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The Search for a Role for White Women in a Liberated South Africa: A Thematic Approach to the Novels of Nadine Gordimer.

Abstract

The impetus for this paper, and also its centre of concern is the puzzlement, spilling over into plain irritation with which many critics received *A Sport of Nature*.¹ The irritation centred around the portrayal of the main character, the young girl Hillela. She seems to drift aimlessly through the 396 pages, surviving mainly by attaching herself to a series of men, often, it seems, simply because they come in handy. Feminists were outraged. Critics were looking for a serious discussion about options in the deteriorating political climate in South Africa. (This is what one had come to expect from Gordimer who has increasingly taken on the mantle of white radicalism). Radicals and socialists were outraged. As I count myself among the feminists and socialists, I took this outrage seriously, and this paper is really a debate with myself about this perceived failure or defection in Gordimer's authorship, which up till then I had admired. I found -at least a possible- answer by positioning the novel *A Sport of Nature* in the authorship and seeing it as an inevitable outcome of the thematic positions Gordimer has taken up in her previous novels, even though this seems paradoxical in view of her increasing radicalism.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

The Search for a Role for White Women in a Liberated South Africa: A Thematic Approach to the Novels of Nadine Gordimer.

The impetus for this paper, and also its centre of concern is the puzzle, spilling over into plain irritation with which many critics received *A Sport of Nature*.¹ The irritation centred around the portrayal of the main character, the young girl Hillela. She seems to drift aimlessly through the 396 pages, surviving mainly by attaching herself to a series of men, often, it seems, simply because they come in handy. Feminists were outraged. Critics were looking for a serious discussion about options in the deteriorating political climate in South Africa. (This is what one had come to expect from Gordimer who has increasingly taken on the mantle of white radicalism). Radicals and socialists were outraged. As I count myself among the feminists and socialists, I took this outrage seriously, and this paper is really a debate with myself about this perceived failure or defecation in Gordimer's authorship, which up till then I had admired. I found – at least a possible – answer by positioning the novel *A Sport of Nature* in the authorship and seeing it as an inevitable outcome of the thematic positions Gordimer has taken up in her previous novels, even though this seems paradoxical in view of her increasing radicalism.

Nadine Gordimer's fiction covers the period from the late '40s to the early '90s, and during this period she has acted as chronicler of events and their effects on the people who were caught up in them; she has searched ruthlessly for a viable moral standpoint for whites in South Africa, and she has herself changed, forced by the burden of a fast changing social reality. Finally, she has attempted to visualize possible alternatives to white roles, both in present, oppressed South Africa and in a future liberated South Africa. In this way she not only reflects, but influences the choices open for whites who are searching for a standpoint in a country they consider theirs, but with whose ruling ideology they do not agree.

Nobody writes in a vacuum, and Gordimer's fiction takes its starting point from the tradition which was established when she started to write in the late 40s, the liberal humanist tradition, imported from England.

The basic tenants of the liberal world view, human understanding, Christian love, the power of reason, change through constitutional means, evolution rather than revolution, abhorrence of violence and an emphasis on the importance of the individual rather than the group have fared rather badly in South Africa. Turning the other cheek or 'the solution of love' are ineffective means of change in the climate of violence prevailing there. Politically speaking the liberal position has occupied a space between black and Afrikaaner nationalism, and liberals have tended to act as spokesmen for blacks, playing the role of benevolent paternalists, advocating patience and gradualism on the one hand, and on the other trying to ameliorate the harsh conditions through charity. The combination of a strong sense of moral responsibility with powerlessness has produced in the liberal psyche intense feelings of guilt.

The fictional vehicle of this view is the realist novel; South African writers have used this form to express their moral outrage in terms of criticism of the system of apartheid and their guilt feelings in terms of a theme of introspection. The emphasis on the individual gives rise to *Bildungsromane* and novels which offer individual solutions to social problems, (e.g. Alan Paton's *Cry The Beloved Country*). To this last category also belongs the theme of miscegenation or a black and white love relationship. Finally, the feelings of estrangement and powerlessness give rise to a discussion of exile or return to England, and this is often the solution, both in fiction and in the lives of South African authors.

Gordimer writes directly both into and against this established literary tradition. Her first novel *The Lying Days* (1953) is a *Bildungsroman*. Its main character, Helen, struggles to disassociate herself from her narrow white middle class background and tries unsuccessfully to connect across the colour bar, only to end up still suffering from 'slow corrosive guilt'. The following novel, *A World of Strangers* (1958) briefly suggests that hope can be found in a black white friendship, but already by her third novel *Occasion for Loving* (1963) events in South Africa, like the Sharpeville Massacre and the banning of the ANC and the PAC, put an end to any optimism and set the characteristic tone for the rest of the authorship, which I would define as an argument against current standpoints or views, either in the public debate, in the literature of the time, or in her own previous novels. In this way she resembles Ngugi wa Thiong'o who also charts flawed or failed solutions to the problems of his country.

This mode of writing could be defined thematically as a kind of fictional revolutionary handbook, outlining things to avoid, or to borrow a chapter heading from Fanon 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness'.² *Occasion for Loving* argues that a black and white love affair does not solve the problems of Apartheid, and it exposes the helplessness of the liberal stance. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) Gordimer discusses a different sort of failure, namely the failure of the white armed guerrilla campaign which ended in ignomy in the late 60s, and, contrary to other commentators, she

has a grudging respect for this group which after all had the courage to try, even though it failed. In *The Conservationist* (1974) liberal problems are not the centre of concern; here, Gordimer is at pains to point out how close the ruling conservative ideology is to certifiable madness. After having exposed the ruling position and rejected the liberal alternative the choice is narrowed down. The political situation deteriorates throughout the period, and with the increased repression Gordimer finds that under the watchful eyes of the secret police 'we prance back and forth ever closer to the fine line between being concerned citizens and social revolutionaries'.³ In *Burgher's Daughter* (1979) Gordimer sets out to investigate the ramifications of living as a revolutionary, untainted by liberal compromise and hypocrisy and aware of the costs of this honesty. *Burgher's Daughter* was briefly banned; one of the reasons given for this was that it was 'an outspoken furthering of communism'.⁴ This 'furthering' was mainly carried out by the Burgher of the title who had dedicated his life to the struggle. To rub salt into the wound the character is closely based on on Bram Fisher, a well respected, Afrikaans lawyer whose 'defection' to communism left a particularly sore bruise on the Afrikaaner psyche.

Gordimer's obvious admiration for Burgher's uncompromising, revolutionary stand provides a fixed point in the narrative. It forms the moral backbone of the book, a parameter of moral integrity, against which every South African woman with aspirations to honesty can measure herself. They all become, in a sense, Burgher's daughters. This inheritance poses important questions: What kind of options does it offer you? Do you want it, and if you do, how will it affect your life?

Brought up in an intensely political atmosphere with her parents in and out of jail Rosa feels trapped. She sees her choices as being between a life of private gratification versus one of public commitment and responsibility. The terms of this opposition are stated in a discussion Rosa has with her lover about their childhoods. He wanted to fuck his mother and kill himself for it, and he reduced life to two constants, sex and death, whilst she remembered that 'we belonged to other people' and that to her parents loneliness meant 'to live without social responsibility'.⁵ In the novel the debate develops into an internal tug-of-war between the cerebral values of duty, responsibility and inevitable suffering on the one hand, and on the other, the simple instinctual and natural desires of the body, like sex or an instinct to turn from suffering. 'Even animals have the instinct to turn from suffering. The sense to run away' (p. 73). Slowly, a resentment builds up in Rosa against being defined as her father's daughter, she grows 'sick of the maimed, the endangered, the fugitive, the stoic; sick of courts, sick of prisons (p. 70). She wants something which Gordimer presents as very ordinary, very reasonable; 'I want to know somewhere else' (p. 187). On the strength of this desire she goes to the South of France, which to the Anglo-Saxon imagination seems to embody the essence of luxury and decadence, and here she has it all: a love affair and

a circle of friends who drink wine, discuss food and collect art. She enjoys it, living naturally through the senses, but she is pulled back by the ties of the community she has left behind. She comes to fear the futility of life without a moral purpose, and she comes to the realisation that even their highly politicised life had room for individualism and the life of the body. With this compromise between the public/political and the private Rosa returns to South Africa and continues the struggle, and predictably, she ends up in prison.

Up to this point Gordimer has outlined a possible scenario of an opposition between political commitment and private fulfilment, and has in turn rejected it. There is, however, a hitch in the neatness of this circular pattern of commitment, flight from it and return to it. We are not told how Rosa arrived at her decision to return home, in fact, we are deliberately kept in the dark. 'I solved nothing but was no longer badgered' she says after a traumatic conversation with a former black step-brother. 'There's no explanation for how this comes about. Silence' (p. 331). Although the tone of the prose indicates that Rosa's decision has the author's approval, Gordimer seems unwilling to argue or reason for it, and this is uncharacteristic of the authorship, which up to then has been a debate in fictional terms between various options. We are left with a problematized solution, arrived at in the dark, and this is a feature, which becomes even more prominent in *A Sport of Nature*.

However, in the following novel, *July's People* (1981) Gordimer does not try out yet another possible scenario for survival. Instead, she pauses, or so it seems to me, and takes a close look at the most painful aspects of this new world order which she desires, but which obviously, she also fears. Fleeing from civil war in the city, a white family is given refuge in their servant's village, and the book outlines an inverted Robinson Crusoe/Friday relationship in which the white woman fails to come to terms with the changed power structure despite her initial good intentions. I can only interpret the ending as her running away from her painful confrontations with July and from the necessity of making major psychological adjustments to the changed situation. She does, of course, have nowhere to run to – Gordimer has always excluded exile from her 'honourable' solutions – and so in her next novel, *A Sport of Nature*⁶ Gordimer makes her, by now fairly embattled protagonist, (of many names) return once more to the battle and to yet another scenario for survival.

Obviously, with each book, and each rejection of choices, the possibilities are narrowed down. In *A Sport of Nature* Gordimer takes stock of her authorship. The main character, Hillela is carefully surrounded by characters who represent all the attitudes or ideologies which Gordimer has outlined, and in the main rejected, throughout her authorship. Her aunt Olga is the rich, conservative South African who tries to exclude politics from her world, her other aunt, Pauline is yet another woman character who attempts protest within the liberal mode and is destroyed by it. Her

lawyer uncle Joe provides legal aid for dissidents, but stops short of what Pauline calls 'the unimaginable darkness of the Underground' (p. 82). Rosa Burgher appears in person, apparently out of jail and working for 'the unimaginable darkness.' Hillela's cousin, Sasha quarrels with his mother Pauline – a quarrel which resembles Gordimer's with liberalism – and follows in Rosa's footsteps, which also leads him into prison. Her mother, as far as is known, has lived the private life of the body, disappearing in search of a Portuguese fado singer with whom she was in love. This outlines the positions already taken in the authorship and mostly rejected. The book becomes an obstacle race between rejected positions or an exercise in the logics of exclusion.

Hillela is almost overdetermined as a new departure in the authorship; the novel opens with her travelling from one unknown place to another, she changes her name in the first sentence of the novel, she has an unknown mother who may or may not be dead, and her known, but absent travelling salesman father may in fact not be her father. We can have no expectations of her, she, or Gordimer, is free to invent new modes of being in an old and tied situation.

To steer a course between the rejected positions Gordimer sets up what you might call sexual drift as a principle. Despite her political upbringing Hillela reacts instinctively and excessively in terms of private, sexual priorities. She gets thrown out of school for going out with a coloured boy; as a teenager, she makes money by dancing gogo in a shop window, and finally, she transgresses a real taboo, the incest taboo, when she seduces her cousin, Sasha, with whom she has grown up as a sibling. The success of her rebellion can be measured by the comments made about her. 'A little tart, like her mother', as her aunt Olga's husband rudely reminds her (p. 114). 'She's a-moral' says her politically active, liberal aunt Pauline (p. 56), whilst her cousin Sasha stays secretly in love with her for the rest of his life, as the warm and gratifying possibility which is mostly excluded from the life he chooses. Up to the point when Hillela leaves South Africa, having 'attached herself to some man' (p. 145) the novel centres around an opposition between unexplained, but amiable sexual drift on the one hand, and objections to this from various ideological standpoints (Victorian moral outrage, or committed liberalism). It seems to be a battle between drift and principle.

At this point in the narrative Hillela disappears from view and moves beyond the ken of her South African background. The point of view changes, and the story is taken up by an exasperated biographer, trying to piece the life together for some kind of publication. As Hillela moves through Africa, America and Eastern Europe she frequently disappears from view, only to re-surface, sometimes inexplicably in a new place and situation. This technique seems to be an elaboration of the silence which took the place of an explanation of Rosa Burgher's reason for returning to South Africa. It makes environmental, psychological and ideological

explanations of patterns of behaviour impossible or at least patchy. It exonerates Gordimer from presenting the closely reasoned psychological developments which we find in her earlier novels and which are part of the genre of the realist novel.

Hillela drifts through Africa, a born survivor, who always gets herself into a comfortable situation, mainly through her sexual attractiveness. In terms of ideology, she is deliberately ambiguous or indifferent. The man she follows out of South Africa is supposedly working against the regime, but is suspected of being a spy for it. In the course of her meanderings she falls in love with an ANC official, with whom she has a daughter, and when he is murdered by South African army gunmen she finds herself 'an honourable black' as a victim of the regime's brutality, a position which Gordimer had previously seen as exclusively for blacks. 'For a long time to come', she writes, 'any white South African must expect to find any black man, from any African territory, considered by the black South African as more of a brother than the white South African himself ... it is a nationalism of the heart that has been brought about by suffering. There is no share in it we can hope to have.'⁷ Hillela has it, caused by shared suffering, but for the shared suffering to earn a person a place in this brotherhood, the suffering has to be either enforced or chosen, but certainly not just drifted into.

The construction of Hillela runs into a problem here. However much Gordimer tries to make her character rely on instincts and shed the ideals of duty and responsibility and the ideological approach to commitment in the struggle, she cannot leave out the commitment itself. So when Hillela witnesses her husband's violent death, a sense of wider commitment is born in her, obviously as a result of her personal grief, and in this way the two worlds of emotion and commitment are combined. Gordimer discusses this in terms of 'the handclasp' which is something different from the embrace, and which seals a bond of shared commitment to the struggle. So Hillela joins the struggle in order to honour this bond, first with her dead husband and later with the African general whom she marries. This aspect is definitely upsetting to a feminist sensibility. Hillela seems to simply follow in the wake of some man, acting out a secondary role to his commitment and fight. Gordimer, however, approaches this from another angle; she is not concerned with male, female roles, but with black versus white roles in a future South Africa. She quotes a letter by Desmond Tutu to *Frontline* in which he says, 'Whites unfortunately have the habit of taking over and usurping the leadership and taking the crucial decisions', and Gordimer continues 'whites must learn to listen - wrote the black South African poet Mongane Wally Serote, in the seventies. This is the premise on which the white segment to which I belong lives its life at present.'⁸ Hillela lives out this commitment; she lives in a polygamous family set up, with an African president who has come to power through dubious uses of military force. In this role she conquers where her liberal

and socialist forerunners have failed: in the last scene of the book she is a guest of honour as the wife of an African president at the Independence celebration of a liberated South Africa. Her willingness to adapt to an African way of life, then, is her truly revolutionary aspect; it represents the new move on the complicated chessboard of Gordimer's fiction.

Arrived at in this way the character of Hillela seems logical, in fact almost inevitable. There are, however, also signs in the narrative that Gordimer does not feel complete solidarity with the position, but rather seems to bow down to the inevitable. One sign is the many gaps in the narrative where Hillela simply disappears from view, and there are inexplicable changes and moves and even several versions of attempted explanations as to why she left one place and turned up in another. Through these Gordimer distances herself from her heroine. She is offering her as a logical or perhaps even necessary outcome of a tied and circumscribed situation and as a reversal of an ideological or philanthropical approach to the struggle; Hillela's rebellion is instinctive and organic, and this is seen as positive. The outcome, however, is not necessarily what Gordimer wants or likes, it is simply what the options have narrowed themselves down to: a scenario for survival with as much dignity as can be salvaged.

There is, however, also a sense in which Gordimer is saying 'Is this really what we have to do?' The subordination which the position demands, both in terms of gender and race seems extreme and is obviously seen as a revenge for decades of wielding too much power, as a way of expiating the sins of the past. History's demand for passivity or even silence is a sophisticated and tortuous revenge on a group of people who have always been very vocal. The very existence of *A Sport of Nature* is an indication that although this demand – and the reasons for it – are understood, it is not necessarily heeded; a lifelong habit of arguing and commenting is not broken that easily. Gordimer obviously suffers herself from the narrowing down of choices which she outlines. The role of Hillela is not wholeheartedly endorsed in *A Sport of Nature*, it is merely presented as a possible way out of a dead-end situation.

NOTES

1. See for example Brenda Cooper, 'New Criteria for an "Abnormal Mutation"?' An Evaluation of Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* in Martin Trump, ed., *Rendering Things Visible* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990), pp. 68-94.
2. Frantz Fanon, 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).
3. Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum' in Stephen Clingman, ed., *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), p. 271.
4. *What Happened to Burgher's Daughter or How South African Censorship Works* (Taurus: Emmartentia, 1980), p. 15.

5. Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 77. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
6. Nadine Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988). All references are to this edition and are included in the text.
7. Nadine Gordimer, 'Where do Whites Fit In?', in *The Essential Gesture*, p. 33.
8. Nadine Gordimer, 'Living in the Interregnum', p. 267



Tyrone Appolis: 'In the Last Train'. Pen and ink.