>8</sup> Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

In what is perhaps the best reformulation of an idea Olive Schreiner first put forward when she stated that the artist must paint what lies before him, Dennis Brutus has written that “an artist, a writer, is a man who lives in a particular society and takes his images and ideas from that society. He must write about what he sees around him and he must write truthfully about it, or he must come to terms with what is ugly in it and pretend that it is not there or that it is not bad.”<sup>9</sup> It can truly be asserted that in *A Guest of Honour* Nadine Gordimer has acquitted herself of this worthy role. Bray’s ambiguity reflects Gordimer’s search for a mode of analysis that could represent the reality of daily life at a particular time in southern Africa in all of its contradictory complexity. She writes in precise and highly evocative diction, and her deep understanding of human character and exploratory nature makes for a suspenseful novelistic presentation. Adding to her stature as a visionary writer is her ability to will a nonexistent hope—one that did not appear even grimly on the horizon at the time—into being without any shred of negativity or sentimentality.

And so, if it is true that the entire South African culture is now inexorably headed for renewal, then it is safe to expect a resurgence of critical interest around *A Guest of Honour* as a vital part of that turnaround of events.<sup>10</sup> In his article “‘Renaissance’ and South African Writing,” Lekan Oyegoke writes enthusiastically about the imminent ascendancy of better days that he sees lying ahead. But he predicts that the “renaissance will not come about as dramatically as the first multiracial general election; it will be slower but steadier as old destructive prejudices and passions melt away and get replaced with more humane and civilized attitudes which recognize and respect the right of all human beings to life, dignity and decent treatment.”<sup>11</sup> One could not agree more.

---

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Brutus, “Protest Against Apartheid,” *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, ed. Cosmo Pieterse and Donald Munro (London: Heinemann, 1978) 93–100.

<sup>10</sup> Lekan Oyegoke, “‘Renaissance’ and South African Writing,” *African Literature Today* 23 (2003) 110, *South and Southern African Literature*, ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones and Marjorie Jones. See also the special issue of *Review of International English Literature* 27.1 (1996), devoted to South African literature.

<sup>11</sup> Oyegoke 8.