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Nadine Gordimere a novelist with difference

Prof. Ninganna

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gulbarga University, Gulbarga

1. Introduction

Micropolitics or Politics of the body

Nadine Gordimer has pursued her political analysis primarily through her own brand of micro-politics or politics of the body, in which questions of sexual expression and transgression are closely linked to racial consciousness. This exploration of sexuality has made Gordimer's work of much interest to feminist commentators. Even cursory glances at her earliest novels reveal that she was aware of the body as an important element in the struggle against apartheid. For instance, her first novel, The Lying Days concerns the personal growth of Helen Shaw, the protagonist.

The experience of the body has an obvious importance in this novel of personal growth, which includes the awakening sexuality of its protagonist; and the broader implications of the bodily experience - the connection with particular aspects of political expression and repression - are made quite explicit. At the concession stores Helen is profoundly affected by the sights and smells of a different social environment - a sudden exposure to an array of cultural difference - which she cannot immediately make sense of, and her reaction is registered bodily: she holds her 'buttock stiffly together', and feels that her eyes are not quick enough to take everything in; she feels a simultaneous need to suppress a giggle, or Tong squeeze of excitement' (LD, 20). The stiffened walk - a gesture of withdrawal - represents a protective response to what is frightening, yet still intriguing and desired: Helen cannot take in the experience as fully as she desires, and her further impulse is to repress a kind of hysteria that threatens to overtake her. At several points in the novel, Gordimer associates laughter with repression, fear or hysteria: the unmotivated laughter at the tennis club, for example, seems a kind of hysterical unease at the privilege the club represents (LD, 25).

The novel, like The Lying Days charts the personal awakening and development of Toby Hood, but at the same time it also condemns his attitudes. In particular, his attitude to women, which remains essentially static, complicates his notional development: throughout the book Toby views women purely as objects of desire, and not as potentially equal partners. After a disturbing encounter with the blind racism of one of his office workers, Toby finds himself unwilling to share his feelings of anger and confusion with his lover, the superficial Cecil. Rather than finding an opportunity to articulate and develop an incipient moral outrage, he finds, in his lover, the offer of a distraction, and reflects:

This reduction of woman to an object for personal gratification is, in Toby's mind, a 'preserve' to be 'fiercely' 0 protected, and this metaphor establishes a link between an individual male desire, and what one might call the institutionalized male desire of the state, which also employs a sanctioned violence, a 'fierceness' to establish 'preserves' for whites. This is the first occurrence in Gordimer's novels of a connection, which is given extensive treatment in her fiction: the connection between egocentric male desire, and the illegitimate political appropriation and control of social space.

Here again, female sexuality represents the unknown 'other' for Toby, who asserts control over the available technology in a futile attempt to record in his memory the nature of this other. He also displays the classic male confusion about and fear of the female organism, which he desires to examine in the space he controls. Later on in the novel, at a club run by Indians, Toby witnesses the singing of a beautiful Indian girl, and sees her as a 'creature' made to please (WS, 2). Toby expresses a similar attitude towards the end of the novel, when dismissing the thoughts of marriage for himself: 'for me, the exoticism of women still lay in beauty and self-absorbed feminity, I would choose an houri rather than a companion' (WS, 249). The attitude expressed confirms Toby's reactions to the Indian girl: in both cases there is an evident commodification and reduction of woman to an exotic other for personal use. This is precisely the way in which the forces of colonial imperialism view the potential of exotic 'other' places and populations. In short, the confused sexuality of the novel's narrator produces an attitude, which parallels the world-view of the apartheid regime, a regime with its roots in an appropriating colonial past.

In A Guest of Honour, Gordimer explores further, the role of sexuality in the struggle against the apartheid regime. The ordering idea in the novel is that sexuality and political vitality go hand in hand. Bray's affair with Rebecca accompanies the progression of his political understanding, just as the vitality of Shinza's political ideology in opposition to Mweta is reflected in his marriage to a new young wife and the fathering of a baby. When Bray and Rebecca make love for the first time Bray is thinking of Shinza, and this clearly emphasizes the equation of sexuality and political vitality. Rebecca leaves, however, 'before there was the necessity for some sort of show of tenderness', and Bray realizes 'that he had made love to her without seeing her face'. (GH, 143). These details can have been interpreted as being both positive and negative: it is unclear whether the lack of tenderness and the anonymity indicate an impersonality which is progressive, or whether the impersonality is in this case regressive, suggestive of the colonial appetite for conquering new territory.

It is the first time in Gordimer's fiction that an inter-racial relationship moves beyond the bounds of apartheid, both figuratively and literally.

In the interview to Robert Boyers just cited, Gordimer explains that black women feel their exploitation by black men is 'a consequence of the 0 exploitation by whites'. As an illustration, she describes the familiar situation of a black man from one of the homelands having to move tofind work, without being given permission to bring his wife and children with him.

The frequent result of such an enforced separation is that the man finds another woman and has children by her. In such a situation the wife left in the country will often find herself abandoned. The example indicates how instances of acute exploitation of black women are invited if not completely caused by, white economic exploitation.

Indeed critics have identified ambiguities and contradictions in her work which challenge her stance on feminism. Sheila Roberts, in Nadine Gordimer's Family of Women, states that in her fiction Gordimer has " by-passed the decades of the feminist movement's greatest literary activity, and has since the fifties established female protagonists whose lives must be taken seriously". (103). Pertinent here are Karen Lazar's remarks, in Feminism as "Piffling"? Ambiguities in Some of Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories, on how a socialist feminism would differ from Gordimer and her hierarchical analysis of the relative importance of racism and feminism: A socialist feminism would. . . depart from Gordimer on two counts.

The Politicization of Women, sums up how economic privilege separates white from black women in the later novels: 'While the native woman is truly doubly-oppressed or doublycolonized, by male dominance as well as by white economic and social dominance, the white settler woman can best be described as half-colonized. Although she too is oppressed by white men and patriarchal structures, she shares in the power and guilt of the colonists'. (39) The argument here is that white patriarchal society supplies a niche for the white woman, based on the requirement of her sexuality, which is subservient, but nevertheless an integral part of the colonizing structure: thus the white woman is enticed away from a feeling of affinity of oppression with black men and women. But this position is more than a mid-ground of semi-corruption, as Visel makes clear in another essay on Gordimer's colonial heroines, Othering the Self: Nadine Gordimer's Colonial Heroines: 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. . . 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. (33-42). Indeed, Gordimer's 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. Gordimer, the most rooted of writers, who maintained in an interview to The New York Times, that, "To go into exile is to 3 lose your place in the world", is 'exiled' from the black majority in her country who are her 'virtual public'. 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 in The Conservationist - and in the white unconscious - is so powerful a pattern in Gordimer's work. 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.

However, the white self can be 'othered', blackness found, finally, within. In The Lying Days, Helen Shaw tries to 'self her black other Mary Seswayo, but is blocked by a wall of difference and indifference. The theme of the white heroine's fearful foray into black territory is taken further in each of Gordimer's subsequent novels. At the end of Occasion for Loving, Jessie Stilwell, who has learned to see herself as an other, 4 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". (Cons. 243).

It is 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. Hillela as other: a natural rebel and nonconformist, fearlessly embraces blackness. For her alone among Gordimer's heroines, blackness is not alien, but rather her native element. But Hillela's, 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 5 believable personality. She is evidence of Gordimer's frustration with the political stalemate for whites in South Africa. While not an autobiographical character, Hillela's, 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.

Later he questions whether saving Hannah is in accord with his value of living for more than oneself. He admits: To run or to stop: a choice between them. Who was to say which was the most valuable? But this woman whose hand was curled against his neck, wasn't she oneself, his need? Saved himself. 1 Now he had something he would never speak, not to anyone, certainly not to her. (MSS, 126-27) Hannah, on the other hand maintains political balance. She loves Sonny dearly, but remains someone "for whom the people in the battle are her only family, her life, the happiness she understands". (MSS, 67).

It is the thrill of Hannah's mind, the thrill of communication that draws Sonny to her in the flesh. It is a relationship founded on precisely the opposite of adolescent Will's racial reading of the affair. They share a discourse based on ideology, politics, literature - not race. But while they revel in the passion this generates, Aila, too, is learning a new discourse, a feminist discourse of self-reliance, self-esteem, and self-assertion. While Sonny has deluded himself into believing that "at least he had been able to provide Baby with a room of her own for the process of becoming a woman"(MSS, 57), it is, ironically, Aila who is building a Woolfian room of her own. When Sonny tries to revive the old domestic discourse with Aila, he is stunned tofind that she no longer speaks that language. She has changed and is thus lost to him. My Son's Story calls the conventional family structure into question, and it invokes the view that patriarchal family patterns repress our liberating instincts. To succeed, a revolution must extend not only to the economic and political spheres but also to the repressive morality of everyday life as well.

An important point of divergence is Foucault's challenge to the idea that power is something which is possessed; instead

of this idea Foucault formulates a model of power as exercised: the focus of the model, rather than on the subjects related through power, is on the power relations themselves. This denial of the preexisting nature of subjects related through power leads directly to a second key point of divergence, the conviction that power is productive rather than repressive. Foucault shows how subjects are produced through certain institutional and cultural practices: his focus here has been on the practices of disciplinary power which are created with the development of the human sciences in the nineteenth century. For Foucault, disciplinary practices establish binary divisions - healthy/ill, sane/mad, legal/criminal - which accrue authority and can be used as a means of social control. Such divisions have a pervasive effect in society, conditioning the way individuals label themselves and each other according to established norms. These controls also involve the actual physical segregation of the population through (for example) incarceration. (21-22).

2. Conclusion

This has certainly been a primary feature in Gordimer's novels in which the racist apartheid ideology is often shown to be effectively challenged - at the level of micropolitics - by trans-racial sexual liaisons. Gordimer also seems to perceive the necessity - as does Foucault - of resisting the existing discourses of sexuality. Hillela's in A Sport of Nature is a practical demonstration of this conviction, since her sexuality leads her into some predicaments that appear to present her as the victim of patriarchal control.

Trans-racial liaisons are not always salutary in Gordimer's novels, however, and this has much to do with the insistence on difference they usually uphold. For some commentators such an insistence is counter-productive since it courts the danger of replicating and upholding racist divisions. Despite this danger, Gordimer usually insists , on focusing on racial difference in her presentation of progressive trans-racial relations. On one level this insistence represents solidarity with the political promotion of black South African identity. It can also be seen as a strategic inversion of apartheid ideology - the racial division is not challenged, but the evaluation of it is; this, perhaps, is an appropriate response to the disenfranchisement of a demographically dominant racial group.

It is also a promotion of difference which suggests a further parallel with Foucault. This is especially so when we bear in mind the ambivalent presentations of inter-racial contact in Gordimer's work: Foucault's presentation of difference is marked, also, by an ambivalent attitude to the liberatory potential of difference, a recognition that difference can supply a source of resistance and potential change, but that it can result in social fragmentation. The promotion or celebration of racial difference does not, apparently. Square fully with Gordimer's prescription for advancement through cultural cross-fertilization; but there is also a general salutary principle in Foucault's prescriptions for preserving difference, the sites of marginalized voices from which effective resistance can emerge, and this does locate one positive element in Gordimer's presentation of difference.

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