

# *Othering the Self:* *Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines*

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**I**N *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir theorizes about the conflicts of girlhood, in which the young girl, torn between her desire to be an active subject and the rewards of being a passive object, is offered powerful "inducements to complicity" ("The Formative Years: The Young Girl"). Beauvoir contrasts the roles offered to girls and to blacks: because of their relatively disadvantaged status vis-a-vis white males, both groups have incentives to question and rebel, to set themselves against the established order. But white girls, unlike blacks, are offered a privileged place within the hierarchy which tempts them to collude in their own exploitation.

Beauvoir's suggestions highlight the conflict between sex and race for the white colonial woman, for whom incentives to complicity are strong indeed. As a white woman she is placed on the pedestal of innocence and purity; she is a vessel for the virtues of "white civilization" in the "heart of darkness." She is taught to hate and fear the black man — to whom, nonetheless, she has a secret, guilty attraction which blossoms in distorted, often violent forms. (Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* is the classic on this subject.)

The colonial woman is pulled in one direction by her sex, another by her colour. This conflict of identity and allegiance is exemplified in Nadine Gordimer's portrayal of the white African woman who is intellectually and emotionally alienated from white colonial society and at the same time physically barred from black Africa. Through her rebellion against the patriarchal order as she struggles to define herself in a hostile environment, the heroine uncovers the connections between patriarchy and racism under colonialism. She begins to identify with the black Africans in their

oppression and their struggle for autonomy, but she cannot shed her inheritance of privilege and guilt. Ultimately she is shut out from the vibrant life of black people, rich — as it seems to her — with pain and possibility.

Nadine Gordimer's great subject is the young woman who ventures forth from the white enclave, who breaks out of the sick relationship between white mistress and black servant, and identifies her own quest for an independent identity with the blacks' cultural, political and, finally, military quest for freedom. For her heroines, "blackness" is linked to sex, sensuality and imagination, to water and blood, and the politics of liberation. The Gordimer heroine's embrace of blackness leads her to become a revolutionary in increasingly concrete terms. However, as the heroine's at first tentative, mostly imaginative participation in the black revolution becomes more active, more realistic, she is caught in the crux between sex and race. As a woman she identifies with the black liberation struggle, but as a white she bears a legacy of privilege which her good intentions cannot cancel out.

Gordimer's public comments on feminism reflect this problematic. She has said several times that the women's liberation movement is irrelevant in South Africa, where political freedom for black men and women must take precedence over subtle improvements in the already over-privileged position of white bourgeois women.<sup>1</sup> Unarguable as Gordimer's view is, it is an oversimplification of the South African situation, which she treats with much more complexity in her fiction.

Her heroines draw the strength to think and act independently from their very position of weakness, of irrelevance in the power structure. Gordimer's white South African women are in a sense outside the brutal pact between the male colonizer and the male colonized. But Gordimer refuses to let the white heroine off the hook as a fellow victim; she insists not on woman's passivity, but on her shared responsibility, her collusion in racism. The white woman is not allowed to claim innocence; nevertheless, she is increasingly prevented by the social and political conditions of apartheid from *acting* upon her responsibility. Furthermore, she is increasingly cut off from blackness, both by government decree and the rising hostility of her black brothers and sisters.

In Gordimer's fiction, then, the ambiguous, self-divided figure of the white girl or woman is the site of the hesitant, fraught rapprochement of white and black. She is the site of connection, while she is made to realize the impossibility of connection. As Gordimer has said, "there's still that area of *conflict* which is from an artistic point of view fruitful" ("A Story for this Place and Time" 106; emphasis added). Her female characters are both internal battlegrounds in which the conflicts of South African society are played out, and meeting places where illicit relationships between the races develop. "I am the place where something has occurred," is Rosa Burger's epigraph.<sup>2</sup>

Gordimer, the most rooted of writers, who maintains that, "To go into exile is to lose your place in the world" (Interview, *New York Times*), is "exiled" from the black majority in her country, who are, as Stephen Clingman claims, her "virtual public."<sup>3</sup> She is published and read mostly abroad, far from the people she writes of and, indirectly, to. Her fiction is acutely aware of its alienation. Her imagination stretches to delineate as fully as possible the arenas of conflict where white faces black: from the ironies of the master-servant bond to clandestine sex, underground politics, dreams and fantasy.

Thus the image of the black body buried in the white-ruled land — and in the white unconscious — is so powerful a pattern in Gordimer's work. Throughout her fiction she has pursued the metaphor of white South Africa as a graveyard, connecting the imagery of dryness and sterility prevalent in white South African fiction with decadence and death. Black South Africa, oppressed and repressed, is the buried body that threatens, or promises, to rise up — to inundate and destroy, or to revive and fertilize — the country of the whites.

For the white heroine, whose psyche is the site of this tumult and ferment, the metaphor of the buried black body is both self and other. In Gayatri Spivak's formulation, the white subject cannot "self" the other; she can neither see the colonized other as a free subject nor successfully identify with him or her. The black other can neither be assimilated nor granted full personhood by the white subject. This is true for the relatively developed, realistic character of Marisa Kgosana in *Burger's Daughter* as

well as for the dead man who is more symbol than character in *The Conservationist*, in which novel Gordimer compares colonial and male domination through the figure of a sexually and economically powerful white male, Mehring, in whose increasingly deranged mind Black, Woman, Death and Land form a threatened and finally threatening link.

In Gordimer's fiction, the black other cannot be "selfed" by the white subject any more than the female other can be "selfed" by the male subject. However, the white self can be "othered," blackness found, finally, within — where of course the heart of darkness has always been. In *The Conservationist* Mehring, like Kurtz, is shattered by finding his enemy, the black and implicitly female other, within. In contrast, the white colonial female character can "other" her self less destructively, more creatively and empathetically, because of her identification — through her femaleness — with blackness. Gayatri Spivak explores this process in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which Antoinette Cosway splits into her dark, angry other, Bertha Mason. Spivak describes Bertha as a version of Antoinette's black self. Thus, "Rhys makes Antoinette see her *self* as her other, Brontë's Bertha" (269).

It is surely significant that the "madwoman in the attic" who, as Gilbert and Gubar have shown, is such a central figure in the women's literary tradition, is a white colonial. In Charlotte Brontë and Jean Rhys, in Olive Schreiner and Doris Lessing, and above all in Nadine Gordimer, the discovery of the other, the venture into blackness, is fertilizing, liberating and self-actualizing. For Schreiner, Lessing and Gordimer, the characteristic inward movement of the female *Bildungsroman* is linked to a corresponding outward movement from the claustrophobic white enclave into the exhilarating larger world of black Africa.

In the key early story, "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" the attack of the black thief and the irrational struggle of the white woman to hold onto her belongings is described as an implicitly sexual encounter — the only form of love available to this couple under apartheid. In their guilty connection the roles of victim and attacker are blurred; the well-clad woman is so ashamed of having grappled fiercely with the ragged man that she cannot betray him to the police.

In Gordimer's first novel, *The Lying Days*, Helen Shaw tries to "self" her black other Mary Seswayo (whom, appropriately, she meets in a mirror), but is blocked by a wall of difference and indifference. The optimistic ending of *The Lying Days* is contrived: Helen's phantasmagorical rediscovery of sea, sex and blackness is a false resolution of the issues Gordimer raises for her heroine, whose central discovery is of defamiliarization, of seeing herself as a white stranger or other in black South Africa (as Mary Seswayo is a black other in white South Africa).

The novel's resonant metaphor is of white South Africa as "a picnic in a beautiful graveyard where the people are buried alive under your feet" (358). White South Africa is a false paradise built on the suffering and destruction of the others, a paradise of death whose horrors the Gordimer heroine uncovers as she digs beneath the lying surface of her country.

Helen fails in her quest to resolve her psychic apartheid, to integrate the buried black aspect of herself which is linked to the "real flow of life" underneath the surface of the white mine compound and the white city. Helen's private, internal movement toward integration is set against the public, external hardening of segregation. Just as her inner barriers start to come down, the public barriers go up in the form of the Afrikaner Nationalist government's consolidation of apartheid. By the end of the novel she is shut off, divided from the buried black part of herself.

The theme of the white heroine's fearful foray into black territory is taken further in each of Gordimer's subsequent novels and stories. In "The Smell of Death and Flowers" the young heroine joins a protest march to a black location. No longer isolated behind glass, as was Helen in a similar situation, she feels her terror warm to fellow feeling as she makes timid eye contact with another race. At the end of *Occasion for Loving*, Jessie Stilwell, who has learned to see herself as an other, starts to become one by removing herself from the protection of white society. A similar change of heart, or othering of self, takes place in *The Late Bourgeois World*. In *The Conservationist* the buried body rises amid imagery of resurrection and revolution: "But violence has flowered after seven years' drought, violence as fecundity, weathering as humus, rising as sap" (243).

In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer's most formally sophisticated fiction up to that point, she employs the interior monologue, which limited point of view is most appropriate to the experience of Africa as inside the white mind. She continues this technique in *Burger's Daughter*, in which Rosa speaks essentially to herself, speakers and listeners in her conversations being dead or unreachable. Judie Newman germanely describes Rosa as the buried body whom we and she unbury through the text. Rosa herself is the other in the mirror when she says, "I saw — see — that profile in a hand-held mirror directed towards another mirror . . ." (14) and "*When they saw me outside the prison, what did they see?*" (13). In the novel's last section Rosa is withdrawn from us as Gordimer focuses on the Soweto uprising of 1976, in which context, she seems to say, the excavation of Rosa's personality becomes irrelevant. Rosa quietly, inevitably, joins the ghosts of her parents in prison as the Soweto children take the Future into their own "hands not foreseen" by the white communists.

In *July's People*, Gordimer tests her white heroine in the aftermath of the revolution. The novel's ambiguous ending, "She runs," is more artistically truthful than the ending of *The Lying Days* which it echoes: "I'm not running away," Helen claims insincerely, en route to Europe. At the end of *July's People* Maureen Smales is described as a cornered animal panicked by her new found freedom from the white-defined role as mistress of a comfortable suburban household. When she is forced to redefine her relationship with her former servant July, now her family's protector, she is offered the opportunity to transform herself into a fellow African. But she cannot. Maureen and Helen, the good middle-class South African daughters and wives, who observe the liberal decencies in their relationships with their black inferiors, clearly are dead-end heroines for Gordimer.

In Hillela Kgomani she introduces an altogether new type: the "sport of nature," who is not subject to the social ties, the rules of behaviour, or finally, the failure of imagination, which bind and limit Maureen and Helen. As Gordimer has explained, the character of Hillela in an attempt to imagine a white South African woman who can survive, even flourish, in revolutionary conditions (Interview, *New York Times Book Review*). Not

completely successful as a realistic character, Hillela is a visionary, symbolic figure through whom Gordimer tries to fill the "inter-regnum" between present and future. *A Sport of Nature*, with its Utopian elements, carries Gordimer further than she has yet gone in depicting a positive future: a happy ending for her heroine as well as for the South African liberation struggle. Hillela triumphs because she does not belong, because she does not conform, because she is a selfish, amoral law unto herself. Sexual freedom is her road to revolution. Beginning with her friendship with a "coloured" boy, which alienates her from the white community, she is radicalized by her love for the fictional ANC leader Whaila Kgomani. She avenges Whaila's death by her marriage to a powerful West African general and statesman, with whom, finally, she watches the flag of Azania unfurl over "Whaila's country."

It is, then, Hillela's strangeness, her otherness in white South Africa, which enables her to manipulate the transition to the Future, which even for Rosa Burger is unattainable: half joke, half wistful dream. Hillela as other: a natural rebel and nonconformist who is immune to society's "inducements to complicity," fearlessly embraces blackness. For her alone among Gordimer heroines, blackness is not alien, but rather her native element. But Hillela, like the buried body in *The Conservationist*, is a mythic rather than realistic character; she is a symptom of her creator's desperate hope rather than a believable personality. She is evidence of Gordimer's frustration, not so much with the limits of the realist genre, as with the political stalemate for whites in South Africa. Gordimer claims that, "somebody like Hillela can sometimes see in an instinctive way that . . . the political ways — just don't work, and can find her own way" (Interview, *New York Times Book Review*).

While not an autobiographical character, Hillela, like Gordimer's other heroines, is a vehicle for personal statement. Through Rosa she affirms her own commitment to remaining in South Africa as witness and activist. Through Maureen she rejects the good liberal daughter in herself, this message being reinforced by the parallels between Maureen and the more nakedly autobiographical Helen. Through Hillela she signals her dissociation

from what she sees as the dead values of the past, imaginatively reinventing a new personality to fit a new country.

Gordimer's idealization of Hillela stems from her own apparent need to free her central character from the white colonial dilemmas that trapped her previous heroines between two worlds: alienated from white society and unable to participate fully in black society. Helen, Jessie, Rosa and Maureen progressively leave the ambiguous shelter of the white community for an ambiguous identification with black liberation. As fellow victims of white male authority, as questioning, intellectual women, as seekers of authentic experience, their empathetic claims to "blackness" do not convince. Rosa chooses to come home to prison because only within that enchanted circle can she overcome her whiteness, her alienation, her otherness. Outside, apartheid laws, distrust, resentment, fear and confusion separate her from her black comrades. Inside, she and Marisa are sisters; "Baasie" is again her brother. But going to jail is a paradoxical form of liberation, as the novel's refrain, an ironic dialogue between prison and freedom, makes us aware. In *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer unconvincingly allows Hillela a short cut to blackness. Relying on instinct, attraction, pluck and luck, she bypasses history and politics to emerge triumphant in her African robes and headdress at the birth of the new nation.

Helen discovers the other within herself; the narrator of "Is There Nowhere Else . . . ?" struggles with the other; Mehring is destroyed by the other; Jessie begins to become her other; Maureen runs from her other; Rosa others her self by joining her sisters in prison; Hillela is an other by nature — or rather by the grace of her author.

The theme of the black other as the white self's double resonates through white colonial fiction from Conrad to Coetzee. The white man's Africa is a mirror of the dark heart of his culture and psyche. While the interplay between the processes of dichotomization and identification is complex and problematic in the male writers, it approaches the paradoxical in white female writers. The imaginary opposition (Fanon's, and JanMohamed's, "manichean allegory") that the male colonist draws between white and black is modelled upon the primary opposition between



male and female. In the male mind, male and female are dichotomized as self/other, subject/object, conscious/unconscious, light/dark, rational/irrational, culture/nature, and good/evil. As woman the colonial heroine is other, object, unconsciousness, while as white she is self, subject, consciousness. The fiction of white African women writers from Schreiner to Gordimer dramatizes this scenario of the urge to rebel versus "inducements to complicity." The white African heroine is victimized by her sex but privileged by her skin colour; her role as victim, rebel, or even revolutionary only obscures her collusion in the power structure by virtue of her skin in a society in which "race" is the determining factor.

For Nadine Gordimer, the heroine's attempt to empathize with the black other as her fellow in oppression leads her to discover, confront and set free the other within her self. Gordimer's fiction tests the limits of this process in an increasingly polarized, brutalized South Africa, whose very volatility, nonetheless, holds the promise of liberation for whites as well as blacks, from psychic as well as political apartheid.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Among Gordimer's most complete and pertinent recent statements on feminism are her remarks in "The Prison-house of Colonialism."
- <sup>2</sup> Similarly, Doris Lessing describes Martha Quest (*Landlocked*) as "the essence of violence," and J. M. Coetzee has Magda describe herself as "the bridge between" (*In the Heart of the Country*).
- <sup>3</sup> Clingman remarks further that, "there is a whole domain of South African life which objectively speaking belongs to the 'unconscious' of her fiction — that repressed black world of which . . . Gordimer's fiction cannot be directly aware" (168).

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